Women in the visual arts
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Editorial

Regular readers and contributors to SAJAH will find in this special issue that focuses on “Women in the visual arts” a variety of themes, dealt with in twelve articles, of which the abstracts give an indication of the scope of the present collection. The contributing researchers made it possible for the journal to uphold its multidisciplinary tradition of incorporating all the visual arts, design, visual culture, craft and aesthetics.

In choosing the said theme for the issue it was presumed that the representation of women in the visual arts, or their participation as artists, architects or in other creative ways is a pertinent way to highlight the variety of approaches that are interconnected in the history of art.

We hope that the collected research will inspire further enquiry into the explored themes that focus on women and that this issue will be received as a contribution to the great volume of works on the subject of women in the visual arts.

E.A. Maré
Love and melancholic art: the sombre beauty of Jane Burden-Morris as the symbol of womanhood in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s works.

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Jane Burden-Morris’s (1839-1914), full of mysticism and unanswered questions, enigmatic figure the feminine aura of which could be compared with the icon saints’ halos, was considered as the personification of medieval romanticism in the Pre-Raphaelite painters’ works. Despite her rather unsuccessful marriage with the most successful designer and entrepreneur of Victorian England William Morris, she starred as a model for the creation of some of the most famous 19th century paintings by being the muse, and, at the same time, the erotic partner of the poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882). Being the dominant figure in a series of painting works, she distinctively influenced the definition of the female nature concept primarily by impersonating roles of prominent women of medieval literature or ancient mythology. In a mixture of inspiration, love, exculpation and art this article aims to focus on the importance of Jane Burden-Morris on Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s works and also to investigate the possible contribution of her melancholic figure to the formation of both the second half of the 19th century Victorian England middle class female stereotype and also the second phase Pre-Raphaelite art womanhood.

Key words: Pre-Raphaelitism, womanhood, Victorian era, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Jane Burden-Morris

“Ερωτας και Μελαγχολική Τέχνη: Η σκοτεινή ομορφιά της Jane Burden-Morris ως σύμβολο της γυναικείας φύσης στο έργο του Dante Gabriel Rossetti ”

Η γεμάτη μυστήριο και αναπάντητα ερωτήματα, αντιγραμματική φυσιογνωμία της Jane Burden-Morris (1839-1914) της οποίας η γυναικεία ούρα μπορούσε μόνο να συγκριθεί με το φωτοστέφανο των βυζαντινών αγίων, θεωρήθηκε η προσωποποίηση του μεσαιωνικού ρομαντισμού στα έργα του Προ-Ραφαηλιτών ζωγράφου. Παρά τον μάλλον αποτυχημένο γάμο της με τον πιο επιτυχημένο σχεδιαστή της Βικτωριανής Αγγλίας, William Morris, πρωταγωνίστησε ως μοντέλο για τη δημιουργία μερικών πολύ διάσημων έργων ζωγραφικής του 19ου αιώνα αφού υπήρξε η μούσα και παράλληλα η ερωτική σύντροφος του ποιητή και ζωγράφου Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882). Καθώς ήταν η κυρίαρχη μορφή σε μια σειρά από σημαντικά ζωγραφικά έργα, επηρέασε δραματικά τον ορισμό της έννοιας της γυναικείας φύσης με το να ενσαρκώνει τουλάχιστον τρεις από τις ετικέτες της γυναικείας ψυχής αποτελούμενες από τα αποτυχήματα της ζωής της, τη διακοπή της, την κρίση της και την εκλάμβαση της: ιδέα, αποφύγεσαι και καταναλώσει, καθώς και η σχέση της με την ζωγραφική του Προ-Ραφαηλιτών. Καταρριχούμενη, η Jane Burden-Morris στο έργο του Dante Gabriel Rossetti και να διερευνήσεις επίσης την πιθανή συνέπεια της στη διαμόρφωση του στερεοτύπου της θηλυκότητας στην ελληνική και την βρετανική τέχνη της Βικτωριανής περιόδου.

Αξιοθέατο: Προ-Ραφαηλιτισμός, γυναικεία φύση, Βικτωριανή περίοδος,

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Jane Burden-Morris

“I have never seen you without thinking that I would like to pray to you” confessed the poet Rainer Maria Rilke to his girlfriend Lou Andreas-Salomé who incidentally was also Friedrich Nietzsche’s and Sigmund Freud’s muse (Farid Abdelouahab 2012: 26). The stubborn, eccentric, elegant, independent, devoted and passionate women who inspired important men of all art forms and were the driving force behind their success, were identified as muses. Notwithstanding that the stories of all these female figures who left their marks on history with their beauty, talent, magnetism and temperament, were very different from each other, they still had one thing in common: the ability to awaken the most creative instincts in their Pygmals. Vanity individuals by nature, usually as much as the artists whom they influenced, they were nourished by the admiration they caused, seeking it in an ever-increasing extent. They
would rarely exceed the visions of their inspirers, because these women muses did not create art themselves, but rather impersonated it. People always looked at women muses with admiration; actually, both men and women wanted to look like them, but it was the creators of the work who got the compliments, no matter whether muses’ catalytic contribution triggered their thoughts. But those women who influenced great artists also built, through these artists’ work, their own glorious legend. This was also something that they rightfully won as they greatly contributed to the creation of masterpieces. Moreover, all of them still continue to be symbols not only of their era, but also of the female emancipation itself.

If we were able to dive into the colors, shapes and symbolisms of the Victorian period paintings and focused exclusively on women’s personalities who were models for the painters of the historical Pre-Raphaelites Movement, we would find many different female types who were profoundly idealized each time. This means that women of different body types and characters, posing for many paintings, be they known or not, became sources of inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelite painters, thus contributing to the formation of Victorian femininity. Among them was the famous Elizabeth or Lizzie Siddal, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s mistress and wife to whom, it was said, he owed much for the legend of his artistic work (Prose 2002: 95), Annie Miller, the muse of William Holman Hunt, Effie Millais, former wife of the famous academic John Ruskin and subsequent model and wife of the famous painter John Everett Millais, Alexa Wilding and several others.

However, the dominance of Jane Burden-Morris in the artistic scene of Victorian England was probably taken for granted, despite the fact that many of the above painters’ models seemed to compete with her, voluntarily or not. Through numerous and more or less fun games of life, Jane managed not only to escape the line of her very fate but also to be imposed in the thought and soul of more than two great representatives of art and design of Victorian England, like William Morris, who was to become her lawful husband, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was not only her great and first love, but also her subsequent lover, and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, the well-known poet of political and love verses.

Her accidental encounter with Rossetti and Morris as well as with Edward Burne-Jones at the Royal Drury Lane Theatre in Oxford in 1857, when she was just eighteen, was to be crucial both for herself and for the art of the Pre-Raphaelites (Styles 2014: 15). Dazzled by her peculiar beauty, Rossetti asked her to become his model not only for the work he performed in the Oxford Union Library Building, but also for other projects he was working on at the same time. She was initially taken aback and did not appear until after an accidental meeting with Burne-Jones who persuaded her to accept this strange, but challenging proposal. Perhaps that happened because the permanent model - muse and mistress of Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal was then busy in other jobs away from Oxford. But when she returned, claimed and won her place next to Rossetti, Jane began to pose for William Morris who had fallen madly in love with her and soon married her. So the beautiful, working class girl was to acquire a remarkable place next to a great artist and visionary of bourgeois England, whom however she never loved. Their house in Kent was none other than that which was famous for its architecture and interior decoration Red House (1859-1860), which soon became the point of ideological/aesthetic initiation of the ambiguous Arts and Crafts Movement (Tsoumas 2006: 187). But her love for Rossetti remained, even in the context of marriage and motherhood that followed, a hidden and unquenchable flame that waited patiently until it turned into fire. Her husband, on the contrary, harbored deep feelings for her: she was indeed his model and muse, but above all she was his beloved wife. His big interest in English mythology, the legends of King Arthur and the Knights’ era was sometimes an inspiration for his painting and design works. In a typical painting of his, from the few that he
painted or finished, Morris asked her to pose for the rather prophetic figure of Queen Guinevere, known for her infidelity of the medieval King Arthur. This work was entitled *La Belle Iseult*.

Jane was certainly an important source of inspiration for other great artists of the era such as Burne-Jones himself who however immortalized her in a different art form, that of stained glass for a number of windows of a church in Oxford. Her classless beauty which despite the passage of time had acquired dimensions of a legend, did not leave unaffected even the only woman painter of the period of the Pre-Raphaelites, the well-known Evelyn de Morgan who visualized her in her works when Jane was already at an older age. Her famous work *The Hour Glass* (1908), a purely metaphorical painting with medieval theme, could not be rendered correctly without the ethereal aura of the then seventy-year old Jane Burden (Lawton Smith 2002: 177).

![Image](http://www.wikiart.org/en/william-morris/la-belle-iseult-1858, 12/01/ 2015)

**Figure 1**


**Modeling for Rossetti: a muse in love**

Although Rossetti was known not only for his ‘bold’ way of approaching his models, but also for the intimate twist he gave to his relation with each one of them, Jane remained faithful to the idea of her affair with him, until the death of his wife Lizzie Siddal who had taken an overdose of laudanum when her child was born dead, in 1862. Rossetti then suffered from depression, and buried most of his unpublished poems in her grave at the Cemetery of Highgate. He idealized her image as Dante Alighieri’s Beatrice in several paintings, such as in *Beata Beatrix*, which were to exert great influence in shaping the European Symbolist Movement. However, the overall representation of women in his works of art was almost obsessively stylized. He tended to depict his new models, such as Fanny Cornforth and Alexa Wilding, as the epitome of eroticism given
that projects with naked or half-naked bodies were distinguished not only for their symbolism, but also for their sensuality.

However, he approached the remarkable Jane Burden with a deeper sensitivity as he tried to take out from her personality those features that a melancholic, pristine and immaculate Victorian woman or an exquisite, mythical goddess would have. Despite the fact that their association started in 1865, their erotic, deeply emotional relationship would become known in 1869 and notwithstanding that it was obvious to everyone, her husband would stoically and shamefully overlook it (Hawksley 2004: 208-10). However, Rossetti, through a peculiar and perhaps provocative letter to Morris that year, seemed to confess to him everything about this relationship as at one point he stated the following:

All that concerns you is the all-absorbing question with me...no absence can ever make me so far from you again as your presence did for years. For this long inconceivable change, you know now what my thanks must be (Poetry Foundation, 2013).

The 1860s was very important for artists given that the invention of photography seemed to launch a new era in their visual perception of art. It was no wonder that in 1865 Rossetti ordered a series of photos of the then twenty six years old Jane from the famous photographer John Robert Parsons trying to work out new ways on the subject of the study of the models that he chose. However from those numerous photos that wonderfully capture her ethereal look, her melancholic sensitivity and at the same time her female courteousness, only a few can identify with the female stereotype which he produced in his subsequent paintings. The fact that the painter was still focusing on the preparatory drawing for a long period before completing his subsequent compositions, refers us to the reasoning that these photos constituted only an experimental form of studying models which did not produce though the expected results (Bartram 1985: 99). It was for this reason that the first portraits of Jane as his model in pencil, oil or pastel are still considered in themselves works of unparalleled virtuosity.

Figure 2
From that moment a different period of creation, inspiration and ideology began for Rossetti in terms of his painting work. The unusual, dark beauty of his deeply enamored model began to slowly stylize, like all the previous female figures that he used as models, but in a rather peculiar, uniquely poetic way: his previous penchant for realism began to disseminate in torque to illustrate the divine unearthly forms of mythology, medieval literature or even the very mythical melancholic and romantic Victorian reality.

In his first very important work, full of metaphors and symbolism, after having developed an affair with his muse, entitled La Pia de’ Tolomei (1868), Rossetti attempts to outline with his artistic talent a character storyline from the bowels of Italian medieval poetry. Through the eternal verses of Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy and specifically its second part entitled Purgatory, he illustrates in vivid persuasiveness La Pia, the unjustly imprisoned wife of vicious and jealous Nello, at the Castle Pietra, in the Maremma area of Tuscany where she left her last breath under unclear circumstances (Paden 1958: 4). Besides the melancholic beauty of Jane which was ideal for the portrayal of Dante’s heroine as she was directly affiliated with her equally dark fate, Rossetti seems to also set out his own thoughts and desires. Therefore, since Jane was also trapped in a barren and failed marriage, she could not be contrasted with any character other than with that of La Pia, aiming though at a different outcome that would allow her liberation from the bonds of her conventional relationship, through the love of Rossetti himself. As he used to design the frames around his paintings believing that in this way he would give more power to his work, he carved out in the frame of La Pia the following verses from the Divine Comedy, both in English and in Italian, pointing from within the need of the heroine to unchain herself, his own desire for Jane:

Remember me who am La Pia- me
From Siena, sprung and by Maremma dead.
This in his inmost heart well knoweth he
With whose fair jewel I was ringed and wed (Dante 1983: 133-135).

But, apart from the enigmatic, melancholic side of the role that she so faithfully incarnated, we can also easily find evidence of an ethereal, gracious femininity and sensuality, especially from the position of her body, which is not unrelated to the deep erotic feelings of the artist for his muse.

Figure 3

In his work *Persephone* or otherwise *Prosperine* (1874) one can readily reveal the cult of the artist in the face of his idolized model who, as we noted not only in his previous, but also in his later works, seems always to keep the stylized feminine sensitivity and mystery betrayed by Jane’s long, thick, wavy dark brown hair, piercing dark eyes, the rather strongly shaped lips, delicate fingers and long, pale swanlike neck. Still, almost fossilized after her abduction by Pluto in the underworld, according to Greek mythology, Prosperine seems lost in her thoughts and abandoned in her tragic fate. However, despite the intense romance, but also the stoic sensibility that this work exudes, the semantic value of the bright red lips of the model in conjunction with the scarlet tones of the ripe pomegranate that she holds in her hand, is really high: these two elements are the clear proof of the artist’s passion for his model, as they symbolize the delight of taste and thus the very meaning of erotic pleasure. Rossetti, now spellbound by his divine muse would write about this work:

She is represented in a gloomy corridor of her palace, with the fatal fruit in her hand. As she passes, a gleam strikes on the wall behind her from some inlet suddenly opened, and admitting for a moment the sight of the upper world; and she glances furtively towards it, immersed in thought. The incense-burner stands beside her as the attribute of a goddess. The ivy branch in the background may be taken as a symbol of clinging memory (Pina, 2014).

*Figure 4

*Persephone or Prosperine*, 1874. Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London (source: retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Morris, 17/01/2015).*
She is also presented equally emblematic and symbolic in his work of a mythological nature titled *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-77). Here we should mention that Rossetti before capturing her fairy shape on canvas, had channeled all his creative kindness in poetry by writing a poem which looks like depicting with its verses this portrait of Jane. The deification and capturing of his muse seems to be particularly evident in this painting since the portrayal of the ancient goddess of the Phoenicians, protector of fertility, love and feminine grace, is one of the most important works of the mature phase of Rossetti’s painting work. Often identified by the ancient Greeks both with the goddess Venus and the goddess Hera, Astarte still maintains in this painting the melancholic sensitiveness of Jane’s stylized face, but combined with the sensual femininity featuring the goddess. It is hardly surprising that this work emits diffuse eroticism that could be considered annoying or even offensive to the strict and conservative mores of the Victorian era. We might dare to say however that this work does not reproduce but the fiery passion of love of his creator for his model who, according to Wood (1981), makes it the epitome of the concept of love in Pre-Raphaelite painting.

*Figure 5*


His famous work entitled *The Day Dream* (1880) is considered as the last important work in terms of inspiration, skill and rendering of the basic female figure he used as a central character in the abundance of oil paintings that he had produced since 1865 (Waugh, 1991: 204). In this work Rossetti looks like trying to free his model from the past, heavily loaded
with symbols, allegories, historicist references and personal passions, roles that Jane embodied. Here the painter, who began to approach the end of his turbulent life, seems to attempt a novel combination of new English painting with old painting styles, thus giving his model/muse not only the refinement, but also the virtue of Renaissance art. The vacant, enigmatic gaze of Jane in combination with her carefully combed hair, her pale, almost porcelain skin, her loving embrace with the tree, the wild honeysuckle caressing her legs, but also the detachment of her thought from the book she was reading, refer us to a young Victorian woman who daydreams. This also seems to be evident in another poem by Rossetti which he wrote on the frame of the work in question:

Within the branching shade of Reverie  
Dreams even may spring till autumn; yet none be  
Like woman’s budding day-dream spirit - fann’d.  
Lo! tow’rd deep skies, not deeper than her look (Bryson & Camp Troxell 1976: 97).

With more love this time accumulated in the course of time and his diseases, rather than erotic passion for Jane Burden in this work of his, Rossetti tried and succeeded again in extolling her enigmatic romanticism by placing her in the popular Victorian environment of the Spring, in a natural kingdom. Here, however, his implication is clear that this dream-like figure positioned in the centre of the painting prevails over everything around her, even over nature itself.

![Figure 6](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Morris, 25/01/2015)

Stereotyping Pre-Raphaelite womanhood

With her mystic beauty, and her labyrinthine personal life, Jane-Burden-Morris claimed and occupied the position she believed she deserved both in the heart and the art of Rossetti. But she herself constituted a special female stereotype which in many cases seemed to come into sharp conflict in any dialogue with the new moral-social model almost imposed by the new order in Victorian England. To understand this we must refer to the distinction of the concept of gender, which in this period seemed to be stronger and more entrenched than ever: the roles of men and women had a completely separate identity under which the aesthetic, social, political, economic and personal positions of each individual were already predetermined. For example, Victorian women had no other purpose in life than to marry and start a family, bear many children (as their beau ideal Queen Victoria) and to contribute, where possible, to the business success of their spouses. The average woman of that time was strictly committed to these goals, while she typically remained without education as this was prohibitive for her own microcosm. Instead she would be employed only with small, creative and exclusive women’s activities such as embroidery, sewing, knitting, cooking, reading novels and so forth, as well as with the upbringing of her children. The patriarchal, male-dominated strict Victorian society would allow nothing more than that. The point that the critic Richard D. Altick made in his work: *The Weaker Sex. Victorian People and Ideas* is typical about this: “a woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most [to a man]: her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs” (Altick 1973: 54). The idealization of the Victorian woman therefore seemed to be directly affiliated with its moral values which were often reflected in its form: emotional, innocent, protective, inexperienced and tender-hearted with beautiful, deep expressive eyes and a pure look, lucent, transparent skin without the slightest hint of sexual challenge. Therefore, based on the foregoing, the following questions may arise: would Jane Burden-Morris be the stylized stereotype of womanhood in Victorian England through such a quirky course in the painting of Rossetti, it being a mismatch with Victorian reality? How could her complex and rather disorderly personal life be isolated from her idealized image in this artist’s works so that it, in itself, constituted a new aesthetic standard for the average Victorian woman? How could this very ‘fairytale and dismal’ image of hers, adulterated though by the erotic passion of the artist for his muse and mistress, find supporters of the view that it set a good example of Victorian beauty, class and morals?

The truth is that Jane Burden-Morris was a controversial person which both through her initial position in society -originating from a working class background, lack of education- and through her subsequent personal choices -marriage with a person of the bourgeoisie, model for painters, bad and ungrateful wife cheating on her husband-seems to be inconsistent with what was understood then as ‘the average Victorian woman’ (Perkins 2013: 26). At least from a moral/social point of view her personality was diametrically opposite to what was then understood as virtuous and proper for her time. From a purely artistic side, the interpretation and rendering of mystic beauty in most works of Rossetti were immiscibly subjective, directed not only by a simple admiration, but mainly by the vulnerable erotic passion of the artist for his model. So we see her gloomy, pale and pristine figure transformed into a divine woman full of power, mystery, sensuality and eroticism. But apart from Jane herself we noticed how Rossetti also called up all kinds of symbolism and allegory to achieve this result which, in our view, created an alternative female stereotype that was far removed from the submissive, almost spineless and wise middle class woman of Victorian England. We also notice how the erotic transformation of his favorite model ceased to exist when his love passion for her failed. In any event all the
previous representations as well as the subversive life of his muse could hardly qualify her as the symbol of Victorian womanhood.

In sharp contrast with the above barren conclusion is our intention to investigate her contribution in shaping the female stereotype that emerged and characterized all the work of Rossetti and therefore of the pre-Raphaelite Movement during its second phase, i.e. after 1860. Having already created, by the 1850s, a wide range of female characters in his work, Rossetti remained loyal in his search for models who could embody roles of powerful women and unusual heroines (Faxon 1989: 61). Situated in a repeated oscillation between realism and medieval mysticism, he managed to find his muse in the person of Jane and give her the characteristics of the roles that he had always dreamed of. Through the unique stylizing of his model, which often referred more to illustration rather than painting, he managed to idealize her by giving her every time different and conflicting properties: the femme fatale, the deity or even the fair lady who always prevails in a magical world where the deliberate absence of male domination is obvious. So the domination of Rossettian womanhood seemed given, unlike what happened in the real life of the Victorians. This can also be detected by the way in which Rossetti provided metaphors in his works of the passion, mystery, power, grace, ethereal beauty, eroticism, but also the need of his heroines for fleeing a shameful reality. Based on all these we consider that the pre-Raphaelite women in Rossetti’s later work could only be identified with the enigmatic figure of Jane Burden-Morris. The creation of this important for English painting visual stereotype, which is still recognizable, was greatly assisted by the poetic genius of the painter. Most of his works depicting Jane enjoyed the support of his sublime poetry and this is why they constituted, in many cases, the terrain of his poetry’s visualization.

Conclusion

The contribution of Jane Burden-Morris in shaping painting during the second phase of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement through the Rossetti’s works is evident. However, its importance is equally remarkable and multileveled with regard to the question of stereotyping the female figure and female nature both in Rossetti’s works, and in Victorian society itself. Although, as we have previously claimed the female stereotype created by Rossetti’s inspirations did not seem to reflect the morals and principles of the average middle class Victorian woman, we strongly believe that it constituted, up to a certain degree, a ‘sibylline’ bridge to her future development. So we can notice that by the time the importance of Victorian values and morality would gradually give way to the nostalgia for old-fashioned beauty, but also for both courtly and erotic love themes in the mid to late nineteenth century English painting. The Pre-Raphaelites, and especially Rossetti through his ‘uninhibited’ works, criticized the individuality, the selfishness and the hypocrisy of the society of their time and the industrialization of goods, by producing pure, genuine and idealized art (Doré 2014: 12). This is why we can clearly state that the romantic, but dynamic, independent and erotically emancipated female stereotype that grew from the multifaceted personality and the sacramental figure of Jane Burden-Morris, seemed to be really quite ahead of its time. Besides, not long after the end of the 19th century the Victorian woman began to find her way to liberation from the shackles of phallocratic dynasty, acquiring an increasingly strong personal, social and political identity.

Notes

1 She came from a very poor family in Oxford with illiterate parents – her father was a stableman and her mother a laundress – who toiled for daily bread. She was born in 1839,
however we do not know much about her until the end of her teens. But what we know is that she had a bad childhood full of survival and hardship problems.

2 An important English poet known not only for his erotic verses, but mainly for his anti-imperialist poems. Specifically he became widely known for his particularly subversive views against the colonial policy of Great Britain in Sudan and his strong support to the national party of Muslims in Egypt. In 1888 he was imprisoned for two months in the Galway and Kilmainham prisons after a fatal for him scuffle with police in a tense political rally, as he was almost always targeted by the authorities. He was a really handsome and brawny man with many conquests of the opposite sex; a lover of many women distinguished for their noble origin or their high education.

3 All these three great artists along with a small group of other, less well-known ones, were found in Oxford because they had undertaken the Oxford Union Library Building wall decoration, an ambitious and difficult project which lasted from 1857 to 1859. The main themes of the decoration were related to the medieval legends of King Arthur.

4 Morris’s house took this name from the classic red brick used for its construction. Most of the objects that adorned the interior were handcrafted gifts of friends of the couple, but also constructions of Morris himself (metalwork, hand painted furniture, textiles, lighting and wallpapers), defining in a symbolic way the new course of decorative arts in Victorian England.

5 The Morris couple had two daughters, Jenny Alice Morris born in 1861, who had many ambitions for an academic career, but was unfairly hit by the disease of epilepsy, and May born the following year, who chose to follow her mother’s hobby, embroidery, and thus soon became a famous embroiderer.

6 One of these series of stained-glass works is known as Faith Hope and Charity and is located in Christ Church, Oxford.

7 Laudanum: it is both a kind of drug and analgesic medicine, particularly prevalent in England during the Victorian period. Its main component was opium and it was usually purchased with a prescription. Its main medical use was to address diseases such as tuberculosis, however because of its cheap price and sedative properties was also called “the drug of the working class.”

8 Because of Rossetti’s many health problems which were directly related to his return to alcoholism, the deep and emotional relationship that was developed between them and which had begun as a passionate bond, turned out to be little or not fleshly at all, especially in the last few years before his death in 1882.

9 Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and moon Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon Of bliss of the heaven and earth commune: And from her neck’s inclining flower-stem lean Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean The pulse of hearts to the spheres’ dominant tune. Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea The witnesses of Beauty’s face to be: That face, of Love’s all-penetrative spell Amulet, talisman, and oracle, Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery.

10 The second phase of Pre-Raphaelitism, which grew out of the first under the direction of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, is the Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelism which in turn produced inter alia the Aesthetes and Decadents. Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) emphasized themes of eroticized medievalism (or medievalized eroticism) and pictorial techniques that produced moody atmosphere. This form of Pre-Raphaelitism profoundly related painting to poetry.

Works cited


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Focusing on southern Africa, this article investigates works of architecture created by black women in the vernacular domain, rather than in the domain representing formal, institutionalised design. It explores the most pertinent manifestations of women’s self-help initiatives. The case studies are located in the region of South Africa and Botswana occupied by Setswana speaking people, whose towns and villages first emerged more than 200 years ago and have continued uninterruptedly in Botswana, to the present. It is explained that scale, territoriality, decoration and the dynamics of creating/making demonstrate a distinctly female approach. The extent to which women, even as vulnerable single mothers, are capable of applying highly pragmatic solutions to providing homes and dignified places for nurturing their children is demonstrated.

**Key words:** informal settlement, single mothers, self-help, traditional housing

In the editorial of an issue celebrating Women’s Month in August 2014, the *Financial Mail* (FM 2014: 4) laments that, in spite of being emancipated in much of the world nearly a century ago, women are still totally underrepresented as business managers and leaders. Locally, only four per cent of the companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) are headed by women. Considering the theme of this special SAJAH issue, one should therefore enquire: what then is the status of women in the built environment?

The index of the mammoth (800 A4 pages) *A Global History of Architecture* by Ching, Jarzombek and Prakash (2007) refers to 552 personalities that have had some impact on the built environment since 3500 BCE. Of these, ranging from nobility to spiritual leaders, as well as architects and builders, only 15, or 2.7 % are women. These include not only Queens Hatshepsut and Victoria, but also architects Jane Drew and Denise Scott-Brown.

It was assumed that a publication such as Francisco Cerver’s *The World of Contemporary Architecture* (2003), would offer evidence of greater female involvement. However, of the 361 illustrated projects, representing buildings and complexes at all scales, female architects are given credit as principals for only eight (2.2 %) and are mentioned as members of the professional team in seven more (1.9 %). The Annual Report 2013/4, of the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP 2014), states that 33% of candidate architects and 27% of all registered architects are female. And of the projects featured in ‘Ora Joubert’s seminal *10 Years + 100 Buildings: Architecture in a Democratic South Africa* (2009), female architects were involved in 28%. (In 11% as principals and in 17% as part of the professional team.)
In South Africa, the Architectural Profession Act of 2000 (Act 44 of 2000), decreed that all new buildings and alterations and additions to existing ones are required to be designed by registered professionals, whether architects, technologists or draughtspersons, with work allocated according to an identification of work matrix, based on building complexity and site sensitivity. In practice, this covers only 53% of what is built. Inexplicably, architectural professionals are excluded from the provision of RDP houses (22%).

The aim of this article is to explore the role of women in creating vernacular housing; traditional and informal, rural and urban – the traditional dwellings and shacks which, combined, constitute the remaining 22% of our housing stock – the two areas normally not requiring the involvement of registered professionals (figure 1). The focus, therefore, is placed on housing solely created by women, without formal training and without official intervention.

Figure 1
Distribution of housing types in South Africa

Explaining the topic: [Vernacular] architecture created by [black] women [in southern Africa]

Vernacular architecture is the making of spaces and buildings in a particular place by the local community using patterns, methods and materials embedded in its culture. It usually develops and adapts over an extended period until it is in equilibrium with the prevailing climatic, geographic, cultural, economic and technological requirements and constraints.

The Tswana is the only indigenous polity that constructed large, compact urban entities in pre-colonial times. While Tswana towns and villages disappeared in South Africa during the apartheid era, they survived in neighbouring Botswana. Similarly, Tswana culture and customs survived relatively intact in Botswana, while black culture as a whole was suppressed in South Africa. The result is that, after Botswana and South Africa became independent in 1966 and
1994 respectively, rurality and urbanisation unfolded in parallel, revealing some similarities and some differences. A loosely presented comparison puts both in perspective.

The United Nations (UN 2002: 5) reports that “Female-headed households, which constitute about half of all households in Botswana, are affected more severely by poverty than men. They have more dependants and have fewer productive assets, such as cattle.” It adds (2002: 9) that “some 50% of people living in female-headed households were below the poverty line”, but more ominously that the severity of poverty was greater in female-headed households than in male-headed households.

Additionally, according to Stats SA (2010: 55), 37.5% of households were headed by women, while Armstrong et al. (2008: 13) report that 45% of all female-headed households lived below the “lower-bound” poverty line, compared to only 25% of male-headed households. Since black people constitute 80% of South Africa’s population and black women 40% (Stats SA 2012: 21, 32), there can be no doubt that black, female, single parents constitute not only a huge segment of our society, but arguably also represent one of the most vulnerable demographic groups in both Botswana and South Africa.

**Sources of information and research methodology**

Information on the historical and current social and economic contexts was variously drawn from the writings of 19th century travellers, and from contemporary (20th and 21st century) publications originating in disciplines as diverse as history, anthropology, archaeology and architecture through an exploratory review of the literature. Data from the literature were augmented by site visits and personal observations, which, because of on-site familiarity, unquestionably allowed for a more credible analysis and interpretation.

Amos Rapoport (1982: 123), who refined this methodology in his research on environment-behaviour relations (EBR), explains that “It is not a linear process, but one involving an intuitive ‘creative leap’ once one has saturated oneself in the information.” The research framework (figure 2) is a simple matrix, compiled to guide the process of collating and interpreting information.

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*Figure 2*

The research framework (source: compiled by the author).
Selecting the case studies

The case studies referred to are situated on a timeline spanning more than 200 years, while the sites occupy a crescent-shaped territory of approximately 250 000 square kilometres that straddles the border between South Africa and Botswana. This crescent very roughly represents the land of the Tswana.

From a single pre-colonial account, the article diverges into two parallel streams; that of Batswana women in neighbouring Botswana and black women in general in South Africa, although the South African case studies are situated in areas where a substantial number of Setswana speakers currently live (figure 3). While Setswana speakers constitute approximately four million (eight per cent) of South Africa’s population and are found all over the country, Setswana is the home language of 65.4% of the people of the North West Province, vastly outnumbering the two million Setswana speakers across the border in Botswana.

Pre-colonial [1750-1884]

For the greater part of the previous millennium the characteristic pattern of settlement in southern Africa was one of evenly spread homesteads, while villages were rare (Oliver 1999: 102). However, the switchover from subsistence herding to a predominantly cattle-based economy resulted in a concentration of people into increasingly large and compact villages and towns, with the concomitant development of central control and social stratification replacing the egalitarian nature of the society that had prevailed until then. Mapungubwe (ca. 1220-1300) and Great Zimbabwe (ca. 1300-1450) both furnish evidence of this phenomenon.
During the 14th century the people who are known today as the Sotho-Tswana began settling the north-western and western parts of present day South Africa. Over a period of 400 years, as their version of a culture centred on cattle matured, the settlement pattern of the Tswana in particular also altered from dispersed homesteads into increasingly larger and, denser villages. This culminated in agro pastoral towns housing populations estimated by early 19th century travellers as being in the range of 10,000 to 20,000 people.

The centrality of cattle reflects the Tswana communitarian cultural construct (*botho* in Setswana), its all-encompassing worldview with its rules of precedence, conventions of social interaction and demarcation of gender roles. One of these roles, which was allocated to women, was the building of their houses. As Burchell (1824: 515) succinctly observed: “the business of building the houses, as well as that of keeping them in order, is a duty which, in this nation, custom has allotted to the women only; and I was always assured, that every part was the work of their hands” (figure 4).

According to Lane (1998: 201) “each wife in a polygamous household has her own establishment or house (*ntlo, lelapa, lolwapa*; plural: *malapa*). By this is meant the social group comprising the wife herself, her children and any other people directly attached to her.” The veranda rondavel, constructed of thatch over earth walls, was the reported type of dwelling throughout the region in the early 19th century, without exception. Maggs (1976: 285) writes that while the walling material forming the bilobial *lapas* may be made of stone or brushwood, the spaces remain the same (figure 5).

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![Figure 4](source: Smithsonian Institution Libraries).

A Tswana woman and her children by Samuel Daniell, 1801
(source: Smithsonian Institution Libraries).
Colonial [1885-1965 in Botswana, 1993 in South Africa]

Most of the Tswana agro-towns were destroyed during the internal conflicts of the 1820s, known as the difaqane. Unwilling to confront both Mzilikazi’s raiders and Trekboer [Afrikaner settlers] expansionism, many tribes moved further northwest into what became in 1885 the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland, where the village tradition has survived to this day. At its independence in 1966, Bechuanaland was renamed Botswana.

John and Jean Comaroff (1997: 18) note that “political domination, spatial distance and racial difference might have been features of most colonial situations”, but Thomas Tlou and Alex Campbell (1997: 229) assert that the Batswana enjoyed much more freedom in the “mild” overrule that prevailed during the time the country was a British protectorate, compared to the brutality of Apartheid and the totalitarianism of South Africa’s segregationist policies. These Tswana communities managed to live with their “political communities” relatively intact (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997: 125). In fact, the black people who lived in British Protectorates [present day Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland] could “proudly boast that they have never been conquered, but voluntarily placed themselves under British protection” (Schapera 1937: 372).

Mary Moffat wrote in 1828 (quoted in Comaroff & Comaroff 1997: 130): “The women cultivate all the land, build the houses [and so on] … dragging immense loads of wood over the burning plains, wherewith to erect their houses …” This represented a response to what the missionaries perceived as an unfair distribution of labour (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997: 130-131): “[The missionaries] were so intent on confining Tswana women to house and hearth; on domesticating them, that is, within a world divided—socially and sexually—into public and private domains, sites of production and reproduction.”
In addition, the missionaries attempted to impose square rooms (with specific functions and privacy), and rectangular houses as the “ideal” and “architectural principles of a civilized life” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997: 289-301) and made a deliberate effort to reorganise Tswana spaces and places. However: “Most Tswana seemed resistant to rectangular rooms, internal doors, and dedicated spaces. They were also resistant to the European idea of the nuclear household. With some exceptions, they continued to build round earthen dwellings for extended families; homesteads whose interiors remained versatile in form and function.”

The Comaroffs (1997: 302) recognised the “culturally assertive Setswana milieu.” “Culturally pragmatic” may also be an appropriate term: John Campbell (1822: 81-82) recounts the case of a chief who had a traditional house and “one behind constructed after the European manner.” Two hundred years later this is still the situation.

From the mid-1800s, the harbours of the Cape and Durban, and mining activities in the interior, attracted larger numbers of black workers and the authorities began to set up what became known as “locations.” Bill Freund points out (2007: 110) that “the idea of planning for an integrated urban environment in which Africans could be assimilated as citizens was completely unthinkable.” By 1855, the principle of spatial (and racial) segregation, as a mechanism of social control, was already entrenched.

Shortly after the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, a set of laws, the Natives Land Act of 1913, not only disempowered black people but also prohibited them from owning land outside the designated “tribal locations” (Marais 1937: 355).

It is ironic that due to labour migration, girls attended school more regularly; as a result, by the 1930s (Schapera 1937: 384): “[W]omen ha[d] not only improved their homes … they ha[d] also become more confident and independent in their attitude towards the men, and less willing to submit to their absolute control.” By the early 1920s, however, women were also becoming increasingly urbanised (Hellmann 1937: 406). Accompanying urbanisation was the culture of individualism which is in total contrast to the communitarian “tribal environment.”

However, making a living in the city was restricted to domestic service for white households, illegal beer brewing or sub-letting accommodation (Hellmann 1937: 409-410). Taking in lodgers not only occurred in shanty towns, but also where women were able to acquire municipal houses, and although the municipalities in theory were supposed to be requested for permission to sub-let, “slum yards” with one room backyard shacks proliferate to this day.

The standard NE (for non-European) 51/9 house and Model Township originated in the 1950s as part of a strategy to stabilise and control the population of black workers. Calderwood’s book, Principles of Mass Housing (1964: 37), describes the development of the 51/9 house and leaves little doubt in the reader’s mind as to the good intentions of the people who designed this unit and planned the dormitory townships: “[I]t must be restated that under no circumstances must our wishes be imposed upon others.” Although these remarks seem well-intentioned, the ugly truth is just the opposite; the black people had no say and no choice! The 51/9 house was standardised for a household of six, with two sleeping in the living room (figure 6).

Calderwood clearly envisaged that the Model Township should be a relatively self-contained garden suburb. He proposed extensive landscaping in the public realm and even made recommendations for gardening and growing vegetables and fruit on the private plots. Calderwood (1964: 95-96) also insisted on the provision of schools, shops, commercial and professional offices, as well as recreational facilities and parks. To these must be added cinemas,
churches, libraries and community halls!

The reality turned out quite differently. The Model Townships were dormitories without facilities. The beer brewing and shebeens of the women provided the only entertainment for adults. And as an example of the cruelest form of social engineering, the township allocated street blocks along what the government perceived as tribal lines (figure 7).

Figure 6
The standard 51/9 township house
(source: Calderwood 1964: 38).

Figure 7
A fragment of Mamelodi in the pre-democratic era
Silitshena (1984: 110) contends that “Botswana had no towns to talk about before independence. The two main towns were very small. In 1964, the total urban population, including 3,850 people in the emerging Gaborone Township, was only 21,000, or 4% of the total population.”

Until the mid-1970s the majority of Batswana peoples lived in traditional villages (Grant & Grant 1995: 33), but the urban population has been growing exponentially, from 9.1% of the total populace in 1971 to 61.1% in 2010 (World Bank 2012). Rural dwelling patterns with their social, physical and spatial features are in stark contrast to the situation in cities where the streets form a gridiron pattern, lined with residential plots occupied by unrelated households. The Western city model is the antithesis of the kinship-based village ward, but many families regard their “real homes” as being in a rural village, where they would often own a house and cattle (Denbow & Thebe 2006: 93). The result is that many households which have moved to centres such as Gaborone and Francistown also maintain a house (and close links with the family compound) in their village of origin.

A United Nations report (UN, 2002: 10) found that very poor, female-headed households derived 43% of their total income from government grants, and 18% from their own production. Currently, village economies are exclusively agricultural.

Many rural homesteads traditionally consisted of a collection of cylindrical huts (colloquially known as rondavels in southern Africa), constructed of dagha (a mixture of mud and cow dung) with thatched roofs supported by an encircling pole veranda. Open courtyards (also referred to as lapas) were the true living spaces. Single-room square huts built using traditional construction methods and materials are also found (figure 8). Vernacular huts have been mainly erected by women, but Western-style houses (called sekgoa houses) constructed by means of industrial building materials such as masonry walls and corrugated iron or tiled roofs are becoming increasingly common; they are erected by craftsmen who are typically male.

Tswana culture and customs have proved to be resilient, but sufficiently pragmatic to be contextually responsive. Whereas Denbow and Thebe (2006: 95) suggest that men only cut the poles for the wall and roof supports while women built and finished the walls and did the thatching, Rantau (2006: 4) on the other hand claims that “Women traditionally built the walls of the hut, whilst men were responsible for roofing it.” In point of fact, women still undertake the traditional thatching while men use the thatching method learned from white farmers, also called “boer thatching” (Larsson & Larsson 1984: 118).

The inevitable result of all the new ‘Western’ houses in traditional villages is that they increasingly resemble conventional suburbia – not a particularly pleasing aesthetic or spatial experience (nor a tempting environment for walking). Moreover, although the role of Batswana women in building the nation’s vernacular dwellings that are still the dominant typology in traditional villages is widely recognised and their building skills are greatly admired, because of rural poverty and the prevalence of impoverished female-headed households (UN 2002: 5), many existing traditional huts and courtyards are deteriorating rapidly.

Since its independence, Botswana has progressed from being one of the poorest countries in the world to a prosperous middle-income country and one of only a few sub-Saharan countries expected to meet its Millennium Development Goals by 2015 (UN 2013: 5).
South Africa, on the other hand, has regressed from having the largest and richest economy south of the Sahara to second place, after Nigeria. Although it is still an economic powerhouse (in African terms), the percentage of the population living below the internationally recognised poverty line (US$1.25/day per person) in South Africa is at 50%; quite average for sub-Saharan Africa. It is thus at the same level as Kenya, (ranked the 11th largest African economy) and considerably worse than Botswana (30%).

Most sources agree that 50-55% of Kenya’s population live in slums while the estimates for South Africa range from 23-29%, down from about 40% in 1995. The 3.2 million RDP (for Reconstruction and Development Programme) houses (2012 figure) certainly contributed to the reduction, but they have generally not contributed to either the quality of life nor to the economic opportunities of their inhabitants. This is due to their physical marginalisation on the remote suburban fringes and the fact that their low densities preclude the development of meaningful local economies or cheap public transport that would facilitate access to economic opportunities. While many RDP schemes feature engineering infrastructure, most lack public amenities and social space.

According to Stats SA (2010: 73), 75.4% of female-headed households live in formal housing, 14.6% in traditional, 9.4% informal and 0.6% in “other”. Figure 9 illustrates the implications of these percentages if they are correlated with the distribution of dwelling types (derived from Stats SA 2012: 63).

UN (2004) describes gender equality in South Africa as follows: “To date just over 50% of the housing subsidies that have been approved have been allocated to female-headed households …” and adds, “Similarly the participation of women in the construction has been actively encouraged through a number of programmes, with a target of having at least 10% of provincial budgets allocated to projects where women are the developers or contractors.” The report also refers to a national Framework on the empowerment of women in South Africa. However, this positive and encouraging scenario has been questioned (Barnard 2013).
As Tshikotshi (2009: 12) asserts: “The urban poor often accumulate difficulties in obtaining decent housing, especially the child-headed or women-headed homes.” Tshikotshi (2009: 81) “It is very common to find a family of about five members unemployed while providing for the basic needs of a family of five or more without proper jobs is very difficult. Most of these households are often headed by a female with low level of education or no education at all.”

![Figure 9](image1)

**Figure 9**
The dwelling types occupied male and female-headed households respectively in South Africa (source: compiled by the author from data in Stats SA 2010 and 2012).

Ironically, as the Comaroffs (1997: 308) argue, “In architectural terms Mafikeng was the most thoroughly transfigured [modified] settlement in all of Bechuanaland at the time.” Montshiwa Stad became the capital of Chief Montshiwa in 1881. The featured example consists of a number of flat-roofed (corrugated iron sheeting) buildings with mud-brick walls arranged around a courtyard (figure 10). A built-in bench engages the street and allows casual interaction with passers-by. It belongs to an elderly widowed lady, who now has two younger generations living with her. This is unquestionably a perfect example of how spatiality may respond to social need. While Western observers might object to the stand-alone outdoor toilet, the inhabitants said they appreciate the privacy and tranquillity it offers in a busy household.

![Figure 10](image2)

**Figure 10**
A homestead in Montshiwa Stad, outside Mafikeng (source: drawing by the author).
Notwithstanding the massive effort to roll out RDP houses, squatter camps continue to mushroom and there is no evidence that the backlog is being reduced, despite government’s claims to the contrary. Mark Misselhorn (2010) comments on the percentage of the population in shantytowns, and suggests that “[t]he actual numbers are probably significantly higher than these figures suggest.” In *The Sowetan* of 2 August 2010, Katlego Moeng writes that “[t]he number of informal settlements in South Africa has doubled in the last 10 years”, explaining: “In 2001 there were 1 066 shanty towns nationally. That number has since risen to 2 628 informal settlements as at the 2009-10 financial year” (figures 11 & 12).

Even in the second half of the 19th century, as locations were being built on the outskirts of towns, many black people resented the restrictions imposed by township living. In such instances, and others where housing was perhaps not available, they built their own settlements. The concept of an informal settlement does not uniformly mean tin shacks. On the periphery of country towns, where urban-rural linkages and access to traditional building resources are still strong, one finds a fascinating fusion of African space, ‘Africanised’ Western form and hybridised technologies. Shantytowns evolved where newly arrived migrants did not have access to those traditional materials and were obliged to rely on recycling materials from industrial production. The first shacks were probably built in Kimberley during the diamond rush, where corrugated iron sheeting, imported from the UK, became the most common material for the roofs and walls of the miners’ bungalows.

More men than women have migrated from rural to urban areas (O’Connor 1983: 69, 72), but studies indicate that many unmarried women move to the cities, while married women also migrate on their own (with their children) because they have become “dissatisfied with rural life or with their husbands.”

O’Connor (1983: 188) asserts that many informal economic activities in informal settlements are driven by women. Apart from the fact that there are more employment opportunities for men in the formal sector, it could be that these women, who were active agriculturalists in their rural origins, have a natural tendency to look after themselves. Women are active in informal industries such as spaza shops, baking, hairdressing and others (Tshikotshi 2009: 102).

Wills (2009: 2) established that “Informal workers are more likely to be women and to have never been married. They are also more likely to live in larger households with children, and particularly children under the age of seven. Significantly lower levels of educational attainment are also reported among informal workers when compared with formal workers.”

![Figure 11](source: images by the author).
Both Bill Freund (2007: 194) and Edgar Pieterse (2008: 57) recount cases where the recipients of free RDP houses illegally sold them (for far less than their real value), returned to their shantytowns of origin and continued practising their informal economic activities. In the older, arguably better-located 51/9 townships, there are interesting cases of densification by means of backyard cottages and shacks (figure 13).
Findings

The theme of this journal issue responds to what Shirley Ardener (1993: 10, 25) describes as “a cultural and political male hegemony”, although she adds: “The fact that women do not control physical or social space directly does not necessarily preclude them from being determinants of, or mediators in, the allocation of space, even the occupation of political space.” This is exactly what happens in the male-dominated cultures under study. In pre-colonial times the cattle kraal, kgotla (men’s meeting place) and the chief’s hut were the points of reference for setting out the homestead. In an informal settlement today it is the ward committee that controls the allocation of plots (figure 14). But once assigned their space, women move decisively to occupy it and make it a domestic place. This process is manifested in a number of ways, of which small scale, territoriality, decoration and the concept of making, are discussed below.

![Figure 14](image)

**Figure 14**
**Territorial patterns**
*(source: drawing by the author)*.

**Scale**

The scale of the squatter settlement is similar to that of a rural village (figure 15). Villages consist of compounds consisting of a number of huts, each constituting a room, arranged around a number of open-air living spaces. And although the rooms of shacks are sometimes connected, each can be clearly distinguished. In both cases the dimensions of a room rarely exceed four metres. Richard Hull (1976: 48) commented that “Africans were adept at maintaining a feeling of smallness and rural intimacy, even in areas of high population density.” This is obviously still true.
Territoriality

In South Africa, the Ndebele developed what is arguably our most spectacular and picturesque architectural tradition, extensively decorated dwellings with an intricate layering of courtyards and built-in benches. Franco Frescura suggests that they clearly set out to impress visitors, in contrast to the Tswana bilobial dwelling that sets out to outline a territorial statement (Frescura 1981: 26).

Lolwapa, “family”, “home” and “household” are all synonymous social concepts which possess spatial and material dimensions (Denbow & Thebe 2006: 96-98). The lapa, or courtyard, is the spatial and organisational centre. Walton (1956: 52) stresses that the lelapa was the real home, with all the domestic activities taking place there. The lelapa was not a male space. Men ate in the kgotla, where they also worked leather, repaired tools and weapons, and tended to the livestock.

Today, the inner courtyard of the homestead is the household’s intimate social space for eating and conversation (figure 16). A fire still features in its centre (Tau 2001: 13). Since each household still has its male-dominated kgotla, it seems reasonable to assume that occupancy of the lapa is now not restricted to women and children any longer, but it is still controlled by the woman of the house.

Anita and Viera Larsson (1996: 13) remind us that “The lolwapa is the heart of the dwelling. It is the place where visitors are received, meals sometimes are eaten, fires lit on cool
winter evenings and people gather at funerals and weddings. It is enclosed by low decorated mud walls and has a mud floor.”

![Figure 16](source: drawing by the author based on surveys undertaken by Larsson & Larsson 1984).

**Decoration**


![Figure 17](A Tswana women decorating her lapa, 1929 (Source: Comaroff & Comaroff 1997: 265).
Creating/making

The Comaroffs (1997: 275) allude to “The physical and social architecture of home”, obviously implying that these aspects are interdependent. Good architecture is a reflection of social structure, and when female participants at international housing conferences, from especially Africa and the Middle East, continually complain that social housing in particular is insensitive to traditional gender-orientated needs for privacy and functionality, they are simply referring to bad architecture. It is tempting to speculate that most social housing is designed by men, but the fact is nevertheless that “Dwellings [are] too small and crowded, especially for entertaining others” and “Women’s priorities may, of course, differ, but their views rarely prevail. Preference for undertaking many activities out of doors is also part cause and part effect of poor housing.” (O’Connor 1983: 165).

The act of building the home and owning it gives the woman considerable control, in this instance over the design as well. Ardener (1993: 5) discusses the precept of male and female sides in society, remarking that the oppositions between male and female are the same as “public/private” and “inside/outside”. This issue is unquestionably reflected in the way space reflects social organisation in every instance discussed above.

She goes on to point out that the phenomenon of “Gendered asymmetries” (Ardener 1993: 19) is evident on all levels. As Merle Sowman and Penny Urquhart (1998) clearly demonstrate in their A Place Called Home: Environmental Issues and Low-Cost Housing, sensitivity to human needs at a holistic level goes far beyond the simple provision of shelter.

Making space, making architecture and making buildings are common phrases in architectural terminology. The case studies discussed span a period of more than two hundred years as well as totally disparate geopolitical and social circumstances. It was nevertheless found by those studies that design decisions pervade the process during all phases, from idea generation to construction to decoration.

Amos Rapoport (1982: 137) argues that “Cultural landscapes are the results of many artifacts grouped together in a particular relationship. They are also the result of decisions of
innumerable individuals”, adding, “This suggests, of course, the presence of shared schemata among particular groups.” This is quite clear from the consistency evident throughout.

**Conclusion**

When Charles Jencks (2011: 60), the prominent architectural author and commentator, mentions that “women were written out of the historical record”, he clearly implies that “women have not been recognized”, rather than “they have not been participating”. This is particularly true in the case of southern Africa where the plight of single mothers and their quest to create homes has not received much attention.

Handel Kashope Wright (2002: 3), an eminent black academic specialising in African studies, cautions against “romanticising Africa and Africans (especially women who are put on a pedestal and depicted as symbolic representations of the continent) …”. However, considering the cultural, economic, political and technological challenges single mothers in particular have to overcome so as to achieve ownership, control, territoriality and the production of space, it would be very difficult not to celebrate their resilience and innovativeness.

But the fact that they seem to be achieving so much, should under no circumstances create the impression that single mothers are self-sufficient; it is simply not reasonable to expect such vulnerable people to continue making homes under such constrained circumstances, without assistance. It is clear that current policies are not adequate, and that special initiatives should be established to support vulnerable women in their quest for housing security.

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**Works cited**


The place of women in the Voortrekker Monument

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The Voortrekker Monument was inaugurated on 16 December 1949, concluding an eighteen-year long project to realize it. Built to serve as a reminder to white South Africans, and especially Afrikaners, of the history and significance of the Great Trek, socially, politically and culturally it embodied the ascendance of the Afrikaner. The conception of the Afrikaner Volk was fundamentally gendered with specific identities, characteristics and sociocultural positions attributed to both males and females. It was also racist with specific rights and privileges attributed to whites on the basis of being civil and thus superior. This article investigates the interplay between gender and race in the Voortrekker Monument by focusing on the representation of and role ascribed to women in the project. The concept of place is employed as a category by which to consider dichotomies around the presence and absence of women in the monument. The ideological and figurative representation and non-representation of women in the monument is analysed within a broader gender discourse of the early 20th century. The overall aim is to understand women’s social and cultural position as embodied in the monument and as an expression of the society within which they functioned.

Keywords: Voortrekker Monument, women, gender, race, identity, place

Women occupy a central position in the Voortrekker Monument. This statement can hardly be contested on the basis of its design and imagery. In terms of its architectural and spatial ordering a female occupies the key exterior position, namely the central point on the terrace defined by the main axis. This important place is taken up by the sculpture Voortrekker Mother Protecting her Children (Anton van Wouw, figure 1). Inside the monument Voortrekker women – as daughters, wives, mothers, fighters and protectors – are central to the events of the Great Trek depicted on the frieze (figure 2). In support of these figurative representations, the role of women in the history of the Great Trek was exalted in the discourse and narrative of the monument. The idealized qualities embodied by Voortrekker women came to serve as the norm for their 20th-century descendants. If presence and prominence were the only measures, women’s importance in the monument could not be questioned. Rather, this article considers women’s place in the Voortrekker Monument by way of the gendered and racial nuances and gradations between presence and absence, ideal and reality, the in-between and periphery.

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The article focuses on the eighteen-year long period from 1931 to 1949 during which the Voortrekker Monument was planned, constructed and inaugurated – referred to as the project of the monument. Women’s presence is considered in relation to how they were depicted, how they were included and how they were excluded. The term ‘place’ is employed as a means to activate thinking around the representation, roles and identities ascribed to women through the project of the monument, specifically in relation to the notions of center, margin and outside. Center refers to the ideologically idealized sense of womanhood central to the representations and narrative of the monument. Margin refers to women’s contributions to and participation in the making of the monument. Outside refers to those women who were discounted from its discourse and representations.

Mainly, the following questions will be explored: how were women ideologically represented in the monument? What sociocultural identity was embodied in this representation? How was this identity reassigned to mid-20th century Afrikaner women? How were women present in the making of the monument? How did their contributions and voices represent their own place and time? Which women had no place in the monument?

To have a place – a central role ascribed to women

The Voortrekker Monument embodied the ascendance of the Afrikaner. It served as a spatial and material manifestation of the collective power and influence they had generated in the process of constructing and consolidating a cultural identity. Following a century of trials and tribulations, by the 1930’s Afrikaners had a cohesive identity and felt that they ‘had a place’ in South Africa. To have a place means to belong. To belong means to be affiliated with something. Sociocultural affiliation means that one is regarded as a member of a group among whom one can take one’s place. Afrikaners had a history, language, religion, culture that marked their association. The cost of the their achievements was measured exclusively in relation to their own suffering and sacrifices. Women were placed center stage in this discourse due to what they experienced during the Great Trek and the Second Boer War (1899-1902)¹. Within a patriarchal society, Afrikaner
women were ascribed an identity imagined on the basis of what their forbearers embodied. To embody is to represent something in a clear and obvious way: to be a symbol or example of something. It can also mean to invest something with or as if with bodily form; to make corporeal; to incarnate, to represent in bodily form, to personify and, finally, to make part of a unified whole. What has become known as the volksmoeder ideology or ideal centered on the construction of this historic female model whose character was untouchable and who’s spiritual and physical body, as a site of trauma and suffering, was regarded as sacrosanct. This model was to serve as a guide and inspiration to Afrikaner women who in turn were expected to match her predecessors’ impeccable character.

The book Die Boervrou – Moeder van haar Volk (Dr. O’Kulis) serves as an example of a text that aimed to elaborate the qualities and characteristics of the model Afrikaner women. First published in 1918 by Nasionale Pers, a company founded in 1915 with the purpose of promoting Afrikaans works and culture, it was a popular book and by 1922 the fourth edition appeared. Its main aim was to define for the Afrikaner woman of the early 20th century the qualities and characteristics of her ancestors – the Voortrekkervrou and Boervrou of the Second Boer War. The dominant themes of Die Boervrou centers on women as bearers of civilization: woman of faultless character – pure, honest, honorable, dignified and worthy – devoted to God and committed to the Volk and motherhood. This bundle of attributes would become a refrain in the discourse on the Afrikaner woman, always referring back to the formative and normative qualities that her historic model held forth. A merging of nationalism and individual character is an underlying theme throughout the text and implies the strong imagined bond between the woman as individual and their social role at the time.

"n Volk is wat sy vrou is. Die vrou is die gewete van haar volk en sy waardemeter tegelyk. Die sedelike lewe van die volk word beheers deur die vrou, aan die vrou kan ons die sedelike toestand van die volk beoordeel (Dr. O’Kulis 1922: 179).

A nation is what its woman is. She is at the same time the conscious of her nation and standard of measure of its values. The woman controls the moral life of the nation; against the woman can we judge the morality of the nation [own translation].

This sentiment would dominate the representations of women in the Voortrekkers Monument. The monument embodied and narrated the Afrikaner’s collective memory and communal worldview. It served as a testament to the sacrifices made by the Voortrekkers and need for the preservation of white civilisation in South Africa. This ideology was intricately caught up in issues of racial purity and the importance of procreation, and therefore many symbols of the monument relate thereto. Some symbols referred directly to the idea of fertility, such as the zigzag line that runs around the top of the monument. The architect, Gerard Moerdyk (undated: 35-37) explained that in old cuneiform a zigzag line represents water, the symbol of fertility, used in the monument in accordance with Abraham’s admonition: “Be fertile and multiply yourselves for your descendants to be like sand at the edge of the sea”. This, Moerdyk stated in line with Afrikaner sentiment, was the only way South Africa would stay a white man’s land.

A white man’s land, it was argued, could not have been achieved without the white female. Corporal-figurative depictions in the monument fixated on the white female as mother, as the cause of the Afrikaner’s existence, and the continued existence in South Africa of a white nation. Many explorers, Moerdyk explained, had advanced on Africa but, “they wrote their name on water”; they left nothing behind. More recently, he continued, the Portuguese had occupied and owned various places on the coast of Africa, but they were never able to settle the interior. It was left to the Voortrekkers to do this, and what a world empire could not do, they did. The
Voortrekkers, the argument went, might have been simple farmers in search of a new state and home for their families, but at least they were successful in establishing a white civilisation in Africa, because of their womenfolk who had accompanied them:

Die Voortrekker vrou, omdat sy gewillig was om haar gemak en tuiste op te gee om haar man te vergesel en al die gevare van Afrika te troetseer, het dit moontlik gemaak dat ons vandag hier ’n blanke ras het.

The Voortrekker woman, because she was prepared to give up her comfort and home to accompany her husband and to defy all the dangers of Africa, made it possible that we have a white race here today. For that reason she occupies the place of honour in the Voortrekker Monument.  

Reference has already been made to the statue *Voortrekker Mother Protecting her Children* (figure 3) placed at the foot of the monument on the main axis of approach. This statue is flanked on each side by a group of relief panels with black wildebeest. The history thereof, in the discourse of the monument, was related as follows: after the treaty was signed by Piet Retief and Dingane, a noise and racket of the dance of approaching regiments was heard. Piet Retief asked Dingane: “What is that noise and racket?” to which Dingane answered: “It is my regiment of Wildebeest.” It is that regiment of Wildebeest that murdered Piet Retief and his companions, Moerdyk explained. The wildebeest, he went on, symbolised the dangers that threaten white civilization and the mother and her children symbolised white civilization itself. She, he concluded, stands triumphant, while the dangers recede.

Die fiere houding en triomfante uitdrukking op die vrou se gesig terwyl sy vol vertroue in die verte kyk, stempel die gevare as wykend en die oorwinning van die beskawing as ’n voldonge feit.

The fierce bearing and triumphant expression on the woman’s face while she stares into the distance full of confidence signify the dangers as receding and the victory of civilisation as an accomplished fact. 

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**Figure 3**

*Voortrekker Mother Protecting her Children*  
(photograph: Chantal van Staden, with permission).
For the poetess Yvette Christianse (1995: 7) the Voortrekker mother represents a prelapsarian⁹ state, “a kind of Eve” and a site on which three Afrikaner anxieties come to rest in mythic security: genetics, numbers and culture. At the same time, she argues, the canonical model of Afrikaner Motherhood joined with the Monument’s subtext which was to perpetuate division, exclusion and eradication. (1995: 8) In Christianse’s reading the Voortrekker mother stands as a guardian of the purity required of Afrikaner women, represented in qualities such as goodness, loyalty, and courage (1995: 11).

The white mother with her children was a rather straightforward symbolic representation of the civil – of white civilisation. But blacks were represented in a more sinister manner, not only as savage but also, symbolically, as animal. The direct translation of Wildebeest’s is wild beast. Therefore the black male is given this characteristic in contrast to all that the white female represents. Christianse refers to this as the ‘all familiar slippage between black and bestial’ (1995: 2) Furthermore, this racist sentiment of white as honorable and civil against black as savage and uncivil in the monument transcends the logical demarcations between past, present and future. The history of the Voortrekkers simply offered a convenient vehicle for a racist mind-set of mid-20th century Afrikaners.

In the monument, the Afrikaner body (its social body) found an abstract complement in the bodies of its forebears, who are figuratively represented on the historical frieze. The frieze served as a historical and visual testament of the bodily and spiritual suffering that the Voortrekkers had endured and the price paid ‘in blood and tears’ by the white body at the hand of the ‘savage’ black body. Many well known Afrikaners and especially descendants of the Voortrekkers were used as models for the frieze. It was considered a great honour to be chosen and taken up, in this way, in the representations of the monument. Against this honour that could be afforded to the white body, the marking of the black body as savage and cruel needed justification. Moerdyk was keen to stress that the aim was not to present the ‘Native’ as an unworthy being, but:

if the dramatic history of the Voortrekkers was to be shown graphically, the treachery and murders which dogged the Trek had to be shown. The Natives on the friezes were modelled from fine specimens of Zulus. No injustice has been done to anyone.¹⁰

**To have no place – discounted women**

Whereas the Voortrekker women occupy a sanctified place in the imagery of the monument not a single women of colour is represented. They are wholly absent from the visual narrative of the frieze: they literally were afforded no place. It is a well-known fact that the Voortrekker community included coloured and black servants who were as much part of the trails and tribulations of trekking. It is estimated that around twenty thousand people trekked from the colony, a number that includes five thousand servants. (Giliomee 2003:161) And obviously they were not exempt from any fate that befell the white trekkers. Among the hundred men killed by Dingane, thirty were servants and sixty black servants faced the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River alongside the 468 white trekkers. (Giliomee 2003:165) Female servants accompanied both Anna Elizabeth Steenekamp and Susanna Smit, two women who left written records of their experiences. Both at some point refer to the terror experienced by these women and, in some instances their deaths, but these statements are made with little empathy (as opposed to when they would record the same among family). Whereas, in terms of numbers, coloured and black people were an integral part of the trekking community their presence and participation was wholly edited from the historic version captured in the white marble of the frieze.
When the model of the proposed design for the Voortrekker Monument was exhibited in 1936, the women’s narrative was limited to the statue of the Mother and Children that represented the strength of the Voortrekker women and her role in establishing a white civilization in South Africa. As the design of the monument developed, to this reference was added the fertility symbols of the radiating floor and zigzag patterns. These served as reminders that the Volk’s survival relied on the Volk’s women procreating. Finally, the women’s narrative found its most potent expression in the frieze where women fill one of two roles: they either have an identity, are active, vocal, strong and stand “out” or “in front” (see panels 5, 15, 18 and 23) or they are passive, without an individual identity, the kappie obscuring the face, quiet, subordinate and “stand behind”, often looking at the back of a male figure (figure 4). Many more males are identifiable in the narrative of the frieze than females. This is understandable within the context of a patriarchal male-dominated society where men occupied all leadership positions. In the captions to the panels as published in the official guide only one female is given a distinct identity, namely Debora Retief (daughter of Piet Retief, panel 10). Finally, one panel directly marks the female body as the object of violence and trauma inflicted by the black body. Panel 14, located the right of the panel portraying the murder of Piet Retief, depicts the attack on the Bloukrans laager. This representation of women on this panel falls outside of the distinction between active and passive drawn above for in this panel the bodies of women and children (all female) are graphically represented a site of trauma and suffering. The depiction of women in the frieze potently reflects the then ideal of the Afrikaner women who were required to fill the role of the heroine when called upon to do so but who were generally required to be a force in the background – to know their place. Within the racist dogma of the time, more sinisterly, it also reflected a sense of the white female body endangered by “die swart gevaar” (the black danger).

**To know one’s place – women on the margin**

What direct contributions did women make to the Voortrekker Monument project? How were they represented at the different levels of creative and planning outputs that marked its making? Who were the women who contributed to the project and how does the ideological identity ascribed to them in the discourse of the monument correspond with their real-life experience and ideals?

The Voortrekker Monument is a tangible marker of the ascendance of the Afrikaner. As such it embodies an identity that this cultural group conceived for themselves on the basis of their history and sociopolitical desires. It served as much as a testament to the character they identified with as a representation of the rights they deemed to have obtained on the basis of this history. The previous section explored the ideological identity ascribed to Afrikaner women in the discourse, figurative representation and symbolism of the monument. This section will focus on women’s project and public related contributions to the project.

Whereas the idea to construct a monument to the memory of the Voortrekkers had been raised at various times, the project only became a reality with the establishment of the Sentrale Volksmonumentekommitte [Central Volks Monument Committee CVMC] in 1931. By the time of the inauguration of the monument 1949, sixteen more committees and subcommittees had been established. Over this period of eighteen years men dominated membership of the committees and above all of them a single man Ernest George (E. G.) Jansen who not only served as chairman of the CVMC but also of the majority of the other committees. Interestingly, Jansen’s wife, Mabel Jansen, was the first woman to become a member of the CVMC. She represented the executive board of the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurbewegings (FAK) of which she became the first female to serve on in 1929.
Figure 4
Women depicted in the frieze of the Voortrekker Monument
Two more women, Sannie Broers and Judith Pellissier, became members of the CVMC in 1935. Pellisier was Mabel Jansen’s sister-in-law, having in 1921 married her brother Samuel Henri Pellissier (1887-1978), an educator who became popularly known as the father of volkspele. Judith herself made a significant contribution to the volkspele movement. These three women, Jansen, Broers and Pellisier, were the monument’s women of the 1930’s. It can be argued that they represent the ascending Afrikaner female of the mid-20th century: all were educated as teachers and all were active in a number of women’s organizations. Jansen was also politically active and campaigned actively for women’s suffrage.

During the 1930s seven different committees were formed to deal with matters relating to the project of the monument. In addition to the three women a total of twenty-five men served on these committees, thus far outnumbering the females. Furthermore, all three women are notably absent from the committees that determined the location and design of the monument. This sets the tone for women’s direct participation and contribution in the project of the monument: women were ‘present’, albeit in a limited way, at least not absent. Women had a voice, albeit limited; at least they were not completely silent. Women had “a place”, not prominent, still at least there.

There is no doubt that the Afrikaner women were active and enthusiastic participants in the centenary celebrations around the symbolic Ossewatrek of 1938 and the Rapportryersfees of 1949. The pageantry of both festivals look very similar and most people would find it problematic to distinguish a 1938 occasion from a 1949 occasion. These events fall outside of the scope of this study and are referred to here mainly to acknowledge the public participation of women in these occasions in general. In both events, women participated fully and they can be seen carrying banners and flags, standing in guards of honour to welcome the arrival of the wagons and, in some instances, even pulling a kakebeenwa dressed in the obligatory kappies and voortrekkerrokke. They were very much part of the crowds in attendance as the wagons made their way across the country in what became a true volksfees. Women can be seen in tableaux staged on floats and in taferele [story scenes] that tended to represent life in the concentration camps. They sang in choirs, danced volkspele, got married, had babies christened and there is not a single local organizing committee that did not have a woman representative. A small number of women even joined the treks. They fully participated but occupied a distinct social “place”: in terms of the important work that marked the gravity of these festivities they were noticeably absent. There are some instances where a woman laid a wreath or unveiled a monument – a privilege usually afforded to aged descendants of the Great Trek leaders – but very few instances where they are central to the activities, and even less so where they feature by orating, speaking publicly. The following example will suffice: during both the 1938 and 1949 celebrations, there is only one instance of a woman delivering a speech, therefore, where a woman is speaking directly on behalf of women. This singular event occurred in 1938 when Judith Pellissier delivered an address titled Die Vrou van Suid-Afrika at the Voortrekker Monument. She spoke not on the main day, the 16th of December, and not on the “secondary” day, which would be the 15th of December, but rather on the first day, the 14th of December. She spoke passionately and poetically, starting off:

By ‘n gebeurtenis soos hierdie pas dit ons as Afrikanernasie om die roem en die nagedagtenis van die Moeder van ons nasie te besing, die roem van die nagedagtenis van die Voortrekkervrou.

On an occasion such as this it suits us as the Afrikaner nation to celebrate the memory of the Mother of our nation, the glory of the memory of the Voortrekker woman [own translation].

She went on to caution that the Trekkervrou should not be regarded as an angel out of heaven, that she had her faults like any ordinary person, but then, relapsing into the accepted overwrought
discourse of the time, said that history has shown that she was not merely the *soetsappige vermaaklikheid* [soppy entertainment] of a man but rather an essential force. Most of what follows falls within the realm of the ideal and the fetishizing of the minute daily trails and tribulations of the *Trekker vrou* and she concludes: “*Mag haar offer, wat op hierdie geheiligde terrein as ‘n ewige besieling sal uitstraal, die wekroep wees aan die Vrou van Suid-Afrika*”\(^{18}\). [May her sacrifice, which will radiate as an everlasting inspiration from this haloed site, be the clarion call of the Woman of South Africa [own translation]. It will serve no purpose to critically deconstruct a text such as this. Rather it should be considered contextually, and even contextually as it takes its place in the predictable and exaggerated discourse of its time. Although she offered no new insight, her speech still marks the only instance in which a woman was given the opportunity to orate.

An interesting contribution of a woman’s voice around the 1938 festivities is contained in a publication titled *Die Groot Trek – Gedenkuitgawe van Die Huisgenoot* (1938). Amongst all popular publications of the time that aimed to serve an educational purpose this book must count amongst the most effective. Accompanying *Die Huisgenoot*, an established family magazine, the *Gedenkuitgawe* might at first glance have appeared as a ‘light’ accompaniment to this, a family magazine, but in reality it is a serious tome on par with a history handbook, and it must have been very effective as a distance-learning history lesson. Of the thirty-three contributors, thirty-one were men and of these thirty-one men twenty-two had titles: doctors, professors, one advocate and one major respectively. This publication served as the tanner of the *Volk* in putting their (newly conceived) history to them.

Two pieces were authored by women: *Die kind en die Groot Trek* by the children’s author Rikie Postma (aunt of the sculptess Laurika Postma) and *Vryheid of die Dood* by Johanna Preller.\(^{19}\) Preller’s contribution to *Die Groot Trek* centenary publication is noteworthy as it represents one of the first instances where an Afrikaner woman writes in a scientifically accepted manner, rather than in the popular style already well occupied by Afrikaner women. The topic and content is also interesting as she deals with a subject that resonated with an issue in her own time: women’s vote. The fact that she had access to her husband’s substantial collection of historical archives and records probably opened up this part of history to her. In the piece Preller focuses on: “*die stemreg wat die Voortrekker vroue uit hoofde van hul lyding en ontbering ‘n eeu gelede verwerf het*”\(^{20}\) [the voting right that Voortrekker women earned due to the suffering and hardships they endured a century ago [own translation]. Mainly, she makes the case that, as the women of the *Kaapse Patriotte* of the 1780’s had been given voting rights, and these rights had never been revoked, it still applied to the Pietermaritzburg Voortrekker women of the 1840’s. This, she says, is a remarkable fact as the position and rights of a woman in her society has, for centuries, served as a measure of the civilization of her people. It is not within the scope of this article to analyse her arguments fully. However, of interest, firstly, is the peculiar interplay and dichotomy between the two propositions put forward, namely, the first which implies that Voortrekker women already had voting rights against the second that implies that they had earned voting rights by virtue of the suffering that they endured. Secondly, that voting rights marked the high regard afforded to women within the Voortrekker community as women of their foe [the British], did not enjoy the same right. Preller’s piece is important within the context of women’s voices in the politics of the time, which will be referred to later but contains many historical inaccuracies and although she puts forward an interesting argument, it is not plausible to imagine Voortrekker women of the late 18\(^{th}\) century to have been part of an egalitarian and ‘gender equal’ community. Most worrying is the authenticity of the piece: this is the only piece of writing ever published by Johanna Preller in contrast to the substantial contribution of her
husband in constructing an Afrikaner history. Is this truly a woman speaking or simply a topic that suited to be credited to a female author?

If Preller’s expert knowledge can be questioned, at least it can be stated as fact that by the 1940’s women were called on specifically for their expertise and knowledge – this marking the first instance where women are invited to participate and contribute to the project due to their unique expert knowledge.

In 1942 two women were invited to join the Historical Committee. This committee had been established in 1936 with the purpose to advise on historical detail, especially pertaining to the details on the frieze. Gertruida Anna [Trudie] Kestell (1891-1974) was called on as an expert of historical Voortrekker clothing. Whereas Kestell represented the “older” generation Kotie Roodt-Coetzee (1913-2005)\(^1\) represented a younger generation who were establishing themselves as experts via the academic route. Roodt-Coetzee’s knowledge and interests were honed during her studies at the Pretoria Normaakollege in 1933, as well as attending occasional classes in Afrikaans Art and Culture at the University of Pretoria. Like Kestell she became an expert in Voortrekker clothing, especially the Voortrekker-kappie.

The appointment of Laurika Postma (1903-1987)\(^2\) in 1942 as one of four sculptors to work on the historic frieze of the Voortrekker Monument was considered a great honour. Of all the women who contributed to the making of the monument, Postma’s life least followed the norms of the ideal Afrikaner woman as defined in a text such \textit{Die Boervrou}. In this book a chapter headed ‘Swakheid en gevaar’ [Weakness and danger] deals with two emerging types of Afrikaner women who, according to the author Dr. O’Kulis (1922: 175), posed a threat to the \textit{Volk}. The first type, the veragterdes [retrogrades], was said to be found among the impoverished class and tended to follow and copy the uitlanders [foreigners]: ‘… vir kerk en volk is hulle verlore’ [… for church and volk they are lost]. The second type, the geleerdes, were educated women and, although the author pointed out that this did not apply to all educated women, a large proportion of this group lacked character which means that they could no longer be regarded as true Boer women. Such women often did not marry, and by implication did not procreate and contribute to the growth and strength of the Afrikaner. Postma more closely resembled the ‘corrupted’ Afrikaner woman described in \textit{Die Boervrou}. She sacrificed the normative life (marriage, motherhood, home) to pursue a European education in sculpture and a career as a sculptress at the ‘advanced’ age of 32. This she did in Germany over two separate years, 1935 and 1939. She dedicated her life to her art and never married. Ironically, the author of \textit{Die Boervrou} was her father, Willem Postma who wrote under the pseudonym of Dr O’Kulis.

The last woman to join the CVMC was Enid van der Lingen,\(^3\) appointed to the committee in 1948 on the passing of Broers. At this time Jansen and Pellisier were also still members, and these three women would remain so until the committee was disbanded in 1968. Interestingly, she is the only woman who ever chaired a committee, this being the Refreshments Committee, a sub-committee of the Voortrekker Monument Inauguration Committee.

Van der Lingen’s sociopolitical life and involvement with the monument serve as a useful and meaningful thread to tie some of the monument’s women together. Van der Lingen and Jansen were prominent members of the Nasional Vrouearty (NVP), the women’s wing of the Nasionale Party (NP). The focus of the NVP was on social conditions, health, education of the Afrikaner and, especially, women’s suffrage. Van der Lingen and Jansen were regular contributors to \textit{Die Burgeres}, a magazine created by the NVP women that served as a platform for debate. Articles dealt with alcohol misuse, morals, and social conditions, the poor-white
In 1930, white South African women were given the vote and the NVP and NP became “one” as it was felt that there was no longer need for gender separated parties and it would strengthen the party to combine resources, for example not to have two different parties fundraising in competition with one-another. It became a problem for women to have separate committees even if they dealt with ‘women’s issues’. Furthermore women became underrepresented on local councils and congresses, which were now dominated by men ‘want hulle stemme was sterker, hulle kon beter gehoor word’24 [because their voices were stronger, they could be heard better]. Men’s issues now dominated discussion: subsidies, roads and bridges. Social problems related to education and health were not considered as important.

Women’s place was once more relegated to the kitchen and Jansen and Van der Lingen, amongst others, expressed their disappointment at being marginalized from the political sphere at the point where they achieved what they had been fighting for. They felt that they were being asked to step aside for the “real” politicians (the men) to steer the ship. They also felt peripheral to the NP politics as it shifted its focus outside of the social issues that had been the basis of their work. In the political sphere, at the point of gaining the vote, women were not given an opportunity to take their place but rather to know their place. I would argue that their participation in the making of the monument followed the same pattern.

**Conclusion**

Whereas the ideal Afrikaner woman of the early 20th century was fetishized in the discourse and imagery of the Voortrekker Monument, real women were at best peripheral to the making of the monument. But although they might have been underrepresented and marginal to the writings and orations that accompanied the social project of monumentalizing the Afrikaner Volk, the group of women considered in this article represents an interesting and rich cross-section of the real Afrikaner women of their time. They were not the stereotypical volksmoeders as had been so carefully defined in the nationalist hagiography. Rather, they were complex and dynamic women attuned to the issues of their day (albeit focused on “white” only) and who contributed significantly, (albeit selectively) to improving the lives of others.

Among the group Postma is the only one to have reflected on her involvement in the monument. This is understandable as her contribution is a tangible one. However, among the reminiscences left by some of these women (most notably Jansen and Van der Lingen) no mention is made of the Voortrekker Monument whereas their political and social work features prominently. One is left to wonder if they had the same experience in their engagement with the Voortrekker Monument committees that they had within the political sphere, namely that they were present but not fully acknowledged, that they “had a place”: not in the center but rather on the periphery?

This article contends that the sculpted representation of women in the Voortrekker Monument was idealized and manipulated in such a way that it served the dominant racialised...
nationalist ideology of the time. In contrast, women’s direct representation in the making of the monument evidenced their marginalized position within Afrikaner society. How does this situation compare to other monuments constructed in South Africa in the early 20th century?

Only a handful of other commemorative monuments were constructed in the 20th century in South Africa prior to the Voortrekker Monument. Among these the Honored Dead Memorial (1904, Kimberley) and Rhodes Memorial (1912, Cape Town), both designed by Herbert Baker, are the only ‘English’ monuments of this time. As a test, two documents pertaining to the Rhodes Memorial, the Souvenir Programme and speech given by the 4th Earl Grey at its inauguration on 5 July 1912, were reviewed to determine if any women were involved in its making. None are listed among the members of the committee that oversaw its making and none are mentioned as of specific importance in the orations that heralded it. Women are wholly absent from this monument dedicated to an imperialist misogynist.

Were women involved in the making of the National Women’s Monument (1913) in Bloemfontein? Elsie Cloete (1999) has shown how, in the discourses of this monument, prominence was given to the near exclusive role males played in its conception and realization. In line with its patriarchal social context, conversely to what one would expect a century later, no women were represented on the National Women’s Monument Commission – a committee of ‘eminent men’. The only two women who contributed in any way was Mrs. Tibbie Steyn, the wife of President Steyn, and Emily Hobhouse and Cloete shows how, over the course of two brochures published 1926 and 1961, acknowledgement of their contribution was deliberately reduced. Cloete (1999: 48) argues that issues of female identity remained subsidiary to the nationalist imperative.

Once homes are being built or rebuilt, once the fear of capture or death has loosened its grip, once a government is in place and in power, old practices reassert themselves, former rhetorics of the mother’s rightful place manifest themselves and there emerges once again from the war-time freedoms accorded women, the old, sedimented layers of notions about ‘a women’s place’ (Cloete, 1999: 37). It could be argued that South Africa was unique in having two national monuments in which women featured so prominently: the one dedicated to women and the other exalting them. From a critical perspective the narrow meaning of the term ‘national’ in this context and the ideological roots of women’s representation needs to be acknowledged.

White Afrikaner women ‘have their place’ in the Voortrekker Monument: the one central but imagined and within the realm of ideology and the other real but peripheral to the spheres of decision-making. If, as within the political sphere and typical of a patriarchal society, they were required ‘to know their place’ they still had a voice and could participate. However, women were noticeably absent from the committees that dealt with the design and imagery of the monument. The Voortrekker Monument is a masculine edifice, conceived of by men, with a racist narrative interplay between strength in the face of suffering as represented by the white female in opposition to savagery and barbarity as represented by the black male. Any women ‘other’ than white women were unashamedly edited from the representations and discourse of the monument, absence being the only place afforded to them.

Notes

1 “Boer” was common term for white farmer settlers in southern Africa. The Second Boer War followed the much less known First Boer War (1880-1881) and is also referred to as the Boer War or the (Second) Anglo-Boer War. Outside of South Africa it is known as the South African War.
See Vincent, *The Volksmoederideology in Afrikaner Nationalism*.

See Van der Watt, *Figures of the Frontier*.


Ibid.

Contemporaneous accounts of the event make no mention of the Zulu fighters being referred to as ‘a regiment of Wildebeest’. See Grobler, *The Retief Massacre of 6 February 1838 Revisited*.

Ibid.

Moerdyk Papers. Ontwerp en simboliek van die Voortrekker Monument, Africana Collection, Merensky Library, University of Pretoria.

Meaning characteristic of or belonging to the time or state before the fall of humankind.

Rand Daily Mail, Moerdyk denies political motive in Voortrekker Monument, 9 November 1938.


Martha Mabel Pellissier (1889-1979), in 1909 Jansen obtained a BA in modern languages from the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington, followed by an early career as a teacher, this being the predominant line of work for educated women at the time. She married E. G. Jansen in 1912. Although well connected by birth within the burgeoning Afrikaner society, in their own generation she and her husband became to be regarded amongst the Afrikaner *adel* [nobility] of their time. Like many influential Afrikaners of her generation she was a *kampvegter* [champion] for Afrikaans. Not only did she set the first ever exam in Afrikaans, but she also co-authored the first guide on Afrikaans grammar, both in 1917. And between 1924 and 1936 she was directly involved in the on-site education of poor white railway workers in Natal. Biographical information from C.J. Beyers & J.L. Basson (eds). 1987. *Suid-Afrikaanse biografiese woordeboek*. Pretoria: RGN, volume V: 407.

Federation of Afrikaner Cultural Organisations, founded in 1929

Susanna Barbara Broers, neé de Vos, 1876-1947, teacher and one of the founders of the *Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie* (SAVF) in 1904. She was also involved in the founding of the Bond van Afrikaanse Moeders, at that point the only training academy for midwives in South Africa. In 1930 she was one of the founders of the *Afrikaanse Kultuurraad van Pretoria* and an active member of the *Transvaalse Vrouesendingvereniging*. Biographical information from D.W. Kruger & C.J. Beyers (eds). 1977, *Suid-Afrikaanse biografiese woordeboek*. Cape Town: Tafelberg-Uitgewers for RGN, volume III: 113.


The CVMC (1931), the Executive Committee (1935), the Siting Committee (1936), the Form Committee (1936), the Historical Committee (1936), the Financial Committee (1936) and the Central Voortrekker Centenary Committee (1937). See Ferreira, *Die Geskiedenis van die Sentrale Volksmonumentekommittee*.


Ibid, p. 27.


See Grobler, E. & Pretorius, F, pp.112-135. She designed the three dresses for the laying of the foundation stone. Her interest in cultural objects led to a later career in curating and museology.

Biographical information from Pillman, *Laurika Postma*.

Enid Christine van der Lingen, neé Wilcocks, 1891-1956, daughter of ds. David Wilcocks and Aletta van der Merwe and the sister
of Raymond William Wilcocks, professor in Psychiatry and from 1934, rector of the University of Stellenbosch. Enid completed her schooling in Stellenbosch and then proceeded to study Law at the University of Pretoria. In 1915 she married Jan Stephanus [J.S.] van der Lingen, a lecturer in Physics at the University of Cape Town. In 1921 Enid, J.S. and their young son spent a year in Baltimore while he completed a PhD at John Hopkins University. In 1930 the family moved to Pretoria when J S took up the position of Professor of Physics at the University of Pretoria. Biographical information compiled from documents in the E C van der Lingen Collection, Manuscript Section, J. S. Gericke Library, University of Stellenbosch. The collection contains fifteen transcriptions of reminiscences by Enid and her mother.

24 E C van der Lingen Collection, Manuscript Section, J. S. Gericke Library, University of Stellenbosch 416/7, p: 3


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Maximum firepower: Vale van der Merwe, an emergent ceramic artist at Starways Arts, Hogsback, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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Vale van der Merwe has been working as a ceramic artist for the past five years, and in that time has developed a remarkably diverse repertoire of both thrown and handbuilt works. These include rapidly thrown utilityware as well as carefully conceived sculptural works that engage with ideas rather than primarily with function. She also makes full use of opportunities offered by high-temperature woodburn firings, and despite works collapsing while being made, breaking while being carried to the kiln and slumping during firing, she has used such occasions as opportunities for learning rather than despondency. Van der Merwe is also an actively hands-on ceramic artist who engages with all levels of tasks associated with studio ceramics in a village setting, so has found herself, for example, both creating a new chimney for the kiln, and simultaneously leading discussion around concepts for new collaborative exhibitions. There is a seriousness of intent combined with infectious confidence evident in both her daily presence and ceramics, and it is hoped that she will develop her repertoire and workings even further in forthcoming years.

Key words: back to the earth lifestyle, ceramic arts, handbuilt ceramics, low carbon footprint, female artists, high temperature wood firing

Female ceramic artists in South Africa are renowned for shaping ideas and pioneering techniques, as well as for innovative use of raw materials. Marjorie Johnstone along with Gladys Short, for example, set up a studio in 1925, in rural Olifantsfontein near Pretoria to create distinctive works (Gers 2000, Hillebrand 1991, Watt 2012), now known as Linnware; and the late Alice Nongebeza fired by placing recently made slightly moist works onto an already blazing bonfire in a rural area near Port St Johns in the Eastern Cape (Steele 2012). More recently, Wilma Cruise (Arnold 1996, Schmahmann 2002, 2007) has developed installations of life-size ceramic sculptures that comment on the human condition; and Fée Halstead (Arnold 1996, Cruise 1991, Scott 1998, Theron 2012) has, in the foothills of the Drakensberg mountains, established Ardmore Ceramics, which is renowned for both exuberantly decorated utilityware and sculptural works.
On the other hand, Vale van der Merwe has, relatively speaking, only just begun her career as an enthralled and committed ceramic artist. Van der Merwe spent her early childhood in and out of her father Anton’s ceramics studios, both in Cape Town and in Midrand (Steele 2014a). She then spent 17 years in Italy without handling much clay. During that time, she completed her schooling, in Italian, then completed three Masters programmes at Bologna University, variously in Personal and Business Coaching; Neuro Linguistic Programming; as well as in Art History. Upon her return to South Africa in 2008, she settled down at Hogsback in the Eastern Cape, and began working seriously with clay at Starways Arts (Steele 2014b) as a way of life and means of earning an income.

**Getting started**

Like Charmaine Haines (Haines 2013), whose studio, called Ware on Earth, is in the Karoo at Nieu Bethesda, and Astrid Dahl (Wilson & Hook 2014), whose studio is located on a farm near Nottingham Road in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, Van der Merwe is energised by living and working in a country setting (figure 1). In a series of interviews conducted in November 2014, she explained that she finds that this lifestyle chimes perfectly with her “need” to connect with mother earth and work with clay, thereby living in a way that is rhythmically integrated with and part of surrounding natural elements (Steele 2014a).

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

Vale van der Merwe's Starways Arts workplace, and at work. The view is across a forested valley towards the mist enshrouded Gaika’s Kop mountain (photos: Anton van der Merwe, 2009).

Van der Merwe, husband Kent Smith and their two daughters live low carbon-footprint lifestyles in a self-built timber home made from trees that were cut down and milled by Smith on exactly the site upon which the house is now built. Their way of life is geared towards self-sufficiency “entwined with a rejection of … near single-minded acquisition of commodities and money, careerism, and an emphasis on disposability and ephemerality” (Halfacree 2006) so common in sectors of contemporary Southern African society. Van der Merwe’s choice of factors constituting a meaningful way of life within a beautiful natural environment arises from recognition that such circumstances spark her creative energies, and that “natural beauty is often a tool” (Lovett & Beesely 2007) with which to work, both physically and conceptually. She maintains that one of the reasons for her presence on earth is to interact directly with its
materiality in creative and constructive ways, and in so doing offer thanksgiving for such an opportunity. Furthermore, I have seen that she creates works true to the spirit of William Morris’s 1880 (Stevens 2007: 422) commendation of “art made by the people for the people as a joy for the maker and the user”.

Van der Merwe thus earns an income by taking these ideas and earthy clay, plus other raw materials, to make something as beautiful as possible under the circumstances as a “thank you” for life and opportunity. Her work with clay, water, air and fire intentionally takes place in recurring phases in relative harmony with natural cycles. Furthermore, she has found that the actual repetitiveness of throwing on the wheel, or of handbuilding, or of many other clay-related tasks including glazing and firing, allow a desirable trance-like state of being focused, yet defocussed, wherein theta waves produced by the brain encourage a state of alertness within calmness that is conducive to bringing her creative impulses to fruition. Homeopath, Richard Steele (e-mail of 10th February 2015), has pointed out that from some points of view, “such states of alertness within calmness encourage a two-way process allowing her to be open to synergies of being both influenced by energies inherent to raw materials in use, as well as to influence them by manipulation thereof”.

Van der Merwe suggests that, from a quantum physics perspective (Gribbin 1991, Bordley 1998, Zukav 2000), just as clay is energised by its history of place in the earth (Gosselain 2008, Watson 1992) prior to being worked, so too can good energy from the artist become imbued into the works during the making and firing processes, thereby adding enjoyment at times of use and contemplation thereafter. Her way of thinking about energies arising from electromagnetic fields driven by the brain influencing forces inherent in both raw materials and thus artworks has both supporters (Emoto 2011, Deshpande & Kulkarni 2012) and detractors (Hall 2007, Tiller 2004), and will be critically explored in a future paper.

Utilityware

Van der Merwe’s utilityware (figure 2) is made up of mainly relatively small items rapidly thrown on an electric wheel, or cut out from slabs of flattened clay. These are comparatively low-priced pieces that can turn out to be good income earners because they use up only small amounts of raw materials, fill up all the tiny spaces between larger works in the kiln, and usually sell easily. Her utilityware range consists mostly of a variety of vessels and plates, some of which can be bespoke when so desired. Consistently successful wheelwork requires immense cumulative skill, and Van der Merwe rates time spent and importance of such work very highly.

One of her main aims is to create works that, in one way or another, suit contemporary architectural lines, settings and lifestyles of her generation. She is working especially for those who prefer smoothly flowing interplays between spaces and ways of living, and is thus careful to keep her utilityware shapes simple and clear, avoiding temptations towards over-decoration and complicated form just for the sake of it. Her tendency towards simplicity of shape and finish harmonise with her predilection for engaging with meditative states of alertness within calmness, thereby passing on to customers tangible items for use and contemplation that both contain and exude qualities that actively add to pleasures of usage and presence.

Van der Merwe sometimes engages with brushwork of oxides above or underneath glazes, and also on raw clay surfaces. Yet, she prefers engraving, faceting, stamping and scraping raw clay surfaces prior to glazing, thereby achieving subtle interplays of angles, volumes, textures and tones. Glazes are used sparingly, and then usually singly, in order to achieve unobtrusive,
understated character. Her works have presence because of quietness rather than by virtue of riots of flowing colour, which can be achieved when those very same oxides and glazes are brushed, splashed or double and triple-dipped in multilayered abandon – all techniques that will be discussed in a forthcoming paper. She creates works that enable users/viewers to “skip hunting for the aesthetic kick in an object because the aesthetics already reside in what it is and flow from how we experience – look, own, use – it” (Watt 2014, citing Saito 2007).

Furthermore, one can, according to Ronnie Watt (2014), regard ceramics such as those made by Van der Merwe as being “multivalent, meaning that experience of them is not prescribed by either tradition or convention, but by choice of interpretation and assimilation in a personal/communal space”. Such a view liberates both artist and viewers, enabling both to comfortably rely on their own criteria rather than on those dictated by others. Van der Merwe’s utilityware, as well as her larger handbuilt vessels and other works, “carry a signature of conscious making”, thereby doing more than merely acting as a “convenience container” (Watt 2014) of the type produced in factories and available at supermarkets.

High temperature woodburn

Another strong characteristic of Van der Merwe’s ceramics is the presence of effects imparted to clay and glaze surfaces by the flames and ash during woodfiring (Carlson 2009, Geisinger 2010, Kusakabe & Lancet 2005, Minogue & Sanderson 2000, Troy 1995) to a white-hot temperature of 1340°C. Much like Maya Machin (www.mayamachinpottery.com/About%20Maya.html, accessed on 28th January 2015) of New England USA, Van der Merwe says that she delights
in working with the maximum firepower that woodfiring gives, to the extent that she may well not have become interested in working with clay as a way of life if it had not been for the fact of being in a position to fire her works in this way (figure 3). Woodburn is both very exciting and demanding in terms of physical labour and intense concentration required to keep a steady stoke and temperature climb. Towards the end of the approximately 24-hour firing cycle, when coming near to top temperature, the fire crackles, bellows, grunts, roars, growls and shakes the earth beneath it. Long tongues of viciously caressing flames sometimes spew forth from even the tiniest cracks in the kiln structure, as well as from spyholes and probe slots. The whole kiln vibrates and shimmers in harmony with the cycles of fuel being fed into the fireboxes and becoming instantly consumed into ferocious incandescence.

As the works inside reach top temperature, the clay becomes quite soft, almost molten, and glazes melt and mix with each other and begin to run. Then, at a specific instant, a decision is made that enough is enough, and a process is begun of gradually diminishing the amount of fuel fed to the voracious fire until even that phase comes to an end and the kiln is clammed closed for the next 36 hours to gradually cool. The moment of deciding that peak temperature has been reached determines the extent of melt that the ware and glazes will have experienced, and whether opening the kiln will reveal a majority of works fired to perfection, over-fired with items melted into unrecognisable globules, or under-fired, which leaves the surfaces grainy and lacking in depth of colour and optimal finish.

Maximum flame travel during firing at Starways Arts is optimised by the downdraft kiln having been fitted with a nine meter tall chimney, which was rebuilt in 2011 (figure 4). The kiln has a firebox on either side, from which flames move upwards towards the arched roof, and are then drawn down through the ware towards an opening in the center of the kiln floor, before being drawn out by the chimney. High temperature woodburn results in ash deposits on the ware becoming incorporated into glazes and contributing to glazing and colouring of exposed spaces of clay body. The flames tend to toast the clay surfaces, imparting warmly coloured areas onto ware – see the beaker and oil bottles in figure 1 – in their pathways. Judicious reduction (Fournier 1977, Hamer & Hamer 2004, Harrod 2012) towards the end of the firing cycle further contributes to the speckling of the clay body and iridescent glaze colours that can result from oxygen being taken from metal oxides characteristic of this firing method.
Vale van der Merwe reconstructing the kiln chimney in 2011. Old gas bottles were topped and tailed, then welded together by her to create the chimney structure (photos: Anton van der Merwe, 2011, and right: 2015).

It is at crucial times such as when conducting and concluding a firing that Van der Merwe is particularly glad to have her father, Anton van der Merwe, around. Like fellow South African ceramic artists Sarah Walters and Esra Bosch (Watt 2014, Walters 2013), Vale van der Merwe has, in an independent way, taken on a variant of her father’s love of clay and fire as creative media. She says that their creative relationship is mutually constructive and symbiotic, and melts away the age difference. She does not see herself as his apprentice as such, nor does he actively try to teach her. Van der Merwe is someone who prefers to learn on her own by doing, at her own pace, and is strengthened by the fact that her father is close, yet understands her preference for finding own routes to fulfilling creative ideas. She is also glad to have been able to step into a studio and use kilns and other equipment established more than two decades earlier. Furthermore, they talk and exchange ideas, and he encourages her need for creative freedom.

*Figure 5*

*Early handbuilt vessels, usually between 400mm and 600mm high, and Wash hand basins, below left and right, are usually between 450mm and 550mm wide (photos: Vale van der Merwe, except for top middle: Anton van der Merwe; bottom middle Laurent Chauvet).*
Handbuilding and collaborative ventures

Handbuilding one-off vessels and other sculptural works, mostly engraved or stamped with semi-geometric patterning, is one way in which Van der Merwe has explored her independence within parameters of existing traditions and infrastructure. Beginning in 2009, *Early handbuilt* vessels (figure 5) were largely unglazed, relying on surface patterning, and play of flames and wood ash for finishing. These have developed variously in directions that include organically shaped *Wash hand basins*, as well as *Birdbaths* and one-off large floor *Vases* (figure 6).

Synergies between Vale van der Merwe, father Anton, and jeweller Taryn Wong Chong (figure 7) in an exhibition in 2011 entitled *The Lost Forest*, show further directions that her ceramics are taking, especially towards articulating concepts as an extension to exploring parameters of ceramic form and finish. The main premise for the exhibition, as stated on the poster, was that

The forests surrounding Hogsback are the remnants of vast indigenous African forests. These powerful but sensitive cloud forests have been devastated, exploited and plundered by great fires, industrial revolution, invasive alien vegetation, single-crop farming and carelessness. The forests have breathed for us, housed us, warmed us, clothed us, fed us and created wealth for us. Starways Arts Centre residents Anton van der Merwe, Vale van der Merwe and Taryn Wong Chong are using the energies of the forest as inspiration to produce an exhibition of acrylic paintings, ceramic sculpture and jewellery. Please join us to rediscover, celebrate and nurture the forests around us (Anton van der Merwe, Vale van der Merwe, and Taryn Wong Chong, 2011).
Ideas for this joint exhibition germinated towards the end of 2010 when the three came together to specifically brainstorm potential for visual arts collaboration. After a day of walking through local forests and contemplating ideas, some themes were established, and it was agreed that each would create works in their own media talking to those themes. Anton van der Merwe chose to create acrylic paintings, Vale van der Merwe located herself within the realm of ceramic sculpture, and Taryn Wong Chong opted for mixed media, including wire, seeds and amber, as well as precious and semi-precious stones. The exhibition opened nearly a full year later. Vale van der Merwe says that she really enjoyed this collaboration and rising to meet the challenge of creating works that allude to concepts rather than primarily to traditions of particular forms or functions. The original concept was further enhanced at the time of the exhibition to include plant aroma and sound by strewing leaves and pine needles on the floor, as well as by playing ambient forest vibe music created by Vale’s brother, Pearce van der Merwe.

In *Ordered Chaos* (figure 8), for example, the ceramic by Vale van der Merwe stands with a painting on a similar theme by Anton van der Merwe on the wall, and the sculpture is swathed around the diameter with a jewellery belt created by Wong Chong. Thus, the whole sculpture – including the belt – is a three-dimensional version of the idea explored in the painting, according to how each artist conceptualised order within seeming disorder, and *vice versa*, as is found in nature. The wheel shape refers to cycles, as well as to self-containment, and that even though there may seem to be a lot of untidy vegetation and so on, everything actually has its place, and all has a function within the system. The wheel shape also refers to original loggers who cut yellowwood, stinkwood and blackwood for profit irrespective of damage done.

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Continuing on this theme, the sculpture *Hidden Treasure* (figure 9a) was exhibited in conjunction with the painting *Rebirth*. The sculpture, which is also a lamp, reflects on cycles of death, decay and rebirth. The structure of the work was loosely based on part of a hollow tree-trunk, and featured amber carved by Wong Chong. The idea behind creating some interior spaces inaccessible to the human eye arose from their perception that in life there are often hidden meanings to events and relationships that may become evident or not, all in due course. *Mother Nature* (figure 9b) has been toasted by the flames while firing, and refers to the feminine aspects of life sources. On the other hand, *Cycle of Change* (figure 9c) is an intense reflection on the vast spectrum of possibilities that can occur as changes take place in people’s lives, as well as in their surroundings. The work is made up of two sets of 64 tiles mounted on mirror and

![Ordered Chaos](image)

*Figure 8*

*Ordered Chaos*, 500mm diameter, with painting *Cycles of Life*, 500mm x 500mm, and close-ups of *Ordered Chaos* (photos by Anton van der Merwe, 2011).
wood to create a book shape. The elements of this work respectively represent the pictograms and hexagrams associated with all change, as outlined by the I Ching (Blofeld 1980, Wilhelm 1975).

Another conceptual work is *Forest Sounds* (figure 9d) wherein a series of vessels with pod-like bellies at different heights hint at different musical tones that arise. This work, exhibited in conjunction with the painting *Forest Light*, is intensely austere, and relies on form and zones of toasting by the flames of firing for its impact. The relatively rough surfaces, and contrasting hues, hint at endless variety. Wong Chong’s jewellery suggests trills and embellishments, therewith adding to myriad sounds in a healthy forest realm that is never quiet. In contrast, the work *From Mineral to Matter* (figure 9e), paired with the painting *Yellowwood Crystal*, is quite stocky and prickly. This is as a result of Van der Merwe’s intention to conceptualise that, from an underground geological point of view, the earth’s components of crystals, minerals and so on have become receptive to supporting new growth of plants and all inhabitants of this planet. Such growth needs nurturing, an important part of which is present in the work *Lost Forest Fountain* (figure 9f), which features water as life giving central protagonist. Warm blushes from the firing add to a sense of mystery and intrigue, and emphasise that water flows, usually nurtures, and finds a way.
Conclusion

Water and fountains are likely to continue as recurring themes in her oeuvre. Van der Merwe’s ongoing interest in reticulating water can be seen, for example, in the *Eye of Heaven Fountain*, (figure 10a) and then in *Organic Fountain* (figure 10b), which were part of a joint exhibition with painter Fiona Almeleh in 2012, held at the Gate House Gallery. It is also likely that Van der Merwe will continue to seek out further collaborative opportunities, while also aiming for more public works such as *Dove* (figure 10c), which was created for St Patrick’s Chapel in Hogsback, as part of a four-station meditative walk. She is also exploring an ever increasing variety of vessel shapes that *Embrace* (figure 10d) and affirm feminine aspects of creative forces, always looking for ways to conceptually express powerful elements of natural patterning found in her surroundings.

She has established an oeuvre that includes both rapidly thrown utilityware and carefully considered handbuilt forms. These works all, in different ways, act as vehicles to further express relationships between herself and her environment by means of specific forms that are engraved or have received other surface treatments. These, in turn, forge new relationships with customers and collectors. Finally, it is her predilection for using a rather coarse Starways Arts clay body, and for firing both utilityware and larger handbuilt works to maximum woodburn white-heat, which contributes to setting her oeuvre aside from other ceramic artists in South Africa. This is a strong foundation upon which to build her career as a successful ceramic artist.

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John Steele first worked with clay as a studio potter in Rhodes Village in the Witteberge Mountains of the Eastern Cape in the 1970s, and then as a pottery manager in Mthatha, prior to taking up his present post as Senior Lecturer in the Visual Art Department at Walter Sisulu University in East London, South Africa.
Witching hour in Vardø: evocative atmospheres on a site of female persecution and trauma

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The 17th Century persecution, torture and burning of eighty-nine women and two men was recently memorialised on the most North-Eastern tip of Europe. Located in Vardø, Norway, The Steilneset Memorial, consisting of a Memory Hall and an installation entitled The Damned, The Possessed and The Beloved, is a collaboration between Swiss architect Peter Zumthor and the late French artist Louise Bourgeois. Vardø is the only town in Europe situated within the arctic climate zone, and the locale of the most severe 17th-century European witch-hunt. Witchcraft and accusations thereof are complex social and cultural phenomena. Some argue that they occur as a result of religious zeal and as attempts to rest economic and social control of regions. This paper will elaborate on these points by showing that spaces of witchcraft are fundamentally gendered spaces, as well as spaces of envy and of violence against women. Furthermore, it will argue that the isolated geographical setting of Vardø, its lack of plant life, chronic seasons and harsh conditions, its exposure to the north, and its genius loci, were implicit in the devastating account of the witch hunt. This case has been selected for two reasons: firstly, in reaction to current critiques of the architectural discipline that question its prioritisation of the visual sense. In which regard this paper hopes to illustrate The Steilneset Memorial as a suggestive and participatory environment, where evocative atmospheres have been concretised; secondly, to highlight nuanced and responsive architectural approaches on a site of female persecution and trauma.

Key words: Witches, envy, gendered space, performativity of place, sorcery, Phenomenology, the lifeworld, Vardø

Heksejag in Vardø: suggestiewe en deelnemende atmosfere in ’n plek van vroue vervolging en trauma

Aan die mees Noord-Oostelike punt van Europa is die 17e euse vervolging, marteling en verbranding van agt-en-negentig vrouens en twee mans onlangs herdenk. Die Steilneset gedenkplek, wat bestaan uit ’n gedenksaal en installasie genaamd The Damned, The Possessed and The Beloved, is ’n projek uitgevoer deur die Switserse argitek Peter Zumthor en die oorlede Franse kuntenares Louise Bourgeois. Die gedenkplek is geleë in Vardø, Norweë, die enigste dorp in Europa wat geleë is binne die Arktiese klimaatsone, en die ligging van die grootste Europese heksejag van die 17e eeu. Heksery en beskuldigings daarvan is komplekse sosiale en kulturele verskynsels. Sommige redeneer dat sodanige verskynsels as gevolg van godsdienstig ywer plaasvind, sowel as pogings om ekonomiese en sosiale beheer oor streke uit te oefen. Hierdie artikel brei uit op hierdie punte deur aan te voer dat plekke waar heksery plaasvind, fundamenteel geslagsverwante plekke is, asook plekke van nydigheid en geweld teenoor vrouens. Verder, word geredeneer dat die afgesonderde geografiese ligging van Vardø, die afwesigheid van plantelike, die kroniese seisoene en ongemaakbare omstandighede, die blootstelling aan die noorde, sowel as die genius loci daarvan, onderliggend aan die vernietigende aard van die heksejag was. Hierdie geval is gekies om twee redes. Eerstens, as reaksie op die huidige kritiek van die argitektdiscipline wat die visuele sintuig vooropstel. In hierdie verband, illustreer die artikel die Steilneset gedenkplek as ’n suggestiewe en deelnemende omgewing, waar evokatiewe atmosfere neerslag vind; tweedens, dien dit as ’n illustrasie van genuanseerde en reaktiewe argitektoniese benadering tot ’n plek van vrouelike vervolging en trauma.

Sleutelwoorde: hekse, nydigheid, geslagsverwante ruimte, spel van plek, toordery, Fenomenologie, die lewenswêreld, Vardø

(Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches),
When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurlyburly’s done,
When the battle’s lost and won.
That will be ere the set of sun.
Where the place?

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With words, Shakespeare paints the first scene of the witches in *Macbeth* in an ominous light. This scene is fundamentally place-based. Here, place, or space with meaning, clearly refers to a site of gathering, a setting for natural events or disasters, and also to a locale for human adversities - all spatial qualities that have accompanied sorcery and witchcraft since ancient times. This paper was inspired by an event which occurred almost a hundred years after Shakespeare wrote the dark and powerful tragedy of Macbeth. This event, as with Macbeth, features witches. Witches have been known since the dawn of mankind as those that dabble in witchcraft, witchcraft being the belief in, and practice of magical skills, exercised by individuals or by designated social groups with specific esoteric knowledge. In Shakespeare’s play, witches act as agents and witnesses, tempting destruction. In the witch hunt of Vardø, the ‘witches’ included eighty-nine women and two men, persecuted, tortured and burnt at the stake.

**Vardø**

In Old Norse, Vardø was known as Vargøy: a compound of vargr, “wolf” and øy, “island”. Once a thriving fishing port, today Vardø is remote and isolated island. With the exception of its towering church, this town exhibits a small urban landscape, predominantly cold and snow-capped. The Steilneset Memorial is located here. This memorial, consisting of a Memory Hall and an installation entitled *The Damned, the Possessed and the Beloved* was a collaboration between French-American artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois (as her final major work before her passing in 2012) and the Pritzker Prize winning Swiss architect Peter Zumthor.

The Steilneset Memorial has been selected as a case of inquiry for this paper in reaction to current critiques of the architectural discipline that question its prioritisation of the visual sense (Baudrillard 1988, Palasmaa 1996a). This *ocularcentric* approach to architecture is seen to negate our other bodily senses and also to neglect the place-making potential of architecture (Leach 1999, Pallasmaa 1996a). Such designs have also been noted to prioritise the architecture of exteriors over the architecture of interiors. It can be said that this form of architecture is conceived for the pleasure of the eyes more than the well-being of its inhabitants (Grey 1986). Shirazi (2009: 80) refers to this as “a phenomenology from without”. He argues that phenomenological interpretations of place by Norberg-Schulz (1980), for example, is generally presented from the exterior. Similarly, Führ (1998b) argues that Norberg-Schulz’s *Genius Loci* or “spirit of place” is a production of photos and as such is a ‘photographic phenomenon’ and not an “architectural phenomenon”. Such places are conceptualised as mute and static two dimensional entities that negate the lifeworld, from the point of view of the detached spectator’s gaze. This spectator’s gaze is a term commonly used in performance studies and refers to an anxious state of the spectator that occurs through the awareness that he or she can be viewed. It means that the awareness of any object, and certainly an architectural object, can induce an awareness of being an object. This paper will show how the Vardø memorial overcomes this subject-object (spectator-thing) dichotomy, how it has become a suggestive and participatory environment, where evocative atmospheres are concretised. And by doing so, it hopes to illustrate nuanced and responsive architectural approaches on a site of female persecution and trauma.

**The storm**

The events that occurred in this place started with a storm, a storm where ‘the sea and the sky became one’ (Hagen 1999). This storm broke loose on 24 December 1617, whilst a large
number of town’s men were at sea, it sank ten boats and drowned forty men. Shortly thereafter, the law of sorcery and witchcraft was issued for the Denmark-Norway union (Ibid). This occurred as local women confirmed, under interrogation of church officials, that witches had caused the storm. Mari Jørgensdatter allegedly admitted to these church officials that Satan came to her during the night, asking if she would serve him, to which she agreed. Thereafter, she was transformed into a fox and flew, together with her neighbour Kirsti Sørensdatter, to Satan’s Christmas party in southern Norway. Mari saw many other women and two men do the same. To avoid identification, they were all transformed into dogs, cats, birds and seamonsters. It was said that these witches had sexual intercourse with devils and demons and that they were responsible for the storm. According to legend, the witches knotted fishing ropes three times, spat on them, untied them, and that the sea consequently “rose like ashes” (Ibid). These interrogations were conducted through exposure to the “ordeal of water”. The ‘ordeal of water’ is an ancient method of torture, in which a person is tied up and cast into cold water. The person who sinks is considered innocent, where floating confirmed witchcraft. Whilst being tortured through the “ordeal of water” one woman allegedly admitted that the devil had tied the tongues of the accused witches and that these women were therefore unable to cry or confess without this method of interrogation. As a result, ninety-one “witches” were burned alive at the stake.

Various writers throughout history have attempted to explain why atrocities like these happen. Witchcraft and the accusation thereof are complex social and cultural phenomena that are hard to define, and commonly associated with the persecution of women by male institutional representatives in position of power. It exists worldwide in a variety of forms, among religions and in both “primitive” and “highly advanced” cultures (Ankarloo & Clark 2001: xiii), and continues to play a disconcerting role in violence against women today. Violence against women, also referred to as gender-based violence refers to “any acts or threats of acts intended to hurt or make women suffer physically, sexually or psychologically” (Richters 1994: 1), which essentially affect individuals for the mere reason of being female. For Wheeler (2014: 3), the witch hunt of Vardø occurred as a result of post-Reformation religious zeal and as an attempt to rest economic and social control of the region. This argument can definitely be supplemented by an inquisition into gender studies, as these church officials, undoubtedly male, condemned women for being alone at home when their men were at sea. As a result, they were accused of adultery, and that, with demons. Other actors in this plot are female, and possibly envious neighbours. It has been noted that accusations of sorcery and witchcraft, and animosity towards witches can, amongst other things, be ascribed to the emotion of envy by others. Envy, the resentment of one person toward another person who has something that they do not have is, according to Russell (1930: 90-91), one of the most potent causes of unhappiness. He explains that the envious person is not only unhappy as a result of his envy, but also because he or she wishes to inflict misfortune on others. Two types of envy have in recent years been identified: benign envy, in a sense a motivational force, and malicious envy. The latter of which can apply to the case of Vardø. The identification of “neighbourhood witches” by Pócs (1999: 9-10) provides insight in this regard. These witches occur as a product of neighbourhood tensions, and are seen as those individuals who have, through magic, increased their fortune to the perceived detriment of a neighbouring household (Ibid). Curious indeed that the last to be burnt, Kirsti Sørensdatter, the alleged leader and admiral, and perhaps also martyr of the Vardø witches was wealthy and married to a well-to-do Danish merchant.
Witches of the North

The above defines spaces of witchcraft as spaces fundamentally gendered, as spaces of envy and fundamentally as spaces of violence against women. Further observations can be made regarding the place of the Vardø trails and persecutions. Vardø is a small settlement on a butterfly-shaped island, joined to the Norwegian mainland with an underground tunnel. It is located at a latitude sufficiently isolated, east of Istanbul (Wheeler, 2014: 1). The town of Vardø is the only European town located in the Arctic climate zone. From November to February, this area is ‘plunged into unending night, while in summertime, the sun never sets’ (Ibid). No trees are to be found there. No plants. “A landscape of rock, moss, cloud, sky and sea is both infinitely varied and unremitting” (Ibid). Climatic conditions undoubtedly associated with seasonal affective disorder.

Winter depression is a typical symptom of Nordic climates, originally identified as such by the 6th Century Goth writer Jordanes in his description of the people of Scandza, or Scandanavia. During the time of the witch-hunt, the town of Vardø was also subject to a prevailing prejudice in Europe. Religious experts claimed that “the evil came from the north” and that “the magic came from the northern wind”. “The north” referring to Norkalotten, the home of the Sami people, who were not Christians and had a reputation for sorcery (Hagen, 2014). This isolated geographical setting, its lack of plant life, chronic seasons, bitter cold weather and harsh conditions, exposure to the north, and genius loci, could certainly be made implicit in the account of this devastation.

All of these factors contribute to the atmospheric qualities of this locale. Atmospheres are evocative phenomena to consider in the performativity of architectural places. Space that transcends volumetric voids, ideal abstraction or pure potential, is essentially ‘atmosphere’ (Grant, 2013: 12). For Zumthor (2006: 11), atmospheres exist as a result of our embodied encounters with the material presence of things. He defines quality architecture as: “[the] extent [to which] the building manages to move me”. For Grant (2013: 12) spatial atmospheres can be measured through a method of performativity, practicality, embodiment, affectivity and phenomenology – essentially through the interpretive study of human experience. These foundations give insight into an approach that discards the spectator and object (place or performance) dichotomy. Instead, they provide ways in which one can consider the relation between the two. They therefore enable one to consider the experiences of atmospheres, through the sensory, moving and emotive body.

Our experiences of atmospheres – of places – are determined by a number of factors: through the existential expressions of material aspects of the Life-world (Thiis-Evenson, 1989), through our ability to perceive places through bodily movement, also through mental places, namely our ability to remember, associate, imagine and dream of places. These three dimensions of placial atmospheres will be drawn on to interpret and describe The Steilneset Memorial.

Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combination of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? (Calvino, 1993: 124).

The Damned, the possessed and the beloved

This atmospheric setting discussed above, its genius loci and the narrative of the witches’ ordeal was exactly what Bourgeois and Zumthor were provided with as a site of atonement. The collaborative memorial is a two part composition, as Zumthor writes, “a white line and a black dot” (see figures 1 & 2).

There is a line, which is mine, and a dot, which is hers...Louise’s installation is more about the burning and aggression, and my installation is more about the life and the emotions [of the victims] (Atkin 2014: 4).
Figure 1
The Dot and The Line, Site Plan of the Stelneset Memorial

Figure 2
Model of the Steilneset Memorial
The line refers to Zumthor’s infinitely long bleached driftwood Memory Hall. This structure is a “long fabric enclosure shaped like a herring fillet, supported by hundreds of bleached driftwood frames, inspired by the remnant diagonal timber fish-drying structures that stood abandoned in nearby fields”(Ibid). Inside this structure, a cocoon is lifted off the rocky ground. One enters this sail-like, pale and hardy cocoon with a wooden platform, and is confronted with a shadowy silk-clad corridor (Wheeler 2014: 5). In this corridor, banners with the accused witches’ names are placed at irregular intervals, depicting their horrifying trial testimonies. This dark and gloomy interior is punctuated with a series of ninety-one windows, one for each person burnt, with a respective bare light bulb hanging in each window.

In stark contrast, a reflective black box that houses Bourgeois’ installation The Damned, the Possessed and the Beloved is located next to the Memory Hall. This becomes a “point of high drama after the studied calm of the tunnel”(Atkin 2014: 5). Where the Memory Hall speaks of precise contrition and contemporary witnessing, this installation violently ruptures all that comes before: “a torture porn movie set of brute literality, less about remembering or honouring, more about transfer of fear and dread from historical document to the physical, to consciousness”(Wheeler 2014: 5). This smoky reflective glass box contrasts Zumthor’s long wooden structure (Figure 3). Inside this box, an endless flame burns out of an isolated steel chair from within a volcanic cone. These flames reflect off all surfaces, as the chair is surrounded by a set of circular mirrors, which twist and distort the flames and the viewer into sinister shapes and distortions.

This memorial was erected as a result of the contemporary trend of democratic governments across the globe to apologise and atone for atrocities of the past and originated from an ongoing $400 million Norwegian project to boost the country’s tourism industry. The term ‘memory’ juxtaposed against ‘forgetting’ is often used to suggest that memory is necessary in order to ensure that injustices never happen again. Jones (2007) argues that history becomes something else when you turn it into memory. History is an inquiry into the past where memory is a conviction about the past. When an historical event is treasured in the form of memory, understanding is replaced by reverence.

![Figure 3](source: Andrew Meredith, 2013, Steilneset Memorial by Peter Zumthor and Louise Bourgeois, retrieved from: http://www.dezeen.com/2012/01/03/steilneset-memorial-by-peter-zumthor-and-louise-bourgeois/ on 29 January 2015).
This line of thinking implies that physical artefacts do not atone for that which happened to those who suffered at the hands of injustice. It implies that the dead are dead, they are not here anymore and memorials are for people. Jones questions whether this way of forcing memory will ensure that atrocities will not re-occur, and suggests that all they create is a mild form of consolation. Whether the memorial in Vardø does in fact compensate for the burning of innocent women at the stake is open to speculation. It does, however, achieve a great deal in its ability to concretise this locale - the material, but also the immaterial. The discussion that follows will illustrate how this has been realised - how the line, the dot and the installation, through expression, motion and nuanced references to the witch hunt, establishes a place with meaning and significance on a site of female persecution and trauma.

The performativity of a place

Zumthor has equated the concept of his design in Vardø with that of his design of the Topography des Terrors at the former SS Headquarters in Berlin. He calls it a ‘semiotic void’. By applying a principle of ‘pure construction’, he deliberately withholds architectural metaphors and symbolism. He designed a building with ‘no meaning, no comment’ (Merin 2013). It is a basic binary system of voids and sticks. By having no semiotic references one is therefore able to project individually developed schemata on to places - an exercise Palasmaa (1996: 66) refers to as mimesis of the body. One can, therefore, through our experience with the expressive qualities of this memorial and through movement in and around it, draw on our personal and collective memories, and also on our dreams and associations of places. Such an interpretation of the place is achieved in the form of a sequence of experiences, a promenade architecturale. French architect Le Corbusier’s mechanism of the promenade architecturale can be applied by architects to anticipate a sequence of events, or experiences, through space. The promenade architecturale describes the journey through and around a building, it gives priority to the bodily experience and binds the intention of the architecture to the perception of the viewer (figure 4).

![Figure 4 Entering the Memory Hall](source: Andrew Meredith, 2013, Steilneset Memorial by Peter Zumthor and Louise Bourgeois, retrieved from: http://www.dezeen.com/2012/01/03/steilneset-memorial-by-peter-zumthor-and-louise-bourgeois/ on 29 January 2015).
A first observation to be made when approaching the Memory Hall is the way in which its anatomy is at odds with traditional, solid and timeless memorials. It is light and has a sense of impermanence. Its skeleton structure reminds one of fish bones found on these shores. This makes reference to the place, but also to the plot. As a result of fishermen being at sea for long periods of time women were left vulnerable to accusations and persecutions of sorcery. The structure also has a sense of motion. It resembles an agile insect and also the mobile Strandbeests of Dutch artist Theo Jansen. This sense of motion speaks of the wind and reminds one of the ‘magic of the northern wind’. This theme of the wind can also be found in the Memory Hall in its cladding of black silk (figure 5).

The driftwood scaffolding framework speaks of the stacking of the wood, and the burning of women at the stake. Inside the scaffolding floats the cocoon. Its elevation off the rocky landscape allows the limited flora to proliferate in summer and for the snow to spread in winter. The landscape becomes resilient and reinforces the impermanence of the structure, in the same way it outlived the temporal events of the witch-hunts. One enters the cocoon as one enters a boat, on a timber catwalk, leaving the permanence and tenacity of this material landscape for an artificial one, similar to the supernatural world of sorcery. Once inside, the slow, long and dark journey through the corridor strengthens the magnitude of the event and its repercussions. The hanging light bulb allocated to each victim refers to the Arctic winter ritual of the lit window. By doing so Zumthor inverts its implication of welcome, warmth and familial comfort: ‘Instead we peer back in time to a community that has turned upon itself’ (Wheeler 2014: 5). The visibility of the nearby church also provides a strong presence from this interior. This church, in contrast to the memorial, evokes a sense of permanence. It is pervasive and acts as a reminder of those responsible for the inquisitions, the torture and the burnings (figure 6).
The two buildings speak of two aspects of these trials, the light and the dark, the lives and the killings. In the reflective dark box the experience becomes interrogatory. There is no reflection, no commemoration and certainly no redemption. The singular chair speaks of something human, something vulnerable, where the projected and distorted fires are unnerving (figure 7). The way these flames twist and flicker conjure the witches’ glamouring and lycanthropy. In here, we are not spectators, in here we “exist in the darkness of what has taken place”(Ibid: 6).
Conclusion

The case of the 17th Century Vardø witch hunt, and the way in which it has recently been memorialised, provides us with valuable social, cultural and architectural insights. It introduces the question of the relevance and merit of contemporary memorials. Whether this memorial will ensure that similar atrocities do not re-occur cannot be guaranteed. This case is important to us nonetheless. Not only because the phenomenon of witchcraft and the consequent persecution of women persist today in countries across the globe, but its narrative helps us identify broader themes that can be drawn on to interpret similar atrocities. In this regard it highlights the role of religion and religionism, and the agency of institutional representatives in positions of power. It shows us that the spaces within which these social and cultural phenomena occur are gendered, spaces of envy and essentially spaces of violence against women. In addition to these social and cultural concerns, this paper shows that the atmospheric conditions of this place - its genius loci- determined by its isolated geographical setting, its chronic seasons and its exposure to the northern wind, were implicit in the account of this witch hunt. It demonstrates how the memorial, conceptualised as the line, the dot and the installation are not symbols that make direct reference to the witch trials. It illustrates how they are void of signification and how they instead evoke certain qualities of the place, of the geographic landscape, and also of its tragic story. This intervention is nuanced, it entices us to imagine and remember similar environments.

In a phenomenological spirit, we can agree that we do not live separately in material and mental worlds but that these worlds are fully intertwined. Our engagement with the material is therefore equally moving as our engagement with the immaterial. To what extent places such as these mediate these dimensions become the measure of their ability to overcome the dichotomy of the detached spectator and place. It becomes the measure of the poetic performance of place.

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June Jordaan recently submitted her PhD in Architecture at the University of Pretoria. She has been conducting research and lecturing architectural theory and design at the Department of Architectural Technology at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology since 2010. She has written and presented various international papers, most recently in Oxford, Prague and Hongkong on topics related to witches, envy, gendered space, performativity of place, phenomenology, and the lifeworld.
The women of Labaki’s *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011): an ecofeminist exploration

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Using a materialist ecological feminist lens, this article investigates Nadine Labaki’s *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011) as a truly womanist text: directed by a woman, and co-written by the same woman who is also in the cast of strong women characters. The analysis reveals that although this film is classified as a comedy-drama, it has a very serious, important message to impart. The alternative perspectives carried forward above all by women, indicate that those belonging to the care-giving class are best situated to lead society into a regenerative direction, away from warfare – religious, economic, or otherwise.

**Key words**: ecofeminism, women, care-giving, epistemology, conflict

It is no exaggeration to say that our world is best characterised as one of conflict. Wars rage across territories in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Religious extremism often is added to the mix, the most recent manifestation being Al-Shabaab militants’ slaughter of 147 people identified as Christian, at Garissa University College in Kenya. Now, xenophobia in South Africa is again making international headlines. Certainly, these instances of conflict are motivated by various factors, ranging from superpowers’ interference in the domestic affairs of nations of the global South, to religious or ethnic intolerance, to the structural violence wreaked through neoliberal globalisation (Robinson 2013: 659-660). But what is clear when one looks at the perpetrators of the violence, is that most of them are men – not women.

Men actually have been described as predisposed to violence by, among others, the American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Contrasting men with women, she wrote:

The man was interested in one end of life, she in the other. He was moved to faith, fear, and hope for the future; she to love and labor in the present. To the death-based religion the main question is: “What is going to happen to me after I am dead?” – a posthumous egotism. To the birth-based religion the main question is: “What must be done for the child who is born?”– an immediate altruism (2003: 46).

The German ecological feminist, Maria Mies, even has accounted for the differences between men and women in terms of phenomenological anthropology. As she explains, studies of the Neolithic Age indicate that women moved from simply appropriating nature by way of gathering, to actually cultivating food sources and inventing tools such as the digging stick to make this enterprise easier. Men, on the other hand, developed hunting tools that could only be...
used to destroy the lives of the hunted animals and rival humans. Their tools in effect facilitated destruction rather than production, making their “object-relations mediated through arms … [a] basically … predatory and exploitative one” (Mies 1998: 62).

Arguments such as these may raise the ire of men who have not modelled themselves as oppressors, dominators, or patriarchs, and who thus may contend that men are not ‘congenitally’ violent. This is not, however, what materialist ecofeminists such as Mies are claiming. Rather, they are advancing that the division of labour – the type of labour allocated to and undertaken by the respective sexes – is what inclines men towards violence and women towards nurturance. Ecofeminist theorisation aims not to target men as irremediably violent but to disclose the crucial importance, at this juncture in history, of the life-affirming ethic embodied by those of the caregiving class. The Finnish ecological feminist, Hilkka Pietilä, accordingly argues:

The world of nurturance and close human relationships is the sphere where the basic human needs are anchored and where models of humane alternatives can be found. This world, which has been carried forward mainly by women, is an existing alternative culture, a source of ideas and values for shaping an alternative path of development for nations and all humanity (1986: 26).

Against the backdrop of this urgent need for an ethical alternative to the destructive societal trajectories of the present, this article explores Lebanese woman filmmaker Nadine Labaki’s Where Do We Go Now? (2011) as an important reflection on women’s fight for peace and on their alternative perspectives. The cinematic narrative focuses on the actions of a village of women – mothers, wives and sisters – who do everything they can to stop their sons, husbands and brothers from killing one another in the name of religion. In an interview at the Sarajevo Film Festival (2012), Labaki was asked why her film appears to be biased against men, and she explained that “unfortunately, throughout history, it has been … seen that it has always been the men that take the weapons and go to war, and it has always been the women that are left … behind with the consequences.” She added that the film may “exaggerate” the difference between the sexes somewhat, but that this is done “to prove a point” – “this film is coming from the point of view of a mother who has had enough.” Labaki, although acknowledging complexity by admitting that not all men are violent and not all women caring, explained that she nevertheless is flummoxed by men. For instance, when she travels, all that her young son asks her to bring back for him is a “Spiderman suit with muscles and a rifle.” In relation to this, she exclaimed: “So there’s something, I don’t know what it is in our genes, there’s something about, you know, the hunter in … us … and … it’s been always like this.” It is envisaged that the succeeding ecofeminist appraisal of Where Do We Go Now? will reveal that what Labaki is grappling with here is an epistemological divide rather than a genetic one. Throughout the analysis, ecofeminist theorisation will be followed up with comparable insights deriving from the cinematic narrative or from Labaki’s discussions of the film.

Theory-less, real-world beginnings

Ecological feminism forms an important part of the alternative globalisation movement, which seeks the globalisation of social relations rather than that of capital. Ecofeminist politics is explicitly grounded in awareness of environmental embeddedness, and inspired by a praxis-based livelihood perspective. The movement was not born out of theory so much as emerging from the everyday concerns of women who have to keep life and limb together. Consequently, most materialist ecofeminists are both thinkers and activists, and many of them, mothers. Many noticed that their own bodies and the environment are similarly resourced under capitalist patriarchy, and thus their concerns extended beyond women’s rights to include issues such
as reproductive technologies, nuclear power, and processed foods (Salleh 1991: 129). The argument is that with little to no need for theory at all, people in care-giving roles, usually women, can see the overlap between human and environmental exploitation, and recognise human dependency – both on other human beings and on the environment. The politics of ecofeminism has been developing for over three decades, and along the way ecofeminist theorists have appropriated various cultural frameworks to interpret it. Indigenous knowledge systems, Marxism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and other strands of thought have been brought into the mix. Furthermore, given the plurality that characterises it as well as its focus on intersecting dominations, ecological feminism is not limited to any one geographic area or domain of concern. Ecofeminist linkages have been made with women, like-minded men, and indigenous peoples across the globe, but without denying the nuanced circumstances of groups in different localities (Mies and Shiva 1993: 1-3).

Nadine Labaki’s entry into filmmaking, and her motivation for creating *Where Do We Go Now?* specifically, offer interesting parallels to the relatively theory-less beginnings of and real-world inspirations behind ecological feminism. Firstly, as Labaki explained in an interview for *College Movie Review* as well as in the interview at the Sarajevo Film Festival, because of the wars that have plagued Lebanon for decades, the country until relatively recently had no film industry. Thus, Labaki had neither a point of reference in relation to which to she could establish herself as a Lebanese film director, nor a Lebanese film tradition in terms of which she could couch her own films. Consequently, as she explains, she had to discover her own way of making films, decide what to make films about, and figure out how to work with people who had never acted before. Eventually she developed what she unapologetically described, in the *College Movie Review* interview (2012) as an unstructured way of working, or “structured chaos,” which often involves departing from the script, improvising, and remaining open to the unexpected. Labaki is interested in communicating real stories about real life, and this is why she does not permit rehearsals. During the Sarajevo Film Festival interview (2012), she argued of her actors: “I don’t want to kill their spontaneity; I don’t want to kill their … instinctive reaction.” She added later on: “I’m not asking them to act; I’m really asking them to be exactly who they are.” Labaki, although undaunted, is well aware that some people are very sceptical of her approach since they are used to undertaking filmmaking in a much more structured way. Even when writing the script, she and the two other scriptwriters who are close friends of hers, were not allocated different tasks to do independently. Rather, they all sat together day in and day out, and talked and created. In this way the task remained enjoyable and spontaneous, reminding one of the dialogical process advocated by ecofeminist thinkers, which involves people “work[ing] in small, intimate collectivities, where the spontaneous flow of communication ‘structures’ the situation” (Salleh 1984B: 343).

In turn, just as ecofeminist politics is motivated by real-world problems of domination and exploitation, so too was Labaki’s creation of *Where Do We Go Now?* driven by a pressing concern. In both of the above-mentioned interviews, she discussed the tragic inspiration behind the film. For twenty years succeeding a harrowing civil war, the Lebanese people had coexisted peacefully. However, in 2008, due to political tensions there suddenly was bloodletting on the streets of Beirut again. In the Sarajevo Film Festival interview (2012) Labaki indicated that for her, this was “completely absurd … because … we saw people that were friends, that were neighbours, that lived together in the same neighbourhood, in the same building, … their children go to … the same school, they go the same grocery shop, they buy the same bread, turn into enemies over a matter of hours.” It was at this time that she learned that she was pregnant with her first child, and she thought to herself that this kind of society, where friends turn into
enemies and are willing to kill one another for outrageous reasons, is not a place she wants for her son. So she began thinking of creating a film about a woman who does everything she can to stop her son from taking up arms. The story eventually expanded into a struggle for peace on the part of all the women in a village. In the filmic narrative, roughly half of the village population is Christian and the other half Muslim. When sectarian violence erupts elsewhere in the country, and the village men learn of this when watching news on the only television in town, they immediately want to fight each other and they seek out every possible excuse to commence warfare. In both interviews, however, Labaki argued that the film is set in a village in an undefined location, and musical scenes are included to give it the sense of being a ‘nowhere-and-everywhere’ place, precisely because the story is not just about avoiding religious conflict in Lebanon, or about conflict among men. The tale equally is an analogy for strife between two sports teams, between friends, between families. Indeed in the Sarajevo Film Festival interview (2012), Labaki contended that this film is a critique of intolerance, and however partial, it seeks to address intolerance since “[c]inema is really a very powerful weapon, a very powerful non-violent weapon … to trigger change.” She also noted that most Lebanese filmmakers are women, perhaps because they are motivated to change their society for the better, and because they “have understood that this … is an amazing way to express [them]selves.”

The difference of care-givers

One of the main premises of materialist ecological feminism is that the capitalist economy depends on relentless exploitation of care-givers, particularly women. This in fact is true of any patriarchally structured society, but ecofeminist theorisation specifically focuses in on capitalist patriarchy due to its contemporary pervasiveness. Care-givers go unpaid but have to raise a new generation of workers, care for those ejected from industry on account of disability or retrenchment, and look after the elderly (Salleh 1991: 134). New Zealand feminist thinker Marilyn Waring suggests (2004: 27) that the extent of this exploitation would be revealed, and indeed the economic picture would look very different, were women’s care-giving perceived as real work and accordingly remunerated. Yet care-giving is assumed to be something that naturally falls on women, and so the question of remuneration for household labour is all too easily and conveniently dismissed as nonsensical (Waring 2004: 70; Mellor 1992: 54).

Liberal feminists may in reaction to this situation advocate women’s ‘liberation’ from household drudgery and their entry into professional ‘real’ work in the public, economic domain. However, very importantly, ecofeminists contend that the care-giving ethic is something that entire societies must turn towards as a humane alternative to capitalist competitiveness and individualistic acquisitiveness. This is because so-called productive economies wantonly exploit masses of people and degrade the environment with only profitable accumulation and consumerist expansion in mind, and in time, they argue, this will lead to omnicide – the destruction of all of life. On the other hand, care-givers on a daily basis embody an alternative, sustainable approach. Household labour involves everyday interaction with physical nature, insofar as it entails such tasks as cooking, cleaning, and washing. Therefore, ecofeminists maintain, this type of regenerative labour is not ‘sanitised,’ in the sense of being divorced from the messy ‘stuff’ of the material world. What is suggested is the development, on the part of care-givers, of an epistemological stance of embeddedness in and relational dependency on the world (Salleh 1997: 17, 164) – a stance far removed from the disembodiment and sterile productivist logic promoted through the work routines and work environments of office employees. Over and above consisting of interaction with physical nature, household labour also involves emotional care for family members and significant others. This works against the self-centred
acquisitiveness promoted under capitalist consumerism. As British ecofeminist Mary Mellor explains, emotional care for others demands “immediate altruism” – “it is carried out for only incidental personal gain (the pleasure of close personal relationships) and … it cannot be ‘put off’ or slotted into a work schedule” (1992: 54). Thus, household care-giving, closely paralleling subsistence labour in rural settings, offers an alternative epistemology to that encouraged under capitalism. The “barefoot epistemology” (Salleh 1997: 133) of care-givers is worlds apart from the (mis)understanding of life encouraged in market economies. As Mellor explains:

[T]he market economy … represents a public world as defined by dominant men, a masculine-experience economy, a ‘ME economy that has cut itself free from the ecological and social framework of human being in its widest sense. Its ideal is “economic man,” who may also be female. Economic man is fit, mobile, able-bodied, unencumbered by domestic or other responsibilities. The goods he consumes appear to him as finished products or services and disappear from his view on disposal or dismissal. He has no responsibility for the life-cycle of those goods or services any more than he questions the source of the air he breathes or the disposal of his excreta. The ME economy is disembodied because the life-cycle and daily cycle of the body cannot be accommodated in the fractured world of the money-valued economy … “Economic man” is the product of an ahistoric, atomised approach to the understanding of human existence (2009: 254).

It is important to stress the following: materialist ecofeminists argue that it is the labour of care which encourages a relational, tentative epistemological stance, not the fact of being a woman. They emphasise experientially developed understandings: beyond discourses and ideologies, “people’s experiences in the world shape their perceptions and knowledges” (Salleh 1999: 208) as well. This is why the Australian ecological feminist Ariel Salleh advances that the care-giving, relational traits needed for our “collective emancipation … represent natural human capacities which have not been historically objectified and valued in the formation of an oppressively specular and exclusively ‘masculine’ culture” (1984A: 35). For her “it is crucial to rediscover, revalue and reintegrate in culture these hitherto neglected dimensions of experience if a real social alternative is to be made” (1984A: 39).

The “difference” of care-givers is systematically thematised in Labaki’s Where Do We Go Now? First of all, just as ecological feminists argue that women carry the bulk of societal burdens, and do much essential but unacknowledged physical and emotional work, the film shows how the women of this village, which is run along patriarchal lines, are expected to centre their entire lives on the wellbeing of their men and children. Yet, whereas it is a pleasure to care for their children, the adult men disappoint them due to their laziness and violent inclinations. In the opening scene of the film, a voice-over narration frames the story while the camera cuts from a long shot of the village, to shots of the village interior including one of a church adjacent to a mosque, to an area filled with landmines, to the cemetery divided between Christians and Muslims, and back again to the desolate village interior before settling on women clad in black, marching down a dusty road. The narrator, a woman, explains that this is a tale of a village with a bloody history of sectarian violence, which chose peace thanks to the bravery of its women. Ordinary, hard-working women: women with “ash-blackened eyes … No glittering stars, no dazzling flowers.” These women have lost fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, but somehow, they manage to persevere and try to make a good life for those who remain. Notably, save for a goatherd and a maintenance man, the village men in the main appear idle. They seem disembedded, largely free of chores, as it is their women’s expected role to maintain the household and to look after them and significant others. Their primary interest appears to be the maintenance of hierarchy. One of the only times they become active, is when the Muslim and Christian men are plotting against one another and engaging in skirmishes after having learned that sectarian violence has broken out elsewhere in the country.
The women, on the other hand, are busy constantly: making preserves, washing clothes, managing the affairs of the household, and organising purchases of supplies from out of town to be collected by two of the village boys. These activities evoke the ecological feminist emphasis on women’s work as involving both physical maintenance of house and kin, and emotional care-giving. Indeed throughout the film, the women are shown in their daily interaction with physical nature and in their routine care for others. This extends even to others no longer alive. The women’s funerual march in the film’s opening scene terminates at the village cemetery where they proceed to tend the graves of their loved ones. In this particular scene, in fact, there is a profound interlocking of maintenance of the physical environment and maintenance of emotional linkages, as the women clear the graves of withered flowers and dust, say prayers for those lost, and remember them. Here care extends even beyond the grave.

It is not difficult to suppose that because of these labours, including remembrance of lives lost to pointless conflicts, the village women see things differently to their men. What is especially thematised in the narrative is the Muslim and Christian women’s peaceful coexistence and acceptance of one another’s beliefs. This manifests in their shared physical labour as well. When the Muslim men break a statue of the Virgin Mary, Muslim and Christian women put it back together. And when the Christian men let goats into the mosque and these animals soil the carpets, the Christian and Muslim women clean up the area. Indeed, what can be called an epistemological chasm between the women and the men, is clearly visible in one of the most dramatic scenes in the film when the young Christian widow Amale, played by director Nadine Labaki, confronts the village men engaged in a scuffle in her café. It is absolute chaos as the unstable camera follows the flurry of fists. Amale stops the fight and, encircled by the dumbfounded men, breaks down, screaming:

That’s enough! Have you learned nothing? Nothing at all? Hasn’t your mom suffered enough? She’s still grieving for your brother. Her tears aren’t even dry! Have a little dignity for heaven’s sake. It’s enough to make us lose our faith! You think we’re just here to mourn you? To wear black forever? Have a little pity! You’re just animals… . Is that what being a man means?

Amale’s frustration points to the fact that the men are detached from the lived dependencies of village life, so much so that, at the drop of a hat, they can turn from friends to enemies in order to sate their appetite for violence and bloodshed. No friendship, no familial bonds, no earlier reliance on or interaction with one another whatsoever stave off their aggression. She and the other women are feeling crushed by these men’s reprehensible alacrity for war. The mournful violin piece in this scene underscores this. Perhaps the women see things differently precisely because it is they, not the men, who have to deal with the fallout of violence. Labaki expressed as much when, in the Sarajevo Film Festival interview (2012), she argued that men wage war while “it has always been the women that are left … behind with the consequences.” The only peace-loving men in the film, who see through the stupidity of this violent upsurge, are the imam and the priest. Yet in the same interview Labaki admits her representation of these religious figures to be idealistic – that this is how she would want religious authorities to behave, to be the “peace seekers.” Even so, it is notable that the film’s priest in actuality is a Muslim, while the imam in the film in fact is a Christian. It appears that these two men were able to step into one another’s shoes for the sake of a greater cause, to communicate a message of peace.

Women against war

Materialist ecological feminism sheds critical light on the interlocking dominations of gender, race, class and nature in the contemporary world, and ecofeminist activist-thinkers look to care-
givers for inspiration for a humane, relational societal trajectory. As Ariel Salleh articulates it: “if women’s lived experience were recognized as meaningful and were given legitimation in our culture, it could provide an immediate ‘living’ social basis for [an] … alternative consciousness” (1984B: 340). Since women often find themselves in care-giving roles and since these latter entail ‘holding’ labour – “touching and holding together the fragments of human non-identity in this mesh of enduring time” (Salleh 1992: 147), warfare and the destruction of life are not an option. The American ecofeminist Ynestra King elaborates on ecofeminist opposition to militarisation:

> While technocratic experts (including feminists) argue the merits and demerits of weapons systems, ecofeminism approaches the disarmament issue on an intimate and moral level. Ecofeminism holds that a personalized, decentralized, life-affirming culture and politics of action are crucially needed to stop the arms race and transform the world’s priorities (2005: 406).

Loving life, and stopping those who want to destroy it so wantonly, are central themes in Labaki’s *Where Do We Go Now?* In fact the entire narrative is driven forward by the village women’s various and often humorous tactics to avert full-blown sectarian conflict. It is possible to suggest that the men’s violence drives the plot forward, but the women’s agency actually is far more instrumental in plot development. What really moves the story on are their powerful rechanneling and eventual neutralisation of their men’s violent inclinations. Because of this, the cinematic narrative diverges markedly from mainstream film where “[a]n active/passive heterosexual division of labour … control[s] narrative structure;” where “the man’s role [i]s the active one of advancing the story, making things happen;” and where he “controls the film fantasy” (Mulvey 1975: 117). In *Where Do We Go Now?* the women do the work of setting the narrative trajectory; what they do makes the story unfold; and they craft the fantasy, most especially through rendering the men spellbound by bussing in a group of Ukrainian showgirls, as will be discussed below.

When in Amale’s café there is a radio broadcast about sectarian violence erupting in an area called Wardeh, a town close to their village, Amale very quickly turns up the music so that the men do not hear of it. Later, two of the village boys successfully set up the only working television out of doors, so that all the villagers can view programmes and get some inkling of events outside of their insulated world. The men want to watch the news, while the women do not. The men get their way, though, and proceed to watch a newscast about the mounting political and religious tensions in the country. To avoid the village men getting too engrossed with this and consequently taking up arms, the women spontaneously start a ruckus, which is given momentum by one woman verbally attacking another for ostensibly picking her nose. The noise of the melodramatic hen fight drowns out the television broadcast, and the men are also pulled into the squabbling over domestic ‘trivialities.’ Later, under the cover of darkness, Amale and her band sabotage the television, putting a stop to news of violence reaching the village men via this medium. In another instance, when the boys Nassim (Kevin Abboud) and Roukoz (Ali Haidar) return to the village with supplies from the neighbouring town, and bring along newspapers detailing the growing sectarian violence, the women decide to quickly burn up all the copies. Saydeh (Antoinette Noufailly) wittily remarks while placing the papers in the bread oven: “They can read my ass now!” Indeed throughout the film humour and courage intermingle, and director Nadine Labaki, in her Sarajevo Film Festival interview (2012), remarks that she expressly included laughter and wit in the film instead of offering simply a grave reflection on conflict. For her, while serious treatment of conflict has its place, and while her film in fact does have serious moments, she feels that using humour allows “absurd” situations to be shown for what they really are – absolutely “ridiculous” – and that by laughing about such situations “it’s
really the way to start healing … it creates this distance, and I wanted to work on that.” She was also inspired by powerful women who, despite losing children, still can joke and laugh, making her wonder where their “strength come[s] from.”

In *Where Do We Go Now?* the women make some other humorous attempts to avert violence. The mayor’s wife Yvonne (Yvonne Maalouf) feigns a trance-like state in the church and ‘speaks’ to the Virgin Mary. The entire village gathers around to hear what Mary has to say through Yvonne, and the latter reports her as saying that God is angry about the village men’s violence. The women are almost found out, however, when Yvonne goes off on a tangent and starts claiming that Mary knows this neighbour called another “an asshole” and that another threw his trash into his neighbour’s yard. But by far the most hilarious diversion created by the women is their recruitment of Ukrainian showgirls, whose pamphlet had fallen out of the pocket of one of the boys upon their return from the nearby town. The men immediately become infatuated with these girls, whose bus ostensibly had broken down in the vicinity. For days, they forget warfare, thinking of nothing other than flattering these ladies and catering for their every need. When their spell appears to wear off and matters start to unravel again, one of the Ukrainians helps the village women discover where the men have buried their guns by stealthily recording their discussions. The women then are quick to dig the weapons up and bury them elsewhere. This is especially urgent as bloodshed is imminent: the young boys Nassim and Roukoz, without their mothers’ permission, had travelled to a nearby town to collect goods for the men, and on the way home Nassim had been killed in crossfire between Muslims and Christians. His mother Takla (Claude Baz Moussawbaa) hides this fact from her elder son, claiming that Nassim has mumps and so must be isolated in his bedroom. The village women are at a loss as to what to do, knowing full well that the moment the men hear of this they will begin slaughtering each other. Takla’s elder son Issam (Sasseen Kawzally) eventually does find out, but before he can go on the rampage she debilitates him by shooting him in the leg while he still is in their home.

The women decide to end this crisis once and for all. To begin with, they enlist the help of the imam and priest, who jointly call on the entire village to gather one evening to thrash matters out. In preparation the women bake drug-laced confectionary, accompanying this work with a wicked hashish song which recommends that when a foolish man is drowning he should be ‘rescued.’ Their plan works out well: the surly men arrive for the meeting, eat, drink, and lose all inhibitions to the point where sworn enemies laughingly embrace one another. One would assume that this cathartic event would mark the end of the conflict, with the men seeing through their aggression and reconciling with one another. The women prove far more sceptical, distrusting the men’s drug-addled gestures. They know that more is needed. The next morning, when the men awake, they find that the women in their homes – their mothers, their wives, their sisters – have switched religions. The Christian mayor rises from bed only to notice Islamic wall hangings in his passage, and finds his wife in Islamic dress, praying to Allah. In another ‘Muslim’ home, a son awakens to his now-Christian mother blessing him with holy water. The men’s confusion and bewilderment grow as they see that all the women have converted, and they now find themselves unable to wage war on the basis of a difference in religious views. It would mean having to turn on their women. We find that Takla, an erstwhile Christian whose young son Nassim had been killed and who, as discussed earlier, wounded her elder son Issam to avoid a reprisal, now is dressed in Islamic attire. She wakes her injured son and tells him bluntly: “Now you live with the enemy … I’m one of them now. What more can you do? Get up, my son. We have to bury your brother.” Issam is flummoxed; his facial expression suggests that he is battling with the dualistic ‘us versus them’ logic so entrenched in his thinking but so impossible to operate in terms of now. His own mother now is ‘them.’
The film closes with a woman’s voice-over narration about the peace achieved in this village, by women “who fought with flowers and prayers instead of guns … And to protect their children … f[ound] a new way.” During this, the camera follows Nassim’s funeral procession involving all the villagers, with some of the men carrying his casket. When they reach the cemetery the narration ends; all that is heard is the wind, rustling grass and leaves. This stirs a sense of embodiment, of physical embeddedness, and of human fragility. The pallbearers come to an abrupt halt in the path separating the Muslim and Christian sides of the cemetery. The camera pans from right to left, adopting the lead pallbearers’ point of view. They do not know which way to turn. The camera cuts to their faces, capturing these men confusedly looking at each other. It then cuts between the pallbearers and the rest of the group of mourners as the former shuffle around with the casket, to ask the women as if in one voice: “Where do we go now?” They can no longer choose sides – the Muslim side or the Christian side – of the cemetery or for that matter of the ideological battlefield, and no answer is possible. They stare at each other, baffled by this new situation, this new peace. The complexity of human relations, and of life itself, is acknowledged here. This final scene manifests the relational, dialogical character of the ‘barefoot epistemology’ of holding labourers, of care-givers. This same relational epistemology has been emphasised by philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. Yet, the ecological feminist argument is that care-giving itself generates this tentative epistemological stance, with no need for theory at all – which is what makes labours of care immensely transformative. The power of Labaki’s Where Do We Go Now? lies in its cinematic revelation of this alternative epistemology of which men also are capable. This is not a “comfortable” perspective, because it does not afford the stability, the certainty, of dualistic ‘us versus them’ thinking. It moves beyond dualistic structures by recognising that ecology and society form a relational web where everything flows bio-energetically in/out of everything else. This ontology of internal relations implies a both/and logic, which means that [the] … epistemology [is] … a dialectical one dealing with process and contradiction. The terms identity and non-identity refer to moments in the ongoing transformations of ‘nature’s’ – always including our own – material embodiment (Salleh 1999: 211).

*Where Do We Go Now?* emotively underscores the importance of a regenerative ethic, underpinned by recognition of complexity, to counter conflict. The principles evoked in this film are those of care-givers. As the Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva explains, these are the principles that “stand … for women’s liberation and for the liberation of men who, in dominating nature and women, have sacrificed their own human-ness” (2002: 53).

**Works cited**


SarajevoFilmFestival. 2012. Conversation with Dir. Nadine Labaki (Where Do We Go Now?), retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D45QDLyB8z0 on 6 May 2015.


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When discussing the role of women in architecture, often two distinct viewpoints arise. Either the relevance of the issue is questioned, or the issue is accepted and all the shortcomings are identified. Parallel to the professionalisation of architecture runs the issue of women’s rights. This article traces the underlying challenges of women in American architecture by discussing the work of three pertinent female architects coinciding with the three waves of women’s liberation. Firstly, the viewpoint of Fay Kellogg, one of the first commercially successful architects in the United States of America, is presented. Secondly, the 1977 book and exhibition titled *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* is used to highlight various forms of discrimination against the female practitioner and/or academic. Finally, the interdisciplinary approach of Sheila Kennedy is presented as antithesis. One of the founding members of the Boston firm KVA MATx, Kennedy described herself as an architect, innovator and educator during a visit to South Africa in 2014. This paper presents three design projects from the current professional work of KVA MATx.

**Key words:** Fay Kellogg, Susana Torre, Sheila Kennedy, KVA MATx, women in American architecture, interdisciplinary design approach

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**The interdisciplinary design approach of the American architect Sheila Kennedy**

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Die interdisiplinêre ontwerpbenadering van die Amerikaanse argitek Sheila Kennedy

Tydens enige bespreking van die rol van vroue in argitektuur is daar dikwels twee verskillende standpuntes: die geldigheid van die kwessie word bevraagteken, of dit word aanvaar en die huidige tekortkominge word bespreek. Die professionalisering van argitektuur staan parallel tot die ontwikkeling van vroueregte. Hierdie artikel onderzoek die onderliggende uitdaginge waarvoor Amerikaanse vroue-argitekte te staan kom, deur die werk van drie pertinente vroue-argitekte, wat gegaan gegaan het met drie vroue bevrydingsbewegings, te bespreek. Dit begin met oogpunt van die eerste kommersieel suksesvolle argitek in die VSA, Fay Kellogg. Daarna word die 1977 uitstalling en publikasie *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective* gebruik om verskeie vorme van diskriminasie teen vrouepraktisyne en/of -akademici uit te lig. Die interdisiplinêre benadering van Sheila Kennedy word as alternatief aangedui. Tydens ’n besoek aan Suid-Afrika in 2014 het Kennedy haarself as argitek, uitvinder en opvoedkundige beskryf. Hierdie artikel bied ’n oorsig van Sheila Kennedy se professionele werk as een van die stigterslede van firma KVA MATx in Boston, tesame met ’n samevatting van die resultate van ’n weeklange werkweek met argitektuurstudente in Pretoria en uittreksels uit persoonlike onderhoude.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Fay Kellogg, Susana Torre, Sheila Kennedy, KVA MATx, Amerikaanse vroue-argitekte, interdisiplinêre ontwerpbenadering

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According to Maria Smith, two distinct perspectives dominate any discussion of women in architecture. Shortlisted in 2013 by the AJ for Emerging Woman Architect of the Year, Smith
writes that one viewpoint is questioning the relevance of the issue, with the added statement of “I just want to be good at my job” (2014). Alternatively, the shortcomings are identified by claiming “we must do more to bring our backward profession up to the 21st Century standards, since it lags so embarrassingly behind” (Smith 2014).

Claiming the architectural profession to be regressive in its treatment of women should be seen against the backdrop of its relatively recent professionalisation. For example, the American Institute of Architects was founded in 1857, to create an association that would “promote the scientific and practical perfection of its members” and “elevate the standing of the profession” (American Institute of Architects 2015). Simultaneously, the development of women’s rights forms a key requirement in understanding the role of women in architecture.

Using these themes as a backdrop, this article discusses the interdisciplinary design method of the American architect Sheila Kennedy. With her approach, Kennedy is not only obsoleting the aforementioned gender issues, but also making a meaningful contribution to the discipline while mapping a future direction for the practise of architecture. Kennedy was chosen based on her unique approach to the built artefact and the numerous awards that acknowledge the contribution of KVA MATx to the built environment. The projects executed under her leadership and companies she worked with make her a worthwhile precedent while the influence and contribution of Sheila Kennedy to American architecture was acknowledged with her fellowship to the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

American women’s liberation movement

When attempting to delineate the American women’s liberation movement, various approaches are used by social scientists and feminist historians (Foster 2015). Although it is often argued that the development of feminism remains constant and uninterrupted to this day, the Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America: Women and Religion [Volume 1] claims that different waves of feminism developed from women experiencing inequality and discrimination, often linked to other forms of injustice (Skinner Keller, Radford Ruether and Cantlon 2006). This article recognises the following three distinguishable developmental waves.

The so-called “first wave” of women’s liberation in America began in 1848, culminating in the constitutional amendment that gave women the right to vote in 1920 (Skinner Keller et al 2006, 12).

The supposedly “second wave” of women’s liberation in America occurred throughout the 1970’s, focusing mainly on advancing the status and issues relating to middleclass white women (Skinner Keller et al 2006, 12).

The “third wave” of American female emancipation emerged in 1991 with the televised testimony of a young law professor (Skinner Keller et al 2006, 12). Anita Hill testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee that the then Supreme Court nominee and her former boss, Clarence Thomas, had sexually harassed her while they worked together. The testimony propelled public awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace. In 1992, the president of New York Women’s Foundation, Marion Kaplan, said that Anita Hill has become representative “of a new and potent wave of feminism” (Sontag 1992).

Using periods corresponding with the above-mentioned waves of women’s liberation, a desk study uncovered prominent women active in American architecture overlapping to an extent with these eras and themes. First, the viewpoint of Fay Kellogg, one of the first commercially successful architects in the Unites States of America, is presented. The discrimination faced by
this architect prevented her from entering the profession after her graduation. To coincide with the second wave, the 1977 book and exhibition titled Women in American architecture: A historic and contemporary perspective is used to highlight various forms of discrimination against the female architectural practitioner and/or academic. Today women are accepted generally in the profession of architecture, although their role is still limited by sexual stereotyping. Finally, the interdisciplinary approach of Sheila Kennedy is presented as a decisive approach to overcome any sexual stereotyping.

**Women entering the architectural profession in America**

During the 1870’s, the recently established architecture schools of Syracuse University (1871), Cornell University (1871) and the University of Illinois (1873) were opened to female students. The first woman graduating from architecture school in America was Mary L. Page, receiving a certificate in architecture from the University of Illinois in 1878 (Allaback 2008: 24).

The *New York Times* of 17 November 1907 published a piece under the heading “Woman invades field of modern architecture”, with a sub-title of “Remarkable success of Miss Kellogg in a profession exclusively followed by men scores triumph for her sex” (*The New York Times* 1907). The article describes one of the most successful women architects of America at the time. Fay Kellogg was “in business for herself, earning from $5,000 to $8,000 a year, and numbering among her clients some of the wealthiest corporations and firms of the country” (*The New York Times* 1907). At the time of the article, Kellogg was renovating six buildings and erecting a new $200,000 structure at Park Place for the American News Company (*The New York Times* 1907).

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

According to Fay Kellogg, women only really entered the architectural profession in America 12 years earlier (The New York Times 1907). Although the number of female architects increased significantly during this period, success in business evaded most. Ms Kellogg attributed this situation to women architects permitting “temporary rebuffs to discourage them.” According to her, a woman should “do as well at this profession as a man” (The New York Times 1907). In Kellogg’s opinion, “…the very nature of the field invites her services, in fact, it needs her” (The New York Times 1907). The only requirement that the prospective female architect has to meet is a certain level of physical fitness, while Fay Kellogg advises on residential architecture and decorative work as directions “in which woman’s talents might well be employed…” (The New York Times 1907).

Unfortunately, some of the challenges facing the professional female architect could be attributed to women in architecture not keeping up with the developments in women’s rights. For instance, Kellogg is restrictive in her advice to the potential female architect despite her success across a wide range of building typologies and being labelled a feminist in some publications. This happened during a period when the women’s suffrage movement almost reaches its peak with the 19th amendment to the American Constitution. Passed by Congress on 4 June 1919 and ratified on 18 August 1920, this amendment guarantees all American women the right to vote (General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives 1919). There were over 200 women practicing architecture in the United States by 1920 (Allaback 2008). This represents approximately 1% of the total 18,185 architects in the United States in 1920 (American Institute of Architects 1924). It is difficult to obtain reliable gender statistics related to the current American architectural profession. In 2009, the National Architectural Accrediting Board reported that women comprising 41% of US architecture graduates. However, the AIA National Associates Committee Report of 2004 claims women are limited to 20% of licensed architects (Women in Design 2013).

A subsequent article by Nixola Greeley-Smith in The South Bend News-Times of 1914 is titled “Pioneer woman architect tells how she won success”. In this publication, Fay Kellogg responds to the question of she became “the pioneer woman architect in the United States”, by stating (The South Bend News-Times 1914):

After I studied architecture at Pratt institute in Brooklyn, where I was born, I, I tramped the streets for a year looking for someone who would give me employment. Nobody would take a woman. Why, the idea of a woman architect was revolutionary. Finally, a French-man showed himself daring enough to give me a chance after I had been refused everywhere else.

It is evident that Fay Kellogg faced discrimination based on her sex, but Greely-Smith (The South Bend News-Times 1914) provides additional insight into Kellogg by claiming:

Incidentally, one of the fine things about Fay Kellogg, architect – she is also Fay Kellogg, contractor, carpenter and steamfitter – is her sturdy championship of her own sex.

According to Rendell, as quoted in Brown (2013: 23), an interdisciplinary approach is a crucial part of feminism in architecture, and she maintains that:

The aim of such work is to question dominant processes that seek to control intellectual and creative production, and instead generate new resistant forms and modes of knowledge and understanding … interdisciplinarity is the kind of transformative activity that intellectual and creative life requires to critique and question…
Reviewing the contribution of women in American architecture

The so-called “second wave” of feminism followed an approach of greater inclusivity. In the foreword to the book *Feminist Coalitions*, Sara Evans writes that feminists “shatter the stereotype of a white, middle-class, politically rigid movement (Gilmore 2008: vii). During the 1960s and 1970s, feminists formed a variety of partnerships, often allying themselves with a diverse range of social justice efforts on grassroots level. The notion of inclusivity could be linked to that of interdisciplinarity as an inter-disciplined approach reflects greater inclusivity. Arguably, this practice followed by Fay Kellogg was a contributing factor to her commercial success, significantly predating the second wave feminism.

Seventy years after the New York Times article featured Fay Kellogg, an exhibition was hosted with the title *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*. Susana Torre was the curator of this exhibition in 1977 and the editor of an accompanying book with the same title. Both were organised under the umbrella of *The Architectural League* through its then recently established *Archive of Women in Architecture*. The publication and exhibition presented a variety of women practitioners and commentators in the arenas of architecture, planning and design. In the foreword of the book, Marita O’Hare, writes that: (Torre 1977: 6).

The idea for the exhibition came at a time, the early 1970s, when the enrolment of women in schools of architecture increased substantially, marking a trend that saw greater numbers of women entering other professional programs, such as law and medicine. At the same time organizations were formed to examine and improve the role of women in the design professions. The conjunction of these events, no doubt a part of the dramatic shift in women’s attitudes toward their lives and career choices, which has shaped the decade of the seventies, underscores the fact that women intend to participate in the design process as professionals and that many of these women feel that there are significant issues affecting their careers that can best be examined in the context of their own professional organizations. For the first time feeling the strength of numbers, and also exploring their identity in a so-called male profession, women wanted to organize an exhibition that demonstrated the range and quality of women’s work as architects, planners, and designers.

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*Figure 2*

The Architectural League published a follow up interview with Susana Torre in 2013, using her original essay for Women in American Architecture as reference. According to the 1977 essay, architecture has remained largely unaffected by the concerns of the Women’s Movement. The initial central question of: “Why have there been so few women architects?” largely remain unanswered. Arguably, the role of women in contemporary architecture continues to be limited. According to Torre, the perception that female architects are only suited to design domestic space has persisted in writings about women and architecture for the past 100 years (The Architectural League NY 2015) Assigning specific building typologies to female architects could be described as restrictive categorisation.

The 2013 publication Feminist Practices: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Women in Architecture claims that women remain under-represented in the architectural profession. This publication reflects on the relationships between feminist practices and design methods in an attempt to understand its role in the built environment. According to the editor, Dr Lori A Brown, the number of male and female students entering architectural school are near equal, but the attrition rate of female students remain large at approximately 17-25% (2013: 1, 380). Brown argues that “in both the academic and the professional fields of architecture, positions of power and authority are almost entirely male, and as such, the profession is defined by a heterosexual, Eurasian male perspective” (2013: 380).

An example of a female architect that is not only breaking these traditional moulds, but simultaneously providing new direction for the practise of architecture is Sheila Kennedy from Boston, Massachusetts in the USA. Kennedy actively employs an interdisciplinary approach during the design process. The result is a built artefact that recognises the Greek origin of architect, namely architekton. The portfolio of Kennedy’s work is not restricted to only one segment of architectural practice. It represents that of a master builder, exploring integrated design collaborations based on reinterpreting organisational systems and introducing new technologies, while existing technologies are innovatively interpreted.

An interdisciplinary approach

An interdisciplinary approach to the design problem could serve as an alternative solution to restraining classification, holding true for more than women or architecture. When attempting to migrate across established boundaries to link different schools of thought and academic disciplines new needs and or professions often emerge.

The notion of interdisciplinarity gained momentum after the Second World War, with the support of the newly found social and cultural freedom. According to Steve Bowkett, as quoted in Porter (2004: 114), “[t]his period of experimentation gave rise to the cross-fertilization and hybridization of ideas across many disciplines: art, architecture, psychology, politics, science, literature, etc. The hard world of numbers and scientific fact collided with the soft world of sensation, memory, illusion and aspiration.” In the 1990 publication Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice, Georges Gusdorf is quoted saying that: “[t]he need for interdisciplinarity has been reflected in epistemological writings since the origins of Western science” (Thompson Klein: 19) This notion was explored further by Thompson Klein (1990: 19), stating that “the roots of the concepts lie in a number of ideas that resonate through modern discourse—the ideas of a unified science, general knowledge, synthesis and the integration of knowledge”
One of the contributing authors of *Feminist Practices*, Jane Rendell, discusses critical spatial practices from a feminist approach. Rendell argues towards an interdisciplinary encounter between feminism and architecture (Brown 2013). A passionate advocate for interdisciplinarity, Rendell states that working between disciplines is difficult because it challenges the familiar and requires the practitioner to relinquish the “safety of competence for the dangers of inability…” (Brown 2013: 23).

Sheila Kennedy, FAIA

An example of a contemporary woman in architecture, practising from a perspective of interdisciplinarity, is the American architect Sheila Kennedy. For the purposes of this paper, Kennedy was chosen because unlike the so-called “starchitects”, she is not restricting herself to a specific segment of the built environment or the practise of architecture. Among others, Sheila Kennedy is a wife and mother, that practises, builds, writes, teaches, develops new prototypes, heads a material research laboratory, addresses women’s needs using design and technological innovation etc. Through her work, Kennedy is mapping the future for built environment practitioners, men and women alike.

Currently, Kennedy is Professor of the Practice of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the first woman to hold the office (MITa 2015). According to the official policy of MIT, this appointment is “made only to practitioners who have developed a high level of expertise in fields of particular importance to the MIT academic program and who also demonstrate a deep commitment to teaching and research” (MITb 2015). She received her Bachelor’s Degree in history, philosophy and literature from the College of Letters at Wesleyan University. Kennedy studied architecture at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris, and received a cum laude Masters of Architecture from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University (MITa 2015).

In 2014, Sheila Kennedy received the Berkeley-Rupp Prize for boosting women in Architecture and Sustainability. The Berkeley-Rupp Prize is given by the University of California to a distinguished design practitioner or academic who has made a significant contribution to advance gender equity in the field of architecture. An important requirement is that the practitioner’s work should emphasise a commitment to sustainability and community (Cocoma 2014) (University of California, Berkeley, College of Environmental Design 2015).

According to Jennifer Wolch, the work of Kennedy “is expanding the boundaries of architecture through designs that transform the way we think about materials and urban infrastructure. Her leadership in developing ecologically responsible soft design solutions to enhance the lives of women in developing countries — and her commitment to apply these innovative design principles here at home — exemplifies the highest goals for the Berkeley-Rupp Prize” (Cocoma 2014).

On 6 February 2015, Sheila Kennedy was honoured as fellow of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). With this, the AIA recognises its members who have made significant contribution to the profession. Less than 4% of the approximately 85,000 registered AIA members are distinguished as fellows or honorary fellows (American Institute of Architects [Scott Frank] 2015).
In 1990, Sheila Kennedy and Juan Frano Violich established the architectural design practice of Kennedy & Violich Architecture Ltd. (KVA). Subsequently, KVA has “established a new model for an interdisciplinary design practice that explores architecture, digital technology and emerging public needs. Designated as one of Fast Company’s Masters of Design, Kennedy is described as an “insightful and original thinker who is designing new ways of working, learning, leading and innovating” (MITa 2015). The consistent standard of work produced by this firm makes this statement is evident.

Following the 1990 establishment of KVA, Sheila Kennedy founded MATx, a pioneering materials research unit at KVA in 2000. Despite being in partnership with her husband in the architectural practice, she is heading the MATx research laboratory. Unlike other material research laboratories, MATx is part of an architectural practice.

The aim of the MATx workshop is to develop and prototype the design, or part of the design. This transforms the design from paper space to real space. This approach is substantiated in the later publication titled Architecture and Disjunction. In this book, Bernard Tschumi (1996 93) writes, “[t]here is no way to perform architecture in a book. Words and drawings can only produce paper space and the experience of real space… Such representations inevitably separate the sensual experience of a real space from the appreciation of rational concepts… architecture is a function of both. And, if either of these two criteria is removed, architecture loses something”. This basic need in architecture remains largely unacknowledged in architectural practice today. In most instances, real space is only achieved the built artefact is under construction, mostly by someone other than the designer. With the KVA MATx laboratory forming an integral part of the design process, Kennedy has addressed this need years before the seminal work by Tschumi, indicating her forward thinking.

The MATx materials research unit engages “applied creative production across the fields of design, electronics, and architecture and material science” (MITa 2015). This unit is unique because the design process is extended to become a manufactured object. The architect is not...
only providing the recipe to the baker or cook (after having consulted with the client in camera). The architect’s responsibility is extended from merely overseeing the production to testing the recipe before it is published.

MATx works collaboratively with business leaders, manufacturers, cultural institutions and public agencies to create designs building components and architecture that advances the widespread implementation of sustainable digital materials... Recent work at KVA MATx includes the RiverFIRST Minneapolis Riverfront Initiative, America’s largest sustainable urban riverfront development, the new East 34th Street Ferry Terminal in Manhattan [among others] (MITa 2015).

KVA MATx could be described as an interdisciplinary design practice that explores architecture, digital technology and emerging public needs. MATx could be defined as a prototyping laboratory and manufacturing workshop that forms an integral part of the design process (MITa 2015). According to Kennedy, the following questions are central to the practice (Laubscher 2014):

How do architects deal with the materials they are working with?

How can we work with these ordinary materials and transform them?

Sheila Kennedy presents the concept of “material misuse” in an attempt to answer the aforementioned questions, stating that the architect should “make such good use of a material that it is transformed through it’s use” (Laubscher 2014). Kennedy removes the traditional separation between architect and material by employing the material in a new way. The design process is extended to material application and unlocks new possibilities in its use. At MATx, Kennedy works with industry leaders, cultural institutions and public agencies, discovering not only new material possibilities, but using existing materials in new ways. The work focuses mainly on the material design. These materials form an inherent part of the design projects executed by Kennedy and her team. These projects have a strong focus on “resilient infrastructure and public space in the urban environment” (Laubscher 2014). Ultimately, the work of this architect is ranging across scales and disciplines. Using the principle of scale, three projects were selected from Kennedy’s extensive portfolio. The selected projects showcase how Sheila Kennedy guides a interdisciplined team (working across the traditional confines of architecture) to design, develop and produce a utilitarian product, a piece of urban furniture and finally a residential building.

The architect’s use of material

The built environment constantly faces the need for an increasing requirement of low cost materials in large quantities. Inevitably, this has led to research and development of materials that could be used in architectural production. Although architects are responsible to materialise their designs in built form, few architects form part (or have in-depth knowledge) of materials research and development. Although the commercial products are standardised in their specification, size and supply, the cultural perception of these materials (and the way in which the architect can employ them) is continually shifting.

The publication titled KVA: Material Misuse argues that material research is directly linked to the culture of production (Kennedy 2001: 12). As a manufactured commodity, industrial building materials represent specific social, political and economic contexts. An investigation into a contemporary building material represents a parallel enquiry into the often complex and
The contemporary architect is facing an ever increasing selection of material from an almost unclassifiable system of interchangeable and disposable building products. The growing range of material palette complicates the concept of material categories, originally derived from the perception that building materials should represent “a singular or unique element of nature” (Kennedy 2001: 12). The architect’s role is changing from forming to deforming, from materialising to de-materialising. In other words, standard applications as re-invented and assigned new definitions and uses. “In our work this research is a process of cultural excavation, where invention resides in a critical re-vision of what already exists. In this way, we look for alternative critical positions for the contemporary condition of material presence that are neither nostalgic references to craft-based tectonics, nor redemptive reiterations of modernism’s claims to technical progress” (Kennedy 2001: 20).

The inspiration for our design begins with … discovery…. This involves a careful account of specific physical properties of the material, combined with an amnesia with regard to the standardized applications and a willingness to invent new uses for it. Such new uses are in fact, both a “misuse” of the material and a radical demonstration of its fullest use…. This reflects a practice that both accepts the economy of the standardized conditions of building materials as products, and deliberately seeks to exceed them (Kennedy 2001, 20).

The work of KVA MATx does not attempt the abandonment of conventional materials and techniques but is rather seeking to dissolve the perception of architecture being “solid, impenetrable and permanent” (Kennedy 2001: 69). Kennedy & Violich’s discursive working method” treats architecture as the invention and design of changeable and often contradictory material conditions … and locates the practice of architecture as a dynamic process of archaeological excavation and research into present situations. The immersion into specific urban, material and historical conditions allows the architects to create real architecture for real people with real needs. They typically incorporate recovered cultural traditions and architectural memory into more pragmatic concerns for context, function and economic considerations” (Kennedy 2001: 69).

The interdisciplinary design approach of KVA MATx is evident through the continuing contribution of the firm’s founding members. For the purposes of this paper, three projects varying in scale were selected to highlight the realisation of this design method. These award-winning schemes are the portable light project, the SOFT rocker and the Chrysanthemum building.

The portable light project

Worldwide, increased urbanisations has resulted in a continually increasing need for services. With the need far outstripping available resources, the result is poorer communities often remaining without basic services. The portable light project provides in one such essential requirement, namely artificial light. This is achieved by combining low tech skills with high tech solutions.

Using the available weaving and sewing skills of the local women, a flat plane is created by weaving fabric, bamboo and/ or other textiles. Flexible photovoltaic material and a light source, or cell phone charging point, is connected to each other and inserted into the woven
plane. One of the results is a bag that harvests the sun when it is carried around to be used as a light source or cell phone charger at a later stage. Figure 4 illustrates how traditional basket weaving techniques could be employed in a similar fashion.

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4**
Sustainable materials and traditional skills set are combined with technology to create a portable light harvesting unit (source: Kennedy 2015).

This project delivers decentralized renewable power and light to the developing world. The technology is presented on an open source platform, it allows for customisation by local cultures using traditional weaving and sewing technologies. The product “... creates the opportunity for greater levels of cultural acceptance and stewardship of this technology, particularly for women who are often among the most vulnerable in developing countries” (Cohn-Martin 2015).

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 5**
The combination of woven baskets, flexible photovoltaics and respectively a light source and cell phone charging point (source: Kennedy 2015).

With his project, Kennedy and her team are crossing the traditional boundaries of architecture where the architect only indicates the light point, specifies the fitting and possibly assist in its final selection. After exploring the need for light within the context of the poor, Sheila Kennedy uses high technology and couples it with a low technology skills set to serve humanity. The result is sustainable portable energy addressing the need for light and communication.
The SOFT rocker

In 2011, the organising committee of the 150th Festival of Art, Science and Technology (FAST) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) invited project proposals. Kennedy and her team at KVA MATx set out to re-imagine hard urban furniture. A interdisciplinary team created an urban rocking chair that relies on human interaction to harvest sun-energy and the final product explores the materiality of softwood panels (KVA MATx 2015).

With the SOFT rocker, Kennedy once again ventures beyond the traditional boundaries of architecture. It could be argued that Kennedy communicates a certain maternal instinct with this project. Whether this is taking place on a conscious or sub-conscious level is unknown. The designed object displays a certain feminine quality, conjuring up images of rocking chairs and the womb, among others. Within the confines of the curvilinear seat, that is ergonomically based, the user is allowed pivotal movement. The pivot point, that is essentially created using a steel rod, could be seen as representative of the umbilical cord. This pivotal cord balances the scientific requirement of sun tracking to ensure optimum exposure of the energy harvesting panels to the sun. The designer is extending her presence by communicating through user interphase. On an analogical level, the device reminds of the mother continuously educating the child.
The Chrysanthemum building

The Chrysanthemum building was selected as the final project illustrating Kennedy’s realisation of the built artefact. The Chrysanthemum flower grows commonly in Boston and serves as concept for this building. A study by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) claims this flower to be one of the ordinary plants assisting in removing toxic agents such as benzene, formaldehyde and trichloroethylene (Wolverton 1989).

The flower is graphically construed and this interpretation is transformed digitally. Among others, the transformation results in a laser cut screen serving as balustrade and used as the screen icon when accessing a cell phone application. The cleansing function of the flower is interpreted resulting in a building management system that mimics this characteristic. At the same time the building user is continuously reminded of this when seeing the graphic depiction on the screen of this mobile device. Through this, the Chrysanthemum building and its essence become a part of the user’s electronic life, providing a definitive focus on the importance of the built artefact. KVA MATx worked closely with a commercial developer to realise a financially viable project model. Simultaneously the ownership and transport model is addressed. With this scheme, Kennedy and her team obviates the common excuse presented by architects that they could not do what they wanted because of the developer and/or client. The interdisciplinary approach displayed in this project ranges across scales and preconceived barriers. This project illustrates a unique design approach that should serve as an example to architects around the globe.

The Chrysanthemum building transforms a vacant parking lot into a new model for smart and sustainable urban living... Residences include innovative micro-units that give young people the opportunity to become first time homeowners, two-story duplex units and large loft units for families. Organized around a courtyard green terrace, the Chrysanthemum Building provides abundant natural light and fresh air to enhance all living units and common spaces, reducing operational costs and energy use. The building structure of locally harvested renewable wood sequesters 32 metric tons of carbon and minimizes construction disruption. To promote the City’s movement to use public transportation, each unit will be provided with a bicycle and a designated bicycle storage area (KVA MATx 2015).

On 22 September 2014, the Chrysanthemum building became the first building in Boston acknowledged with a Holcim Design Award. Selected from more than 6,000 entries by an
international jury of experts, this project is described as an “affordable residential urban infill development, [in] Boston, MA” which offers a viable solution to the “housing question” while promoting an affordable model for residential development in a dense urban neighbourhood” (Holcim Foundation 2014).

The Chrysanthemum building provides ten residential units comprising of four compact units and six adaptable family-lofts and is located within the North End of Boston. Narrow streets, alleyways and brick buildings with cascading fire escapes characterize the area. The context of setback-terraced façades and the wrought iron fire escapes are transformed resulting in a “digitally designed and fabricated screen wall, and a commercial space that spills out onto the street reinforcing the neighbourhood’s street-life. The carved-out rear courtyard underscores the project’s motivation to create spaces that benefit from natural light and promote a state of well-being and permanence” (Holcim Foundation 2014).

The Chrysanthemum building is financed according to the principle that short-term investments must not prevent long-term opportunities for responsible energy conservation and adaptability to changing urban lifestyles. The demands and constraints of a small urban site required working with neighbourhood associations and the city’s redevelopment authority to reconsider zoning ordinances, which would have resulted in parking at the street in lieu of commercial activities that characterize the neighbourhood. The limited dimensions of the site required an alternative to steel and concrete construction resulting in a “softer wood frame” construction adaptable to the urban context and providing opportunities for local contractors to participate in the local economy (Holcim Foundation 2014).

According to KVA MATx, a mobile phone application was developed to assist in managing the building. The resultant mobile platform is a smart building management system enabling residents to manage trash, re-cycling and order neighbourhood services. The Chrysanthemum application connects residents with local service providers, encouraging the support of sustainable local businesses, restaurants, and healthy food providers (KVA MATx 2015). The project “…integrates mobile phone applications for bike sharing and building-systems monitoring and promotes the use of social media to enhance user participation and communication” (Holcim Foundation 2014).
Figure 10
The regional sourcing of building materials, a typical floor plan and an axonometric of the primary structural components of the Chrysanthemum building (source: KVA MATx 2015).

Figure 11
The design team and building developer created a mobile phone application for the Chrysanthium Building (source: KVA MATx 2015).

Figure 12
The street façade employs a steel framework with circular patterns inspired by the Chrysanthemum (source: KVA MATx 2015).
Conclusion

This article alludes to the underlying challenges of women in American architecture while using the issue of women’s rights as background. The first commercially successful architect in America, Fay Kellogg, advises future women architects to limit themselves to designing houses. With this she obviates her own achievements. Women in architecture should challenge the perception that female architects are only suited to specific building typologies by acknowledging their substantial contribution to the built environment.

When comparing the book and exhibition titled Women in American architecture with the development of women’s rights in America, the discrepancy within the architectural profession becomes evident. Unfortunately, some of these shortcomings could be attributed to women in architecture not keeping up with the developments in women’s rights during the last century and a half. Currently, the female architect is still facing a largely male dominated profession.

There are practising women architects that are surpassing any form of sexual stereotyping. One such example is the American architect Sheila Kennedy. Her interdisciplinary design approach, enables Kennedy to partner with various actors and agents in the built environment to deliver award-winning schemes. This paper presents the interdisciplinary method of Sheila Kennedy as a future model for all architects. This approach of the KVA MATx design team restores the mother of all art forms to its rightful position by ignoring perception and transcending boundaries. The future of architecture (and the education of its students) is entrenched in an interdisciplinary method. This approach is not only valid for women, but applicable to most practitioners of architecture.

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Bernardino Pinturiccio’s depiction of a virtuous woman in the *Scene from the Odyssey*

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The purpose of this research is to assess the contents and meaning of a multi-layered Renaissance painting by Bernardino Pinturiccio, representing a scene from Homer’s *Odyssey*, by utilising Renaissance criteria. In the first part of the article the stage-like foreground scene of the painting is evaluated with special reference to the narrative genre of *istoria* painting in which gestural communication is linked to visual rhetoric, as described by Leon Battista Alberti. In the *Scene from the Odyssey* the physical attitudes of the depicted figures and the gestural communication between the centrally placed young man and the woman sitting at her loom – identified as Penelope, Odysseus’s virtuous wife – convey to a large extent the meaning of the representational setting. In the second part, dealing with the background scene, it is proposed that the painter included details that may be interpreted as references to Odysseus’s adventures during his decade long return journey to Ithaca, thus linking past and present in the visual narrative.

**Key words:** Bernardino Pinturiccio, *Scene from the Odyssey*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, *istoria* painting, visual rhetoric, epideictics

The creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they persevere in a solemn silence (Plato, *Phaedrus*).

It is necessary to learn the conventional language of painting in order to “see” a picture... (Luca Giuliani 2013: xiii).

The Italian Renaissance painter Bernardino Pinturiccio, who was born in Perugia in *circa* 1454, is best known as a fresco painter, but he also painted portraits and narrative scenes. After Pope Gregory’s return from Avignon to Rome in 1378, the Vatican became an important artistic venue that attracted many artists, amongst whom Perugino (*circa* 1448-1523), in whose employ Pinturicchio initiated his career. Pinturicchio remained active in Rome during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries as an independent artist. Late in his career he also depicted Classical motifs, such as the *Scene from the Odyssey* (also referred to as *The Return of Odysseus* [*Ritorno di Odisseo*], figure 1), painted in 1509 for a room in the palazzo of Pandolfo Petrucci in Siena.
The contents and meaning of the *Scene from the Odyssey* are investigated in two parts:

In “Part one”, the foreground scene, in which the emphasis is on the gestural communication of the figures placed on a stage setting, is interpreted as an *istoria* painting which is linked to visual rhetoric. In “Part two” it is proposed that the painter included details in the panoramic background scene that may be interpreted as references to Odysseus’s adventures after the Trojan War during his ten year long attempt to return to Ithaca, thus integrating the present and past of the visual narrative in the foreground and background space.

**Part one: a rhetorical interpretation of foreground scene of the *Scene from the Odyssey***

This research focusses on a Renaissance visual work of art based on the requirements of the *istoria*, a genre invented by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72), which, by its emphasis on gestural communication, is linked to visual rhetoric.

Rhetoric originated as an oral art of persuasion, classified by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) into three genres: (1) political, (2) forensic and (3) ceremonial. Its development followed a trajectory from Classical Greek theoreticians, notably Aristotle, who codified the process of oratory, through the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance. During the later period rhetoric was revived and revised by the Italian Humanists, a development that left its imprint on both works of art and theoretical writings on art history, especially the theoretical ideals expressed by Alberti and Giorgio Vasari (1511-74). Thus, visual rhetoric manifested in Renaissance painting as a reinterpretation of the lessons of Classical rhetors whose art of oral persuasion was studied by the Italian Humanists as part of their *studia humanitatis*. In order to join the ranks of the learned and shed their Classical and Medieval status of craftsmen, visual artists applied the learned, secular contents of the Medieval Trivium (that included rhetoric) and the mathematical studies of the Quadrivium to their art. Consequently, the emergence of visual rhetoric during the Renaissance offered a valid way of conveying a pictorial message and meaning by uniting the spatial composition and figural arrangement, the latter by means of connotative interaction based on gesture, attitude and facial expression.

Eventually, the influence of the application of rhetorical canons to the representation of visual reality that developed as a form of silent rhetoric provided art historians an important and valuable theoretical basis for the interpretation of Renaissance visual arts. It also formed a link to art theory, of which Alberti was a foremost exponent. Thus, the engagement of different parts of various Italian Renaissance paintings’ compositions, may be interpreted as parallel with the rhetor’s orational phases, with the purpose of persuading an audience to accept the truth of, or be moved emotionally, by their mute message. In this regard the rhetorical treatise by Quintillian (35-100) became of special interest during the Renaissance. Besides the organisation, expression and style of an oral argument he focussed on the moral aspects of rhetoric, notably epideitics, the third, ceremonial, genre which refers to display, with the moral purpose of praise and blame (see Weinberg 1973: 168; Siegel 1968: 13). Likewise, *istoria* painting developed a focus on the moral aspects of a figural representation.

Since there are correspondences between the arrangement of the Albertian *istoria* and visual rhetoric, the analysis of the contents and meaning of the foreground scene of the chosen painting by Pinturicchio is arranged to follow the parts of a Classical oration, as postulated by Quintillian: *exordium* (introduction), *narratio* (narrative account of contents), *partitio* (outline of analysis that follows), *confirmatio* (arguments as proof), *refutatio* (counter arguments) and *peroration* (summing up).
Exordium: the Scene from the Odyssey as an istoria painting

Alberti (1976: 70) designated the istoria, which has relevance for narrative painting, as “the greatest work of the painter”. The term refers to narrative painting and its aim is to represent “noble historical subjects” (Edgerton 1975: 197). Moreover, the concept of visual rhetoric is central to the formal development of istoria painting. Carolyn Wilde (2002: 13) points out that “Alberti’s term compositio is very specific, drawing on his alliance between painting and rhetoric”. In an istoria composition the narrative is made explicit in a manner of figural communication that can be understood as “speech incarnated through expressive gestures” (Hamrick 1994: 403).

Alberti asserted that in a successful istoria painting all compositional elements comprising the narrative subject – figures, scale, colour, light and perspective – come together. While the work’s unity is prioritised, the importance of a variety of different figures with individualised postures comprising a composition is essential: “In every istoria variety is always pleasant. A painting in which there are bodies in many dissimilar poses is always especially pleasing” (Alberti 1976: 76). This variety supplements the evocation of figures that seem alive and moving, which was the Renaissance ideal to attain painterly naturalism. Furthermore, the painter should observe and represent nature in its beauty and grace, causing the viewer to experience a pleasurable emotion, while also inspiring him or her to a moral judgement of the figural presentation. Praising virtue and reproving vice should be evident in the presentation of the demeanour and expression of the figures. Most importantly, fidelity to natural appearances, multilevel significance and artistic form are enhanced by the visual transformation of Classical rhetorical devices appropriated from the orator’s art of persuasion. In the istoria the portrayal of human figures are mute and static, but they come “alive” by means of gestures that convey their relationships, and “motions of the soul” (emotions), in the way that Alberti (1976: 77) presumes: “The istoria will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul.” Thus, painting is defined as an affective art, recalling the rhetorical tradition that effective speech could move hearers to right action by playing on their emotions. Likewise in painting, the purpose of elevating the moral character of the viewer of noble subjects refers to the importance of epideitics, belonging to the third, ceremonial rhetorical genre, which Quintillian rated highly.

Narratio: the theme of the Scene from the Odyssey

The theme of the Scene from the Odyssey, painted in circa 1510, clearly refers to the Greek legend of Odysseus, a Greek king of Ithaca, who was immortalised in Homer’s epic poems, the Odyssey and the Iliad. He was the son of Laërtes and Anticlea and married to Penelope, who bore him a son, Telemachus. Renowned for his cunning intelligence, Odysseus’s identity is quite diverse: ruler, warrior, shipbuilder, wanderer, traveller, potential trader, potential settler and bard (Rose 2012: 154). Actually, the legendary Odysseus is most famous for his adventures during the ten eventful years he spent wandering after the equally long Trojan War, ostensibly trying to return home to assert his place as the rightful king of Ithaca. During the long years of his absence, his wife patiently awaited his return, enduring the obnoxious behaviour of dozens of suitors seeking her hand in marriage. Since Penelope believed that Odysseus was still alive, marriage to a suitor would have enabled the successful candidate to usurp the throne. She therefore tried to keep the suitors at bay by making them an idle promise that she will choose a husband from among them when she had finished weaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law, Leartes, who lived on a farm outside the main city. However, when alone at night Penelope undid the work on the
shroud, ensuring that the task would never be finished. This trick was eventually discovered by the suitors who then demanded that she choose one of them immediately. As coincidence would have it, it was at precisely this time that Odysseus returned to Ithaca.

Disguised by the gods as a wandering beggar Odysseus’s homecoming was also eventful and timeous. After having met Telemachus, who was born after his departure to Troy, it is decided that Odysseus will follow him home. There he participates in the test of stringing and shooting with the bow (his own, shown hanging on the wall behind Penelope in the picture) that Penelope had set for her hand in marriage. None of the suitors was capable of this feat which Odysseus accomplished with ease. Thus Odysseus was recognised as Penelope’s missing husband. As an honourable man protected by the gods, the legitimate king regained his virtuous wife, re-established his household, and empowered Telemachus to kill all the suitors and their servants.

The foreground of Pinturiccio’s Scene from the Odyssey reveals some imaginary dramatic incident involving seven figures on a stage-like setting who need to be identified. What is represented is not specifically narrated in the legend of Odysseus, but much information can be discerned concerning the way in which the figures are involved or not involved with each other, but gesturally reveal the “movements of their souls” during a precise moment of the compositional event in Penelope’s spacious room. To the left of the painting a richly, but modestly, dressed woman is shown – most certainly Penelope – looking up from her loom at a centrally placed gesturing young man. The plainly dressed maid sitting on the floor adjacent to Penelope is occupied with the task of rewinding the ball of wool, linked to the cat’s paw by a thin line, on a shuttle for Penelope’s renewed effort to weave the shroud. The group comprising three full-figure men standing aside to the right, who are seemingly not related to each other or to any of the other figures, is not in her field of vision. Neither is the man entering at the doorway on a higher level than the group of three, who touches his head with his right hand and holds a staff resembling a sceptre in his left hand.

**Partitio: stating the theme of the Scene from the Odyssey in terms of rhetorical expression**

The title of the Scene from the Odyssey indicates that the painting focuses on the representation of a scene from the Odyssey – albeit as imagined by Pinturiccio. He composed a scene with a narrative content linked to rhetorical expression, which – as previously explained – was designated an istoria. The argument in the following sections on which the interpretation of the painting is based focuses on the identification of the interrelated figures in the painting, as well as the context in which they interact. Most pertinently it is the figures’ gestures and physical attitudes that enable the viewer to interpret the rhetorical content of the painting, especially regarding the moral judgement of praise and blame befitting the participants in a situation that primarily involves Penelope.

**Confirmatio: an analysis of the figures’ gestures and attitudes as proof of their identity**

According to Michael Baxandall (1988: 60) the young man in the foreground of Pinturiccio’s composition could be either Telemachus or one of Penelope’s suitors. Since this youth takes centre stage in the depicted episode, his posture and gestures are intended to reveal his reason
for approaching Penelope. Coming almost within reach of her he arrests his stride, leans forward in her direction and delivers a seemingly urgent message. His right hand is outstretched towards her, but, curiously, the position of the pointing forefinger of his left hand follows the perspectival lines of the floor tiles and the base line of the loom to the vanishing point at the intersection of the frame and the window, close to where a small black bird is perched – a detail that may have some symbolic meaning.

Evidently, the vigorous approach and intense communicative movement of the young man has an effect on Penelope who, distracted from her weaving, faces him, relaxed but fully alert, in contrast to her maid, sitting adjacent to her on the floor, who remains preoccupied with her task as described above. The young man’s movement towards Penelope – his leaning stance and gestures – seems to convey an authoritative message, accentuated by his serious expression and the purposeful action with which he approaches the recipient of his message. Even though his lips do not move in speech, he is engaged in some form of persuasive oratory by means of his posture and gestures.

The painter uses the communication between the two main characters, Penelope and the young man, to create references to two specific socio-political contexts. In the absence of her husband, Penelope is the vicarious incumbent with inalienable royal authority. In her securely seated position her status is evident as the person whose response to either her son who is committed to search for his lost father, or a suitor with the intent of usurping the throne, will influence her life and the kingdom of Ithaca for better or worse. When the young man approaches her she seems to be depicted in a transitional, introverted moment: leaving off her introverted weaving activity with a calm facial expression, she directs her attention to the message of the young man: as if absorbing some unusual news, she turns towards him and “listens” to his mute message, but does not respond instantaneously or react emotionally.

The young man’s gestures relate him only to Penelope. If he is one of the suitors his action in approaching her would express his ambition of usurping the throne by taking Odysseus’s widow (presuming that the king is dead) as his wife. It could be argued that after ten years of being pestered by suitors, Penelope would be bored by their continual advances. Thus, the communication between the young man – be he either a suitor or Telemachus as Baxandall avers – and Penelope poses a moral problem, which, in rhetorical terms, would evoke an epideitic judgement, the moral judgement of praise and blame.

**Refutatio: a counter argument about the figures’ identity**

As noted, Baxandall is of the opinion that it is not clear what this painting is about and his uncertainty needs consideration. However, the theme is clearly that of the Classical legend of Odysseus: the foreground scene depicts Penelope and her maid in a room designed for weaving. The former looks up to the centrally placed young man. The young man placed centrally in the composition could be Telemachus telling Penelope that he had met Odysseus, or it could be one of the suitors intruding upon Penelope with his claim to the throne.

If the young man’s status is ambiguous as Baxandall avers, his manner of approach to Penelope in drawing her attention away from her weaving might afford some clues about his message to her. His action in approaching Penelope expresses haste and urgency, but seems purposeful and unwavering. If he is Telemachus, then his message is most probably about his father and his quest of restoring the kingdom, an ambition that represents him as the legitimate
heir to the throne and the potential bearer of power. If a suitor, he would be a rival of the group behind his back, and his attitude would not be that of hasty arrival like a messenger.

**Peroratio: what the analysis reveals about the meaning of the painting**

If the *Scene From the Odyssey* is an *istoria* painting – a flowing narrative in static form – one would expect to find the composition arranged according to Alberti’s guidelines that refer to a narrative subject. The formal painterly aspects such as colour, light, perspective, are not the only key necessary to unlock its meaning, but, most importantly, the attitudes, gestures and relationships of the figures should be considered. Thus, in the *Scene from the Odyssey* the messages communicated between the figures – especially the message that the centrally placed youth conveys to Penelope – depends on viewers’ understanding of the importance of visual rhetoric. Furthermore, the visual narrative in terms of the Odysseus legend, from which Pinturicchio composed an imaginary scene, involves a moral judgement, over and above the formal and aesthetic qualities of the presentation.

The representative content of the painting, referring to aspects of the Odysseus legend, provides connotative references uniting the spatial parts of the painting and the interaction or otherwise of the figures. However, the meaning of the content can only be established if the engagement between the centrally placed youth and Penelope is ascertained. In this regard Pinturicchio strangely echoes the iconography of Medieval or Renaissance annunciation scenes, in which an angel – mostly a winged male figure – arrives in the Virgin’s abode to inform her of an event involving her future that is about to happen. In most examples the angel, standing or kneeling before the seated Virgin, interrupts her act of reading from a sacred text. These two figures are traditionally intimately united in space: the one speaking and the other attending to what is spoken. Likewise, the young man in the *Scene from the Odyssey* who apparently enters in a hurry with fluttering girdle ends, interrupts Penelope at her weaving, and is related to her in shared space. More intimately, and in terms of a compositional element, he is related to Penelope by the light blue colour scheme of his feet and the lower part of her dress. On the basis of this observation one may conclude that the young man is delivering a message to Penelope, that he, who seems free to approach her intimate space, is her son. What Telemachus is informing his mother about is said in gesture and open to speculation. Most probably he is imparting some news about his father, since a scene from the *Odyssey* without reference to Odysseus would be odd, since the alternative title of the painting is *The Return of Odysseus*.

The message that Telemachus delivers to his mother is clearly not observed by, meaningful or disturbing to the group of suitors behind his back; they seem to be indulging in the motions of their minds and is not in Penelope’s field of vision. In contrast, the bearded man in the doorway who is not united connotatively with the group of suitors, focuses his vision on Penelope. Therefore, he may be identified as Odysseus, observing Telemachus, whom he met previously and followed to his home, explaining to Penelope that her husband had returned.

An epideictic judgement involves praise or blame for the figures represented. At the order of Odysseus he group of suitors will, according to the legend, be executed by Telemachus for their bad behaviour. Odysseus who eventually found his way home to his wife and son is the exemplary king and Telemachus his heir. Most deserving of praise is Penelope, the virtuous woman. She is depicted as unblemished, calm and patiently occupied with her weaving. In a society in which women were designated subordinate roles, the praise of Penelope’s virtue is praise indeed.
Part two: references to past episodes in the Odysseus narrative

The background scene in *Scene from the Odyssey*, depicted as if seen through an open window may be referred to as virtual, as explained by David Summers (2003: 431): “When we look from real space “into” a virtual space, we see an apparent space (and time) from that in which we are standing…”. Thus what is seen in the background of the picture refers to a different reality, but is purposely linked to the stage-like action presented in real space in the foreground of the picture. This setting may furthermore explain the large, strangely constructed open interior of Penelope’s work space presented as a stage-set and the unrealistically large scenic opening that affords an extensive view of the sea and part of the shore. Behind the structural frame that demarcates Penelope’s room, and to which the loom is attached, the panoramic window opening also affords a view of a landscape to the left, with a fortress, a hilltop building, men and animals below. To the right a large vessel in full sail seems to be passing. On its deck stand a man and a wild animal, while followed by men in a rowing boat, one of whom with his legs in the air. This panoramic vision is assumed to refer to incidents and details relevant to Odysseus’s decade long return journey.

It is proposed that in this spatial arrangement of stage and window with no barrier between them, the past and present of the *Odyssey* legend are simultaneously brought into an interpenetrating compositional space. If the man standing in the doorway is indeed Odysseus it is appropriate to associate him with Janus, the Roman god of the door, who had two faces: one looking forward and one looking back – forward to Penelope and turning his back on the past with visual reminiscences seen in the background. His arrival will clear the stage for a new beginning.

While the analysis in the first part of the article deals with the interaction of the figures on a stage-like foreground setting, there are several details in the overall picture that are not accounted for in the preceding rhetorical analysis, or cannot be accounted for:

In the foreground birds – actually on the stage – are included in the picture: a small black specimen perched on the frame to which the young man’s finger points, and a falcon on the hand of one man in the group of three in the foreground.

In the background a ship appears with a billowing sail on which a man stands, accompanied by a tiger-like animal, with the domestic cat that features so prominently in the foreground, placed vertically below the wild animal on the ship.

A curious detail is the young man blue feet and Penelope’s synchronised blue dress.

Various other details in the background such as the castle and pastoral scene in the background may also be relevant as references to past episodes in the Odysseus narrative.

An explanation can be offered for the presence of the birds. There are various references to birds in the *Odyssey* as transient messages from the gods. The legend relates that when the time drew close to the time that Odysseus would take revenge on the suitors the birds that symbolise them become smaller and weaker, indicating that their deaths become inevitable. Thus, the falcon, a bird of prey, on the suitor’s hand finds a counterpart in the small black bird – probably a species that represents seasonal change – perched safely some distance away from the falcon on the interior frame where it is highlighted as belonging to both the foreground space and the virtual background space. The young man’s finger pointing at the small bird is therefore a relevant gesture in the compositional and narrative contexts, asserting the evidence that the
youth is Telemachus announcing the advent of his avenging father, because the suitors would not anticipate their own demise.

An explanation for the curious detail of the man and tiger on the boat, directly above the domestic cat playing with a ball of wool which Penelope’s maid is rewinding, may be found in the Circe episode during Odysseus’s wanderings. When Odysseus and his crew went ashore on the island of Aiaia to find supplies, they found themselves in a forest glen where lions and other wild animals had been drugged by Circe, the dreaded goddess. She also drugged Odysseus’s men and turned them into pigs, but with the help of Hermes Odysseus escaped the ordeal. After being persuaded to release Odysseus and his crew, she gave them a favourable wind to sail to Itacha. Thus, the man and the wild animal on the boat serve as a reminder of Odysseus’s ordeal in Circe’s domain. Linking the tiger with the domestic cat implies that Penelope, a faithful and domesticated wife and mother, is contrasted with Circe, the sorceress.

In the colour scheme Telemachus’s blue feet probably suggests that Pinturiccio idealises his status as a “heavenly” messenger wearing magic sandals, reminiscent of Hermes, while referencing also to the angel Gabriel. The colour blue moreover relates Telemachus to Penelope who wears a blue dress, which in Christian iconography is the symbol of the Virgin’s purity, and which in Pinturiccio’s scheme could also symbolise her connubial fidelity.

Several details remain unexplained, such as the cross on the ship’s flag and a series of crosses on its outer railing. Likewise, the small boat with one man with legs in the air, and much of the people, animals and castle in the background.

Finally: an assessment of Pinturiccio’s knowledge and skills as a Renaissance painter

The Scene from the Odyssey is proof of Pinturiccio’s knowledge of Homer’s classic epic that qualifies him as steeped in the scholarship of the Italian Renaissance Humanists. Furthermore, he absorbed the artistic lessons of his era, especially Alberti’s requirements relating to istoria painting: individualised postures of figures that seem alive and moving, showing the motions of their minds; a variety of different figures in dissimilar poses gesturing expressively with long-fingered hands; the representation of nature in its beauty and grace, and emphasis on the epideitic quality of rhetorical expression. As a fresco painter the panel proves Pinturicchio’s skills in the exposition of the narrative, naturalistic representation of the figures, exemplary colouring, and exquisite detailing of all the compositional elements.

In 1996 Pietro Scarpellini (1996: 832) averred that Pinturicchio “was long relegated to the margins of the Renaissance and mentioned only amid the dense ranks of decorators, but since the 19th century there has been a revival of interest in his art, although a full critical re-evaluation has yet to appear”. The full-critical re-evaluation was written by Scarpellini and Maria Rita Silvestrelli in 2004. Nevertheless, I hope that this article will be a further contribution to the revival of interest in the art of Pintoricchio. I also hope that some of the uncertainties about the contents of the Scene from the Odyssey that Michael Baxandall formulated (quoted in note 17) may be answered.

Notes

1 There are few definitive publications about Pinturicchio (also spelt Pinturiccio). The most scholarly is by Scarpellini and Silvestrelli (2004).
oratory as the judicial, the deliberative, and the epideictic.

3 See Vickers (1988) for an historical and theoretical appraisal of rhetoric.

4 Alberti and Vasari applied rhetorical principles to their writings on art, respectively in De pittura (On Painting) and Le vite.

5 “Rhetor” in Classical Greek refers to a trained speaker, capable of persuasive communication. For an analysis of the term see Arthurs (1994).

6 The Humanists’ influence on visual arts during the Renaissance is best described by Baxandall (1971). His main thesis states that the Italian Humanists contributed to the theory of the visual arts and the recognition that they possessed a status comparable to rhetoric and poetry which were designated as “liberal arts”.

7 Alberti (1976: 89) noted that “I would be delighted if the painter […] should be a good man and learned in the liberal arts”.

8 Historically praise or blame – referred to as epideictics – was characterised by display or ceremony. It was considered the least important kind of rhetoric (alongside political and forensic rhetoric as distinguished by Aristotle), focussing more on inspiring than on persuading the audience, and had to do with praising and blaming. However, over the centuries, epideictics gained in prominence and emerged as a powerful influence in medieval poetry, and also led to the emergence of a system of visual signification which, in some respects, resembled verbal language (Corbet 1971: 40; Vickers 1982: 500-2).

9 The istoria in Renaissance art follows on the tradition of narration in Hellenistic and Roman art. See Von Blankenhagen (1957).

10 Edgerton (1975: 197) defines the istoria as follows: “The concept, prevalent in late medieval and Renaissance Europe, that the sole purpose of pictures is to show noble historical subjects as a means of elevating the moral character of the viewer. Such a didactic point of view about pictures was supported by the conservative Church at the time, and particularly by Alberti.”

11 I borrow Hamrick’s terminology, which he formulated to describe Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s early description of language.

12 Jacobs (2005) demonstrates the significance of lifelikeness in art during the Renaissance.

13 The major textbooks on oratory known during the Italian Renaissance are Aristotle’s Rhetoric, Quintillian’s Institutio oratorio, and Cicero’s De oratore.


15 For a detailed discussion of the socio-political situation in Ithaca at the time of Odysseus’s return, see Rose (2012: 157-165).

16 While Penelope resisted the advances of the suitors and remained chaste, Odysseus had countless amorous adventures during his absence from home. Only once did he resist the lure of a sexual encounter when he ordered his men to bind him to the ship’s mast when passing the domain of the sirens who lured men to disaster with their irresistible song.

17 Baxandall (1988: 60) states: “A painting like Pinturicchio’s Scene from the Odyssey seems to be using a language we only half understand. Is the urgent and well-dressed young man in the foreground expostulating or narrating, with his open hand and emphatic finger? Is the turbaned man with the raised palm registering surprise, dismay or perhaps even sympathy? Is the half-figure on the extreme right, with hand on heart and upturned glance, indicating a pleasant or unpleasant emotion? What is Penelope herself feeling? Collectively these questions become the general question: What is the subject of this painting? Does it represent Telemachus telling Penelope of his search for Odysseus, or does it show the suitors surprising Penelope in her ruse of unravelling the shroud she claims to be weaving? We do not know enough of the language to be sure about it.”

18 The present argument is centred on the interpretation of the young man as Telemachus who was born soon after Odysseus left Ithaca to go to war in Sparta. The war lasted for ten years and Odysseus’s wanderings kept him away from home for another ten years. Therefore, Telemachus was no older than 20 years when his father returned.

19 The meaning of most of the gestures remains uncertain, even though the young man’s pointing finger may be explained in context. Baxandall (1988: 61) correctly states: “There are no dictionaries to the Renaissance language of gestures….”
Works cited


Aristotle. See Kennedy.


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This article investigates the de/acculturation of identity (as brought forth specifically by diaspora) as visually represented by contemporary South African artists Berni Searle and Leora Farber. Specific focus is placed on the photographic installations Looking Back (1999) by Searle and Aleorosa: Induction (2004-2007) by Farber. The postcolonial spatial construct diaspora involves an experience of displacement, relocation and a scattering of identity. Diaspora is mainly brought forth by the willing and unwilling [forced] migration of people across physical and psychological borders. Accordingly the repositioning of identity during diaspora is associated with de/acculturation. We argue accordingly that both Searle as a brown woman and Farber as a white woman from Jewish descent distinctively reclaim their collective and autobiographical identity narratives in the selected artworks as solo-protagonists. The methodological approach for this article consists of a theoretical investigation of the postcolonial spatial identity complexities diaspora, hybridity and liminality. This is followed by a reading and interpretation of Searle’s installation Looking Back and Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction as a visual manifestation of the de/acculturation process that is associated with the diaspora.

Key words: Aleorosa: Induction (2004-2007), Berni Searle, diaspora, identity, Leora Farber, liminality, Looking Back (1999), hybridity

De/akkulturasie van identiteit: diaspora in gekose foto-installasies deur Searle en Farber


This article focuses on postcolonial historical terrains of identity narratives that were suppressed pre-1994 by way of the interpretation of selected artworks from contemporary South-African artists Berni Searle (born 1964) and Leora Farber (born 1964). The selected artworks chosen for this article namely Searle’s installation Looking Back (1999) and Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction (2004-2007) deal with two separate identity narratives of womanhood and specifically an experience of de/acculturation. De/acculturation in turn can be associated with the postcolonial interpretation of diaspora, hybridity and liminality. Searle is a brown English speaking South African woman while Farber is a white English speaking South African woman.
of Jewish decent. Both artists were raised during the apartheid era and simultaneously witnessed the end of apartheid and the transition of power after 1990. Searle as a brown woman experienced three-way othering: as a woman, a brown individual and a brown woman. She expressed her experience as a so-called Coloured of hybrid heritage during apartheid (1948-1994) where she, as all brown individuals, was subjected to racial discrimination as follows:

It is a term which I rejected then, as I do now. By colouring myself in different ways, in sometimes imaginary ways, I tried to subvert the idea of being racially positioned and described under apartheid (Searle in Williamson 2009: 108).

Farber, in contrast to Searle, enjoyed the privileges of whiteness. Although white, Farber as a woman from Jewish descent can be viewed from the Eurocentric gaze as the Other. Farber states in an interview with Sandra Klopper (in Law-Viljoen 2008: 16-17):

In contrast, my sense of alienation and ambivalence is characterised by feelings of psychological dislocation...On the one hand, I completely understand and support the preoccupation in contemporary South Africa society with issues of reconstruction and redress; on the other, my role in this process as a white, English-speaking South African is necessarily liminal and marginal (Farber in Law-Viljoen, 2008: 16-17).

In accord with Farber’s description above the artist’s body becomes a medium of performance. Performance, as Butler (1993: 95) argues, cannot be understood outside of the context of repetition.

Both artists use their bodies as a voice of agency through which they visualise the search, repositioning and displacement of their autobiographical identity heritage in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore Searle and Farber distinctively comment on the acculturation and simultaneous so-called de-acculturation of identity that took place during their collective historical identity narratives as inherited from the colonial era. The expansion of European colonialism since the 1600’s brought forth the willing and unwilling [forced] scattering of peoples, populations and cultures. The migration of people, although not solely associated with the advent of colonial practices, was amplified by improved global transport and immigrations. New settlements in new contexts had to be negotiated across borders that brought forth spatial identity complexities associated with diaspora. Diaspora brings forth novel displacement, relocation and a willing or unwilling repositioning of the self. From a postcolonial perspective the de/acculturation of identity that occurred during the scattering of people during imperial and colonial diaspora still has a continuous to influence on identity formations long after the demise of these empires (Cohen 1997: 26; Ashcroft et. al., 1998: 68; Loomba 2005: 147).

Twenty years after South Africa’s first democratic election the country is still inlayed with inherited as well as newly voiced identity complexities regarding authority, belonging and displacement. The “strategic-political and ultimately moral-historical question” as anti-apartheid activist Neville Alexander (1936-2012) formulates in An Ordinary Country (2002) is how to move forward whilst remembering, when the demise of apartheid was unmistakable but the transition into a new democracy has only begun. Post-apartheid artists visually document, investigate and simultaneously contribute towards the discourse of identity by critically re-evaluating the past whilst looking forward. The need to conscientiously conceptualise and ultimately authentically claim identity plays an important part in the recognition of individual autobiographical narratives.

We argue that during the colonial and apartheid era, individual identity narratives and histories that differed from the patriarchal white dominated so-called norm was alienated due to
hierarchal power relationships. Searle and Farber as postcolonial protagonists therefore reclaim their own distinct and individual historical and spatial identity narratives by re-performing identity. Both artists’ distinct collective and historical identities are inherently moulded by hegemonic power structures of the past. The methodological approach for this article consists of a theoretical underpinning of the postcolonial spatial identity complexities diaspora and inherently hybridity and liminality is investigated with particular focus on the brown and Jewish experience. This is followed by an interpretation of Searle’s installation Looking Back and Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction. The article concludes with a summary of the main arguments.

A postcolonial understanding of brown and Jewish diaspora

The term diaspora is generally associated from a postcolonial perspective with the identity complexities that arise as product of the scattering of people during imperial and colonial practices or as a consequence thereof (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 68). The term, however, does not only imply the consequences of geographical scatterings but is also associated with a psychological sense of home. McLeod (2010: 242) emphasises the shifting perception of home for diaspora communities:

The concept of “home” is imagined in diaspora communities. The concept of “home” ... can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong. As an idea it stands for sheltering, stability, security and comfort... . To be “at home” is to occupy a location where we are welcome, were we can be with people very much like ourselves... (McLeod 2010: 242).

McLeod (2010: 242), in accordance with Rushdie (1991: 10), argues further that the concept home for diaspora communities becomes an “unstable and unpredictable mental concept”, which is built up from spatial paradoxes between the past and the present. Cohen (1997: 26) identifies two different criteria by which diaspora takes place. The first criterion is the alienation and relocation of a group that is forcefully or willingly driven from their home. This relocated group can be identified as a collective that shares a so-called sameness such as culture or religion. A classic example would be the 2000-year-old dispersal of Jewish individuals as a result of anti-Semitism:

Diaspora Jews ... are always in a vulnerable situation. For almost two thousand years, from 70 [B] CE until the re-establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jews have lived as a relatively powerless minority in a variety of host countries. Their well-being, or lack of it, has been in direct proportion to the positive or negative attitudes of their host governments (Hellig 1995:155).

This so-called type of diaspora is usually associated with a profound experience of trauma as it is a constant over generations. The second criterion Cohen (1997: 26) differentiates is an experience of diaspora as a product of expansion of a country across borders for example colonialism. Colonists experienced diaspora after leaving their country of origin. The immigration of Dutch colonists during the VOC’s trading post campaigns in southern Africa and later the imperial British takeover, for example, had to acculturate geographically and socially to their new environment. This possibly led to the migrant’s self-perception as a victim. Fludernik (2003: xii) alternatively divides Cohen’s (1997: 26) second criteria of diaspora into three subcategories namely: colonial diaspora; diaspora caused by slavery and permanent displacement by emigration; and lastly diaspora characterised by a greater mobility regarding temporary or semi-permanent, self-exile. For this article Fludernik’s (2003: xii) subcategory of diaspora which concerns slavery and permanent displacement is of importance. The importation of slaves to the Cape colony by Dutch and British colonialists for example enforced unwilling and permanent
diaspora upon slaves. From 1658-1808 a rough estimate of 63 000 slaves were imported from mainly Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka (earlier known as Ceylon) as well as Angola, Malaysia, Guinea, Mauritius and Madagascar (Thompson 2006: 35; Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 80). These slaves as mentioned earlier were forcefully imported and had to acculturate geographically to southern Africa and simultaneously adapt socially and psychologically with Western values and religion as determined by colonial rule.

Accordingly a shared feeling of diaspora within an alienated migrant group creates a communal collective memory (Hutchinson 2007: 42-52; Leoussi & Grosby 2007: 8). McLeod (2000: 207) emphasises the complex relationship between identity formations and memory that are heightened with diaspora communities. First or second generation children of willing or unwilling migrants, for example, develop their identity in “both spaces of origin”. For that reason, the identity of descendants of diaspora migrants is simultaneously shaped by the memory and experiences of their inherited country of origin as well as their country of birth. Descendants of Jewish immigrants that came to South Africa during the 1930s for example completely acculturated South African identity as they grew up here whilst keeping their inherited eastern Jewish tradition from their partially acculturated parents or grandparents.

One can argue that diaspora communities form their own unique, acculturated, hybrid cultures or as Hall (1993: 401-402) states “the diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew”. Hybridity broadly refers to the formation of new intercultural identities that was brought about with the spreading of colonialism (Van der Merwe & Viljoen 2007: 3). The term was initially used during Victorian botany to describe a third, new plant species that originates when two existing plant species are traversed (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 118). During imperialism and colonialism, the term was negatively used as part of racial ideology to describe people of mixed race that were “not pure” according to the colonial gaze. Slaves who arrived in southern Africa during 1658-1808 for example assimilated over generations with the local KhoiKhoi, white European settlers as well as other migrants from African or Asiatic ancestry and would later collectively become what we know today as the brown identity (Adhikari 2006: 468). Racial hybridity as set by colonial and apartheid racism had a great impact on the so-called brown heritage and inherent identity complexities that followed:

For me, growing up coloured meant knowing that I was not only not white, but less white; not only not black, but better than black (as we referred to African people). The humiliation of being “less than white” made being “better than black” a very fragile position to occupy. The pressure to be respectable and to avoid shame created much anxiety (Erasmus 2001: 13).

Bhabha (1994: 2), however, highlights from a postcolonial context that hybridity can be used as a tool to undermine structural imperial and racial domination. From this perspective, hybridity is not only associated with so-called structural and biological differences such as colour or race but rather cultural acculturation. Descendants from Jewish immigrants of the 1930s, for example, have culturally hybridised with South Africa. According to Bhabha (1994: 235) hybrid identities undermine structural difference by creating a space of agency or what he (1994: 37) calls “a third space of enunciation”.

Turner (1969:95) and Bhabha (1994: 117) state that liminality includes a transformation in which the previous self-seizes to exist and is rather replaced by a new self. Liminal originated from the Latin liminis which literally translates as lintel (Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins, 2010). The lintel symbolises a transitional space of identity between leaving and arriving, the border between here and there or now and then. Bhabha (1994: 117) argues that liminality is by necessity a result of the colonial condition. That is why he regards the creation of identity
as an on-going and constantly changing process. He (1994: 37-38) identifies three spaces with reference to hybridity and people in diaspora. The first space refers to displaced people’s memories of their countries of birth, and their original culture and identity. The second space refers to displaced people’s current position with regard to the country in which they are resettled, and their forming of new cultural traditions and identities. In this second space, different phases of acculturation with the new country and traditions take place. The third space is the liminal or “in-between” space [between the first and the second space] and is characterised by a perplexed state of mind, trauma, new identity formations, and experiences of uneasiness, discomfort and ambiguity (Bhabha 1994: 117). The third space has reference to the shattering of a previously coherent and structured life, characterised by displaced people’s view of reality (Bhabha 1994: 117). Brah (1997: 225) in accordance with Bhabha (1994: 117) emphasises the importance of diaspora and liminal spaces in which identity should be questioned and rethought. A spatial border which ought to be celebrated where acculturation can take place and the restructuring of identity, culture and exclusivity takes place:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. ... It may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity (Bhabha 1994: 38).

Within the so-called South African postcolonial moment and post-apartheid context [since 1994], it seems as though personal, collective, and historical identity issues are still critically present as racial complexities are complicated by the radical political power shift from white to black in a democratic South Africa. Black people are not only in the majority, but they also have the political power in the country (Le Cordeur 2011: ii). This decolonial power shift in accordance with Ricoeur (1991: 435) caused a necessary rupture in the so-called linear structure of identity and brought forth a heightened consciousness of identity and inherently a liminal space. Adhikari (2005: xv) emphasises that brown South Africans particularly, despite Bhabha’s (1994) assurance of hybridity as a tool to undermine structural imperial domination, are in a liminal space. This experience of liminality was not only felt during colonialism and apartheid but also now in a post-apartheid South Africa: “First we were not white enough and now we are not black enough” (Adhikari 2005: xv). Erasmus (2001: 24) also highlights the brown identity position in post-apartheid as in liminal diaspora. According to her (2001: 24) the brown identity was suppressed by white domination but simultaneously othered black people pre-1994. White Jewish South Africans on the other hand possibly experienced a feeling of psychological diaspora with the turnover of power in 1994. The concept of whiteness still preserves an inherited, privileged hegemonic status, which is still evident in the economical and education sectors (Lopez 2005: 6). The identity of being white, especially white Afrikaners, is currently under scrutiny because of their past hegemonic and political power identity. This causes an experience of self-alienation (Alcoff 1998: 11; Visser 2007: 2; Engelbrecht 2007: 39-40).

The most common contributing factor for present-day diaspora is emigration. White South Africans in general have shown a certain form of escapism from current day South Africa in search for better possibilities internationally. Jewish South Africans would also join the so-called white chicken run, with approximately 50 000 white Jews leaving South Africa for mainly Canada and Australia, between 1980 and 1996 (Beinhart 1996: 71). This emphasises the Jewish culture’s consciousness of a global community and their historical experience with diaspora. In accordance, Visser (2007: 2) postulates that the remaining white South Africans are also left with a feeling of diaspora as “emotional detachment from the realities of South Africa”. This emotional detachment can especially be seen in middle-class suburbia where the constant fear
for security is met with gated, highly secured complexes and 10 feet walls. This is also true for the upcoming black and brown South African middle class.

**Searle’s Looking Back: an exploration of hybridity and diaspora**

![Image of Searle's Looking Back]

Looking Back consists of nine colour photographic images of the artist, and forms part of her Colour Me (1998-2000) series. Each photograph depicts a close-up of the artist and is 42x50cm in size. The photographs as part of the original installation were displayed in the window of an art gallery. Four of the nine photographs are displayed on the outside and are, therefore, visible to pedestrians passing by while five are facing the interior of the gallery. At the back of each of the photographs are different coloured spices from different geographical destinations, each individually placed in glass containers which are framed in white. As seen in Figure 1, Searle is lying on her back in each of the four depictions, her face covered with different types of spices, each spice a different colour. Each photograph is taken against a white background and framed in a black. The glass frame that contains the spices is each filled with the specific spice that is depicted in the specific photograph that Searle used to cover her body.

The main spices used in Colour Me are baking flour (white), paprika (red), cloves (brown), pea flour [ertjiemeel] (beige) and turmeric (yellow). The four selected photographs

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*Figure 1*

depicted in Figure 1 specifically contain paprika (top left), baking flour (figure 2), and turmeric (bottom left) and cloves bottom right. Furthermore, Searle’s gaze and posture in the selected photographs shifts from directly confronting the viewer (top left and bottom right), looking past the viewer (bottom left) to completely looking upward, away from the viewer (top right).

![Figure 2](image)


Searle’s body posture and subsequent gaze in *Looking Back* emphasises her autobiographical as well as her collective search for identity (Du Toit 2013: 153). Her body becomes a metaphor for her shared identity as a woman and more specifically a brown woman. As discussed earlier the brown identity narrative is inlayed with complex heritages. Searle's use of different kinds and colours of spices forms a link to her hybrid ancestry: that being a descendant of slavery, the original native KhoiKhoi and the succeeding brown identity formations that followed (Bester 2003: 15). Especially slaves and spices were viewed during colonialism as trading commodities and negotiable objects (Baderoon 2011: 81; Lewis 2001: 109). Postcolonial critique suggests that the colonised is not only exploited by colonialism, but also dehumanised and objectified (Loomba 2005: 24-25). Searle's use of different kinds and subsequent colours of spices also become a reference of so-called colour classification as enforced by the apartheid regime. During apartheid, as inherited from the colonial era, people were classified and accordingly framed and discriminated against according to their skin colour. Searle, on the other hand, exposes this hegemonic racially biassed practice by *framing* herself in many colours. Therefore visually remapping and deconstructing previous misconceptions of colour and identity. Simultaneously Searle’s use of spices, as food enhancer and preserver, becomes a metaphor for the safeguarding of her identity heritage which ought to be celebrated and conserved (Williamson 2009: 110).

The reclaiming of identity is further emphasised by Searle’s (as brown protagonist) gaze. The installation *Looking Back* contains images in the gallery window which face both the inside of the gallery space, as well as the outside. In the selected photographs facing the street (figure 1), which can accordingly only be seen from outside the gallery, Searle does not make eye contact with the camera and therefore neither the viewer. Searle possibly creates a conscience voyeuristic distance between the viewer and herself in order to simulate the uncomforting colonial gaze. The photo installation in the window panel facing the street as a collective whole reminds one of hegemonic Victorian scientific photo documentation. Searle’s exposed, naked body becomes an inter-textual reference to a woman such as Saartjie Baartman, who became
scientific objects with no agency. This is especially emphasised by two photo frames (figure 1). One being a typical scientific profile shot from the side (figure 2) and the other which depicts, in contrast to the other photographs in the series, an entirely different angle from above, exposing her breasts. Lewis (2001: 109) suggests that the artist’s nakedness and apparent helplessness [she is laying on her back] imitate the colonial and patriarchal view of brown (and black) people. The naked body’s position on her back also serves as a reminder of the sexual exploitation that slave and KhoiKhoi women were subjected to during the colonial era (Williamson 2009: 110). Her mouth is covered with spices, therefore her voice cannot be heard – she cannot speak for herself. Typically of a colonial and patriarchal view of brown or black individuals (and women) as the irrational, passive and fanatical other. Furthermore, nakedness for the colonial, hegemonic gaze became a symbol of uncivilised, barbarism, which ought to be “tamed” (Lewis 2001: 109). Hendricks (2001: 27-38) states that during colonialism gender inequality went hand in hand with racial inequality.

The panel inside the gallery space, in contrast to the street view panel of the installation, contains specific photo depictions where Searle is gazing assertively at the viewer (figure 3). Smith (2000) states that Searle “gazes as much as she demands to be gazed at”. By doing this, she inherently confronts the colonial gaze and claims back her identity with authority, ensuring that it is seen. Consequently, Searle becomes the protagonist of her identity by overturning the role of object to subject (Van der Watt 2004: 75). The depicted photographs in the installation Looking Back mostly only portray a head and shoulders shot. Additionally her skin and hair is covered with spices in all the photographs. According to Bester (2003: 16) by not showing her breasts and covering her skin – a direct depiction of her womanhood and brownness - Searle takes on an androgen gender and non-racial identity. Schmahmann (2004: 100) in accordance with Bester (2003: 16) mentions that Searle “underplays signs of her femaleness” to defame the objectified woman’s body as perceived through a patriarchal and colonial lens. Searle, therefore, claims agency by becoming a new identity which is free of racial and sexist discrimination.

Figure 3

The Looking back installation as a whole possibly becomes a spatial, metaphorical interplay of liminality which highlights diaspora as an acculturation process. The windows in which the
selected art works are presented and visible both on the inside and outside of the gallery becomes a physical and symbolic marginal border. As Du Toit (2013: 166) notes, for the installation to be viewed unabridged, the viewer has to physically move between the outside and the inside of the gallery space. In accordance with Bhabha’s (1994) conceptualisation of liminality and the third space of enunciation, this in-between border becomes a discursive space where identity can be renegotiated and rethought. As suggested earlier the outside panel of the installation facing the street contains imagery that can symbolise the hegemonic, colonial past and the consequences brown people had to endure because of racial discrimination. In Figure 2 for example Searle’s profile does not meet the viewer’s gaze and she is covered in white flour – whiteness being a symbol of decades of oppression. In other words, Searle in these specific photographs become a metaphorical other to the viewer’s gaze as to emphasise the brown identity struggle before 1994. The photographs are facing the inside of the gallery space, in contrast, depict Searle’s gaze confronting the viewer (figure 3). As such she becomes the Self, reclaiming her hybrid identity narrative with agency. The space between the other and the Self, as brought forth by diaspora, marks the liminal where de-acculturation of the past identity and acculturation of the new identity can take place. This in turn marks a process by which the marginalised other (brown and brown woman) is renegotiated by Searle’s performance and furthermore emphasises the fluidity of identity. As Bhabha (1994: 2, 35) postulates:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation... (Bhabha, 1994: 2).

Simultaneously one can argue that Searle’s use of the inside gallery space versus the outside street view becomes an ironic, cynical observation of post 1994 South Africa. Searle’s presentation of herself as the Self only takes place in an elitist gallery space, whilst “on the street” her represented identity in Looking Back is still the other. This is possibly due to the fact that the brown identity in the new South Africa is still faced with a diaspora identity that is brought forth by “not being black enough” (Adhikari 2005: xv; Erasmus 2001: 24).

**Hybridity and diaspora in Leora Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction (2004-2007)**

Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction (figure 2) forms part of the photographic, video and installation series Dis-Location/Re-Location (2004-2007). Farber herself, like Searle’s Colour Me series, plays the solo-protagonist in the series. In contrast to Searle’s naked body Farber, however, is decadently, fully dressed in Victorian attire. In Aleorosa: Induction Farber is sitting in a rose garden, with a white painted house and veranda in the background. The garden is full of white roses. She is sitting on a cane garden chair, with a decadently embroidered cushion with flower patterns. There are two tables visible in the photograph, one on her left and another on her right hand side. The table on Farber’s right hand side behind her [from the viewer’s perspective to the left] is covered with a white tablecloth, accompanied with a silver, Victorian tea set. On the small glass table on her left side [from the viewer’s perspective to the right] is a small crocheted cloth with a wicker basket, containing indigenous aloe plants. The woman [Farber] has short dark hair and she is wearing a straw sun hat. She is dressed in a Victorian style, brown corset possibly made of animal skin with a long, white skirt underneath. Her head is slightly tilted towards her left arm and it seems as though her eyes are closed. She is busy implanting aloes in her arm with what appears to be embroidery scissors. Lastly, the photograph appears to be visually manipulated with a softened, hazed foreground toward the bottom of the image.
Farber’s *Aleorosa: Induction* is the first photograph in a seven part photographic narrative called *Aleorosa*. *Aleorosa* in turn forms part of the complete series *Dis-Location/Re-Location* which again is divided into three main narratives namely: *Aleorosa*, *Ties that Bind Her* and *A Room of Her Own*. In the series Farber as solo-protagonist re-imagines three different identity narratives that being of: (i) the Victorian Jewish immigrant Bertha Guttmann (1859-1934) who arrived in 1886 for an arranged marriage to the Jewish business man Sammy Marks (1844-1920); (ii) her grandparents as Jewish migrants who arrived during the 1930s immigration wave in South Africa from the East bloc and their subsequent first generation South African born children (Farber focuses especially on her mother) and lastly (iii) her own autobiographical identity narrative as an acculturated second generation South African woman of Jewish descent in post-apartheid South Africa (Farber in Klopper 2008: 14-15). All three identity narratives are bound together by different experiences of de/acculturation, diaspora and finally an account of cultural hybridisation from a female Jewish perspective. The monumental project was mainly photographed at the Sammy Marks Museum, Guttmann’s and Mark’s previous home on the farm Zwartkoppies, outside of Pretoria. As such *Aleorosa: Induction* (as well as the *Dis-Location/Re-Location* series as a whole) is visually contextualised and mainly references Guttmann’s Victorian experiences as an immigrant from Sheffield, England.

Guttmann led a typically social and frivolous life of a rich man’s wife with fourteen staff members at her disposal (Mendelsohn 2008: 27). As a product of her time, Guttmann kept following the colonial traditions and values of her country of origin in “exotic” Africa. Farber (in Smith 2002) defines the body as a vehicle through which we experience the world as through which that experience is mediated. It is a metaphor for the duality between interior and exterior, nature and culture, private and public. I use it
as a means of uncovering the untidy layers beneath the pristine, within a western paradigm (Farber
in Smith, 2002).

In contrast to her husband there isn’t much historical record available for Guttmann (Mendelsohn,
2008: 29-30). This is a typical product of a Victorian patriarchal society in which woman were
marginalised as home makers and therefore never dealt with so called official business. Guttmann’s marriage to Marks was also framed by this patriarchal perspective, typical of the
time as illustrated in one of his letters to her:

I should like you to bear in mind and mark carefully for future that when I tell you anything especially
as to people’s characters, you will allow me to be a better judge than you are, and it is only natural I
should be... (Mendelsohn 1991: 182. Italics by the authors).

Simultaneously Guttmann as a Victorian white privileged woman, married to a very successful
businessman, othered her mainly black staff members. She for example writes to her husband
regarding the requirement for extra staff members at their home: “and not counting the necessary
Kaffirs to do all the children’s quarters...” (in Mendelsohn 1991: 184). In the same letter to her
husband Guttmann writes: “I have been the Housekeeper which is a good billet for a wife”
(Mendelsohn 1991: 184). Guttmann and Marks accordingly adhered to the typical colonial
Victorian, hegemonic hierarchy: Marks as a white man being at the top of the household
hierarchy, followed by white male children, then Guttmann and female children and lastly their
black staff members. It is also important to note that black men were placed above black woman
within a patriarchal order. Although both Guttmann and Marks were Jewish and could therefore
possibly been subject to anti-Semitism (which at the time surged worldwide) this is unlikely
because (i) Marks was a respected and wealthy businessman and an advisor to Paul Kruger and
(ii) they were already acculturated to Anglo-Jewry. In accordance with Shain (1994: 17) Anglo-
Jews were seen as white equals, in contrast to the 1930s immigrants from the East bloc (such as
Farber’s grandparents).

Immigration and subsequent migrant identities, however, in agreement with Bhabha (1994)
is traumatic and brings forth feelings of displacement and alienation. We argue accordingly that
Marks especially rather falls into Cohen’s (1997: 26) second criteria of diaspora and Fludernik’s
(2003: xii) subcategory of colonial diaspora (as discussed earlier) mainly because Marks came
to South Africa willingly for economic opportunities and not due to for example Jewish exile.
Guttmann as a Victorian woman, however, came to South Africa for an arranged marriage and
alternatively experienced unwilling diaspora that is associated with trauma and later even resent.
Hence the title of Farber’s series Dis-Location/Re-Location is a direct reference to Guttmann’s
(and her grandparents’) experience of de-acculturation of her previous home (Sheffield) and
acculturation with the new (so called exotic Africa). Simultaneously Guttmann’s new home at
Zwartkoppies was one of isolation as Marks was constantly away on business (cf. Mendelsohn
in Law-Viljoen 2008: 23).

In the selected photograph Aloerosa: Induction Farber (as Guttmann, figure 4) is clothed
in a corset, dress, gloves and sunhat, whilst sitting by herself in a typical English rose garden
(English tea set included). The image is colour framed by whiteness: white dress, white gloves,
white chair, white table cloth and white roses (which remind one of the Tudor symbol The White
Rose of York). Whiteness can inherently be compared to the hegemonic view of whiteness being
“pure”. Accordingly the viewer, at first glance, is confronted with a typical Victorian colonial
scene. The subject (Farber), however, is planting an aloe, native to southern Africa, into her
arm with embroidery scissors (figure 5). The staged so called female gender codes in Aloerosa:
Induction (for example her poised posture) are immediately disrupted with this action as it
deconstructs the so called patriarchal perspective of being a civilised lady. The implanting of
the aloe can further be interpreted as masochistic and painful but Farber’s (as Guttmann) facial
expression, in contrast, is calm and collected.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 5**
Leora Farber, 2004-2007. *Aleorosa: Induction* (detail), from the *Dis-Location/Re-Loca-
tion* series, archival pigment print on soft textured fine art paper, edition 1/9, 65x65cm
(source: Law-Viljoen 2008: 120).

*Induction* therefore becomes a metaphor for the start of Guttmann’s de/acculturation
process and subsequent diaspora which will lead to complete cultural hybridity. Guttmann de-
acculturates from her “pure” Western, Victorian identity (represented by Victorian attire and the
English rose garden) and acculturates (represented by indigenous aloe’s as well as the corset
which is made from animal skin) with southern Africa. As such her identity starts to change as
the aloe – which metaphorically represents Guttmann’s confrontation with her new home, new
cultures and social contexts in southern Africa – becomes part of her. This can be illustrated
by the rest of the *Aleorosa* photo narrative which portrays the transformation process as the
aloe grows and becomes more and more part of her metaphorical body such as in *Aleorosa:
Propagation* (figure 6). Finally as the acculturation process is completed Farber/Guttmann
become part of the landscape as seen in *Aleorosa: Supplantation* (figure 7).
Figure 6

Figure 7
As such the work Aleorosa: Induction becomes a framed hybridised moment of transition – a liminal space, which is accompanied by diaspora and alienation. The liminal space as portrayed by Aleorosa: Induction, although visually contextualised by Guttman’s narrative, inherently also represents Farber’s Jewish grandparents experiences in the 1930s as well as her own experiences of whiteness after 1994 with the transition of power.

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate the de/acculturation of identity as portrayed in Searle’s Looking Back and Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction photo installations distinctively. This was done by firstly giving an introductory contextual framework regarding South-Africa’s colonial and apartheid eras. Specific focus was placed on the brown and Jewish migrant identity narratives. Thereafter a theoretical understanding of the postcolonial constructs diaspora, hybridity and liminality were investigated. In summary the postcolonial constructs chosen for this article individually deal with spatial complexities of identity that emphasise different spaces or experiences, physical or psychological, that fuse and concurrently represents a new space. These constructs were used as a visual framing reference during the reading and interpretation of Searle’s installation Looking Back and Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction.

Searle’s and Farber’s distinctive art careers began mainly after 1990. Both being born in 1964 and raised during the apartheid regime one can argue that their distinct art oeuvres were influenced and shaped by the country’s long colonial heritage and apartheid. Leora Farber, in contrast, is a second generation, white, English speaking South African woman of Jewish descent. Her grandparents immigrated to South-Africa during the 1930s from Lithuania and Latvia in order to flee anti-Semitic persecution that surged across Eastern Europe. Farber grew up during the apartheid regime as a privileged white woman in Johannesburg. Searle and Farber both make use of inter-texts that suggests this colonial influence such as Searle’s use of spices and Farber’s use of a Victorian, Jewish, migrant narrative/s. Both Searle’s and Farber’s photographic installations are visually outlined by the self-exploration, re-evaluation and re-positioning of identity before 1994 by different layers of narratives. Simultaneously both artists comment on subjective identity formations after 1994. After 1994 the de-colonial power struggle for a so-called psychological independent and liberated state and nation continues in South Africa as identity narratives are constantly under the limelight and in flux. Conclusively both artists use their collective and autobiographical or personal identity narratives before and after 1994 to inform the selected photo installations that were chosen for this article.

Both Searle’s Looking Back and Farber’s Aleorosa: Induction deal with issues of alienation, displacement and diaspora, which are inherently associated with processes of de/acculturation. In this regard, Searle works directly with the female collective brown identity heritage. Farber in her turn intertwines three different female Jewish narratives. Searle’s and Farber’s diverse heritages are presented in both installations distinctively by the artists themselves as solo-protagonists. Accordingly their bodies become surrogates of discourse by which layers of identity complexities are investigated. With reference to Butler’s argument that performance cannot be understood outside of the context of repetition, we state that by repetition an old cycle can be broken and a new one produced. Therefore Searle and Farber as postcolonial protagonists reclaim their own distinct and individual historical and spatial identity narratives by re-performing de- and acculturation processes of different origins. In conclusion one can then argue that Searle’s Looking Back and Farber’s Aleorosa becomes a liminal space in which the
de-acculturation and acculturation process can be completed as hybridity is embraced and an experience of psychological diaspora fades.

Notes

1 During the apartheid era people generally referred to brown individuals as Coloureds according to Article 5.4 [c] of the Population Registration Law of 1950. However, since 1994 a difference of opinion exists as to how to address so-called brown/Coloured people (Rooy, 2011: iv; Adhikari, 2009: xv). For the sake of consistency and to avoid possible criticism of discrimination, the term brown people is used in this article in conjunction with the terms “whites” and “blacks” except when referring to a hegemonic viewpoint within the context of apartheid.

2 The postcolonial dichotomy between Self and O/other, in accordance with Lacan (1986), is generally used to describe and critique hegemonic hierarchy that took place during colonialism (Ashcroft et al., 1999: 170-171). The Self becomes the subject whilst the O/other is shaped by their gaze and therefore the lesser object. During colonialism white men were seen as the Self whilst black men for example were seen as the other. From a patriarchal viewpoint white men as the Self however view white woman as the Other. Black or brown woman therefore experience three layered othering: as a woman, as black and as a black woman.

3 Sammy Marks was generally known as “President Paul Kruger’s [formerly president of the ZAR, 1977-1881] Jew” or “the uncrowned king of the Transvaal”. Marks was a very successful Jewish businessman originally from Lithuania. Although originally from Eastern Europe Marks assimilated with England, as most of his business was done there, before arriving in South Africa. Together with his successful business endeavours Marks’ later successful relationship with Kruger brought him more financial stability (Mendelsohn, 2008: 27; Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 190; Farber in Klopper 2008: 15).

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I was a victim of violence as a child, and saw physical and sexual abuse of women and children taking place all around me. Now, as an individual male Xhosa-speaking adult, I have become aware that the scourge of violence against women and children takes many forms, and is usually perpetrated by men. This realisation has led me to become unconditionally committed to publicly standing up against such abuse, both in my way of life and in my artworks. This article traces aspects of my early experiences while growing up in the township of Mdantsane, near East London. It also reflects on events and messages embodied by my artworks, culminating in thinking about how reconstruction of the work *Ultimate Survivor* symbolises breakage, then slow post-abuse revival and healing that can occur as lives are rebuilt. I conclude with a call for adoption of louder and more effective interventions against women and child abuse. My sculptures were created towards achievement of my BTech: Fine Art Degree at Walter Sisulu University at the end of 2014. Co-author, John Steele, was my supervisor, and has collaborated with me in producing this article.

**Key words:** Alison Botha, ceramic sculpture, patriarchy, rape and abuse survivors, violence against women and children

**Isigqibo somphumeleli:** Umbumbi wodongwe waseMpuma koloni utetha ngokunga fihlisi malunga nempatho gadalala kubantu ababhinqileyo kunye nabantwana


**Amagamaangundoqo:** Alison Botha, into ebunjwe ngodongwe, ulawulo lwendoda, amakhoba odlwengulo nopatho gadalala,_ubundlobongela kubantu nabantu ababhinqileyo

A buse of women and children in Southern Africa is a growing scourge and blight upon our contemporary society, in which, for example, “at least one in three South African women will be raped in her lifetime” (Moffett 2006). The Daily Dispatch newspaper editorial of 28th November 2014 (p. 9) highlighted that violent incidents against women and children are occurring ever more frequently despite campaigns such as the “16 Days of Activism
for no Violence Against Women and Children”. In this article, it was stated that in the Eastern Cape, for example, yearly “reported sexual crimes rose from 9 567 by April last year to 9 879 by March this year”, and that of all those who experienced domestic and other abuse, it is likely that “less than 4% of women in such situations report the violence”. These statistics paint a frightening scenario of extensive and entrenched patterns of abuse, including that it could be that in the Eastern Cape up to “70% of women have suffered gender-based violence” (Daily Dispatch, 28th November 2014: 9). Factors mitigating against reporting to authorities of incidents of women and child abuse could include “fear of victimisation, [and fear of] further violence and shame” (Wild 2014: 32).

Extensive in-depth social studies of some causes and manifestations of women and child abuse, both locally and internationally, have already been undertaken. The likes of Gondolf 1995; Heise 1998; Jewkes 2002; Jewkes & Abrahams 2002; Khan 2000; Matthews & Benvenuti 2014; Miles et al 2014; Richter & Dawes 2008; Rumbold 2008; and Watts & Zimmerman 2002 give a good overview of many of the main factors. The likes of Banwari 2011; Barnes et al 2009; Sidebotham & Heron 2006; and Williams 2003 point out that each incident of abuse of women or children is unique, despite a common undertow of violence usually perpetrated by men. Another commonality in South Africa, as observed by Musariri (2014: 35), is that we live in a “patriarchal social fabric characterised by impunity for perpetrators and revictimisation” by those very same culprits, and/or society at large, and/or the criminal justice system. Coetzee (2001: 300) notes that the ideology of patriarchy – father/male as ruler – serves to “perpetuate relations of domination” and various forms of gender discrimination committed by men over women and children. This way of thinking is endemic, especially considering that “both Western and African cultures seem to be deeply influenced by the idea of the supremacy of the fathers, since patriarchy is irrevocably part of both Eurocentric and Afrocentric cultures in South Africa” (Coetzee 2001: 300).

Being an abuser and changing that behaviour

Given the background of research already carried out by others, my intention in this article is to look at aspects of my own life and observations about women and child abuse, and about how these have led to creation of specific artworks. I grew up in the township of Mdantsane, which is located outside East London, on the way to King William’s Town in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Violence against women and children was so rife that I grew up thinking that this was normal. As a child, I found myself being beaten up for no good reason, and also saw that happening all around me. I grew up thinking that boys and men have a right to beat up girls and women because that is what happened all the time.

I was raised by my mother because my father had gone into exile in 1983 to join the ANC, when I was three months old. My mother and I stayed at my aunt’s house. One day, before the 1994 elections, when I was 11 years old, my friends and I had been playing soccer outside and we decided to come into the house to watch cartoons on television. We were surprised to find my father’s cousin and a stranger already in the house. The stranger asked me my name, and wanted to know where my mother was. I became afraid because I thought that he might be a policeman trying to find my mother to harass her because it was known that my father had left the country to join the ANC.

It turned out that this stranger was actually my father who had returned from exile. My mother arrived soon after and was surprised at his return. He had left without explaining anything
to her, so she wanted to know why he had just left her with a new baby, without making proper plans and provision for our wellbeing. Soon they were shouting at each other. I started to be afraid and cursed this day of meeting my father because I saw that my mother was going to live a miserable life from now on. There was nothing I could do. The first time I saw my mother bleeding, we had woken up one night to discover that he had hit her, and was still trying to attack her. I became filled with anger against my abusive father.

After that day, my parents went their separate ways. They had not been married, but agreed that I would go to visit him on weekends. I was a well-disciplined boy at the time and did not like shouting, and I began to dread visiting him because he often yelled at me and told me that I had no brains. He also made me fight with other boys, and hit me very hard when he was teaching me boxing. He planted anger and a fighting spirit in me, and I became a bullying child. I became short-tempered and quick to look for fights with boys or girls. It made no difference, so long as I could engage in a street fight.

I had to change schools, began to carry and use a knife, and became a heavy drinker, drug addict and robber, and was regularly arrested by police on suspicion of criminal activity. I also became abusive towards my girlfriend because that was the only behavior pattern that I knew. I told her that I had to beat her because that was how to show her that I loved her. One day, in 2002, when I was in court on a charge of robbery, I realised that the life I was living was not a good life at all. Things had started to go bad as a result of my father bullying me and calling me a sissy mama’s boy.

I realised that changes had to be made, and with the support of my mother, acted accordingly to complete my schooling and change my way of life by respecting others and behaving responsibly. It so happened that I had always enjoyed drawing at home and at school. This interest was consolidated when I attended Grades 8-10 at Qaqamba Senior Secondary School in Duncan Village because a group of us were transported to the Belgravia Art Centre in East London twice a week for art classes. After completing my matric I registered at Walter Sisulu University for Fine Art studies, and am currently working at the Khayalethu Special School for disabled children in East London. It feels good to have become happily married and to be carrying on as a visual arts educator in my own community.

Abuse often starts at home

Now, when I look back, I realise that women and child abuse often takes place in conjunction with excessive use of alcohol (Gondolf 1995; Jewkes 2002; King et al 2004; Richter & Dawes 2008; Seedat et al 2009). The artworks Sour home, Udabane [Measure], Who is next: 1, and Who is next: 2 (figure 1) speak to aspects of the reality that young children are especially vulnerable. Sour Home refers to the fact that incest and other forms of child abuse often happen at home (Jewkes & Abrahams 2002; Pierce & Bozalek 2004; Richter 2004), supposedly a safe and happy place. This work was specifically inspired by the newspaper report (Boya 2014: 5) of a Dimbaza man who returned home from a tavern and raped his three-year-old niece. Udabane [Measure] reflects on problems that babies and children often suffer as a result of parents and caregivers gradually losing their wits because of alcohol intake.

In my township, the term udabane refers to a measure of alcohol known as “half a glass”. Any container with a distinguishable line or other point of reference is used to distribute equal portions of alcohol served to drinkers who have collectively bought a bottle of wine or spirits. Adults who like drinking in taverns sometimes take infants and young children – represented
here by a baby’s drinking bottle – with them, and when they begin to cry from neglect and hunger, the common turn of phrase is *mbethe ngodabane azolala*, meaning “give him/her half a glass for sleep”. Many children growing up in Mdantsane get *udabane* almost every day instead of love and food, and many become alcoholics before they can even walk.

*Who is Next* 1 & 2 refer to perpetrators of child abuse who perpetually seek out new victims, sometimes mercilessly causing gruesome death, or at least intense pain and fear. Growth into adulthood of victims who have survived is stunted and held back by incidents of abuse (Posel 2006; Richter 2003), just as the rope tied around that baby bottle prevents it from moving easily.

*Who is Next*: 1 & 2 also refers to the fact that serial abusers and killers of women and children are sometimes seemingly ordinary people known to the family and community. One such perpetrator is Bulelani Mabhayi (figure 2) of Tholeni village, about 30km from Butterworth in the Eastern Cape. Such people are never satisfied and return to abuse, rape and murder again and again. Zwanga Mukhuthu (2014: 12) has reported that Mabhayi conducted a relentless five-year reign of terror before being arrested and convicted in 2013 on 20 counts of murder of women and children, half of whom had been raped by him.

The artworks *Stop it uncle, it is painful, Sold 4 sex*, and *Oxhel’eyakhe akabuzwa [Can’t be questioned]* (figure 3) carry on with the theme of *Sour home*, both in the sense that perpetrators...
of abuse are often known to the victims, and that it is sometimes the closest family members who perpetrate the worst abuses (Behere et al 2013).

![Stop it uncle, it is painful](image1)
![Sold 4 sex](image2)
![Oxhel'eyakhe akabuzwa](image3)

Figure 3

Stop it uncle, it is painful 2014, ceramic, 48x35cm
(photo: John Steele).

Sold 4 sex 2014, ceramic, 54x25cm
(photo: John Steele).

Oxhel'eyakhe akabuzwa [Can't be questioned] 2014, ceramic, 62x33cm
(photo: John Steele).

I created the work *Stop it uncle, it is painful* after a visit to the Masizakhe Children’s Home in Mdantsane. I noticed one little girl who was particularly chatty and active in the games we played. I found out that she was recovering after having been removed from her mother’s care because she had regularly been left alone at home with her uncle. He had systematically raped her over an extended period of time until, eventually, her school alerted social workers that she was continually crying and in pain. She had not told her mother because of being threatened by her uncle, so she ended up *ebeka ingca* [putting grass] to avoid talking about her pain and discomfort.

She did, however, eventually talk about what had been happening to the social workers. Charges were laid and that man is now serving a sentence of 25 years in jail. The mother of the little girl was deemed to have been indirectly abusive because she had left her daughter alone with the uncle for extended periods of time, and so the child was placed in the care of the Masizakhe Children’s Home.

Some parents are more directly abusive, especially in cases of incest (Bass & Davis 1998; Kobue 2014: 7). Other parents have been known to sell their female children for sex, as in the case of a 13-year-old girl being sold for a mere R250.00 (Sibiya 2013: 4).

On the other hand, in the work *Oxhel’eyakhe akabuzwa [Can’t be questioned]*, I am commenting on some stepfathers and other men in families who contribute financially to the welfare of children who are not biologically theirs. Such abusers provide food and clothing, and expect sex in return.
I had experience of this when I fancied a girl in my church, but her stepfather, who was a deacon in the church, would never let us be alone together. I later found out that he gave her money and gifts so he could keep her available for his own devious pleasures. He was applying a common way of thinking known as *andinokondla amasele ndiwondele inyoka* [will not feed frogs for snakes], meaning that he was the one to have sex with her because he fed her. His horrible abusiveness was eventually discovered, and he was forced to leave.

**Sugar daddies, rapists, murderers and entrenched patriarchy**

The works *Am I your niece or your marhosha? [Prostitute?]*, *Nothing for mahala [Nothing for nothing]*, *Kugug’othandayo [Looking for fresh flesh]* (figure 4) continue with the theme that many men are predatory, and consider it their right to buy sex and create dependency through gifts and threats. Sometimes women respond to those *Looking for fresh flesh* by asking for more, but *Nothing for mahala [Nothing for nothing]* stresses that there are many undesirable side effects to such relationships with sugar daddies, including unwanted pregnancy.

Overt violence is at the core of child and women abuse, and results in circumstances such as *Sex slave*, *Living with pain* and *Pool of blood* (figure 5). Intimate partner abuse is particularly prevalent for women (Freeman 2013), and experiences of violence usually hamper and haunt abused people for the rest of their lives.

In *Pool of blood*, I am referring to extremes of viciousness that include rape, disembowelment and hacking apart of women and children into sections, some of which, like the head, might be stuffed into a plastic bag and then sold to create powerful *muti* [medicine for evil purpose]. Such practices are quite widespread. Comaroff and Comaroff (199: 281), for example, relate that the South African “press has been full of such cases … [and some perpetrators are] accused of disemboweling their victims, often babies and youths, and either retailing organs in the market in viscera or using them for their own nefarious ends”. Burke (2000: 204), with reference to the ritual murder of a teenage girl named Segametsi Mogomotsi in Botswana, has confirmed that such practices are widespread in southern Africa.

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**Figure 4**

*Am I your niece or your marhosha? [Prostitute?]*
2014, ceramic and mixed media, 40x33cm
(photo: John Steele).

*Nothing for mahala [Nothing for nothing]*
2014, ceramic, 113x53cm
(photo: John Steele).

*Kugug’othandayo [Looking for fresh flesh]*
2014, ceramic, 59x27cm
(photo: John Steele).
Abuse of children and women can take place in both urban and rural settings, and may not necessarily always be obvious and overtly violent. Subtle social and verbal undermining of children and women by men can also be immensely damaging, as can ways some men have of conducting themselves as if they are superior to others. Self-assured patriarchy is so entrenched in Southern Africa that many men claim it as automatic that women and children must see to their needs, listen to them and obey every instruction without questioning. I am proudly Xhosa-speaking and respect my heritage, but I also know that there are customary ways of thinking and performing rituals that favour men and can impact negatively on women.

Despite that, my grandmother has told me that in the days when she was young, she was happy because she was raised in the time when people respected each other. In those days there was a sense of group solidarity, wherein people took care of each other, recognising umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, “that a person is a person through others” (Battle 1996, Mabovula 2011, Mbigi 1997, Mbigi & Maree 1995, Mbiti 1970). For example, in those times, under ideal circumstances, there were poor and rich families, but the difference with today was that the rich ones were not boasting about what they had, but rather helped those who were poor. My grandmother told me that her family was poor, so they were excited when a girl child was born because now there was hope that the family would get some cows as lobola [bride price paid by the groom, intended to bring families together] (Anderson 2007, Mubangizi 2013). The extended family made sure the girl child was safe and raised properly so that a substantial lobola price could be achieved. In those days, parents were quick to notice if a child was raised by good people. So, in my grandmother’s household, even though daughters were raised with care, there was still an undercurrent of commodification, and a commercial value was attached to her, which is what I am portraying in the artwork Ilobola, our milk jar (figure 6).

Unlike imbeleko rituals [introducing a newborn child, irrespective of gender, to the ancestors], there are a variety of cultural practices among Xhosa-speaking individuals that encourage events that are not always beneficial to women, although in the big picture, if such
women are safe and happy, then that must also be acknowledged. Practices prejudicial against women include that “descent is usually traced through the male line” and males practice “domestic authority” (Dase et al 2007: 66; Kuckertz 1990, and Peires 2003).

Furthermore, women in the Eastern Cape are sometimes “still subjected to sexist and abusive … customary practices such as ukuthwalwa [marriage without consent] and ungeno [widow being forced to have sex with her brother-in-law … so she can have children from the same clan] (Dase et al 2007: 67, George 2004). Likewise, hlonipha [taboos imposed on a new bride] behavior aims, among other purposes, to indicate subjection to patrilineal will (Kuckertz 1990, Dase et al 2007). Despite factors such as these, like fellow Xhosa-speakers Gcinikhaya Dase and Siziwe Sotewu (et al 2007: 70), “I have an overall positive regard for my cultural background, which also provides security and safety nets in the form of extended family obligations to help each other in difficult times”.

Something that bothers me deeply, however, is that I think that many things are going wrong with the practice of initiating boys into manhood (Gasa 2013: 11), and that one of the biggest problems is that some abakhwetha [initiates], are instructed to have sex after becoming ikrwala (new men) with women other than their girlfriends. At the time I was initiated in 2002, at the age of 19 years, I was told that because I was now a man, I could sleep with every woman out there, except my mother. I was advised to first have sex with an older woman who I was not in love with to test my posh new penis with her, and also to transfer ifutha [white clay] to someone who I did not love in order to cleanse myself. I was also told that after I had engaged in intercourse with an older woman, I could go to my age group, or younger, so that those girls could iron my new posh penis with their small vaginas. Those steps of cleansing and ironing are some of the causes of the high rape rate in our communities, aggravated by a so-called “virgin cleansing” myth that is circulating that encourages men suffering from HIV/Aids to rape virgins in order to cure this ailment (Leclere-Madlala 2002, Meel 2003, Richter 2003).
Fighting back

I created the works *You fetch water you die*, *Misunderstood* and *My beauty is my pain* (figure 7) to refer to the issue that whenever women are alone, they become vulnerable, even when undertaking ordinary daily tasks. Actually, they are in danger of abuse by predatory males wherever they might be, no matter what they are doing. This vulnerability is a hugely debilitating constraint on freedom of movement for women, often resulting in death, such as happened to Anene Booysen (Morei 2014), who was stabbed and disemboweled after leaving a tavern, as well as to Reeva Steenkamp (Basson 2013, Kingwell 2013), who was shot by her boyfriend. These murders of women took place against a backdrop of up to “four women [being] killed by their [male] partners every day in South Africa” (Freeman 2013), a country in which more than a thousand murders of women through male violence occur per annum (Smith 2014).

Sometimes communities fight back, as demonstrated in an event of mob justice depicted in *Die like a dog* (figure 8a), wherein a male perpetrator of abuse was summarily beaten to death by the people who came to rescue a woman who was being raped (Sizani 2013). On other occasions, *Fighting back* (figures 8b and 8c) is a viable option, but the costs are high, as can be seen in this over life-size sculpture that reveals all sorts of mental and physical constrains and disfigurements. Abuse results in nightmarishly harmful mental and physical outcomes, but victims who are determined to remain standing begin to unravel some of the damage done, thereby resisting total emotional withdrawal and/or physical death.

It is out of such feelings that the work *Ultimate survivor: broken then reconstructed* (figure 9) was created. I had become very sad because of thinking all the time about ways in which some men abuse women and children, and the difficulties such behavior caused. Then I decided to create a work dedicated to all those who have survived abuse, and are somehow managing to slowly heal the hurt and put their lives back together despite such traumatic experiences. This decision was inspired by a newspaper article (Nkonkobe 2014: 3) that covered a talk given by rape survivor Alison Botha to the East London Businesswomen’s Association breakfast on the 9th of March 2014. Background to Alison Botha becoming a motivational speaker is that “in 1994, Alison endured a horrific experience: she was raped, disemboweled, had her throat slit
and was left to die on a rubbish dump outside Port Elizabeth by Theuns Kruger and Frans du Toit” (www.alison.co.zahttp, accessed on 27th December 2014). Now she was here to talk in her capacity as an inspirational speaker. The following quotation from this presentation by Alison Botha caught at my heart:

We are all survivors. We each have a story to tell … Although we are sometimes made victims in our lives, we don’t need to remain victims. We can also overcome. During the rape, I remember thinking “Alison, don’t worry. It’s not you they are doing it to. It’s just your body”. While I was dragging myself to the road, I can admit 99% of me actually wanted to die. But God did not need me to die that night. He needed me to live (Nkonkobe 2014: 3).

In this work I tried to show that out of harshness, pain and disfigurement can come a rebuilding that may lead to life becoming worthwhile once again. It so happened that this artwork fell over and broke on Thursday 30th October 2014, on the day before it was due to be transported to the Anne Bryant Art Gallery for exhibition.

The following morning, I woke up early and decided to fix it rather than throw away the pieces because rebuilding is exactly what is needed when a person’s life has been broken apart by violence. I then also decided to search for Alison Botha on the internet and, upon finding her email address, wrote to her and told her what was happening. She replied almost immediately, and has been very encouraging.

Alison Botha stands firmly among those in South Africa who are inspirational survivors of incidents of any form of women and child abuse. Her email, below, also inspired me to change the title of this work from Survivor to Ultimate survivor: broken then reconstructed.

--- On Fri, 10/31/14, Alison <alison123@mweb.co.za> wrote:
> From: Alison <alison123@mweb.co.za>
> Subject: Reply from Alison
> To: “‘Dinilesizwe Komani’” <komani.dinilesizwe@yahoo.com>
> Date: Friday, October 31, 2014, 10:40 AM
> Hi Mr Komani.  What a story!
> Thank you for sharing it with me.  I am so honoured that I inspired the sculpture and now so sad that it fell and broke.  I can only imagine how devastated you were.  But I was crying when reading your
email of how you have decided to let her be the ultimate survivor and glue her together. Thank you for letting my story inspire you – your story has inspired me too and I will be sharing it with others. PLEASE send me photos – I would love to ‘meet’ her.

With warm regards www.alison.co.za http://www.facebook.com/AlisonABC

Figure 9
Ultimate survivor: broken then reconstructed 2014, ceramic and mixed media, 185x52cm.
Left: Dinilesizwe Komani and the original Survivor (photo: Sonwabiso Ngcai).
(photos: middle top – Nkosibonile Matshangana; middle below and right: John Steele).

Conclusion
There is no doubt that “in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, sexual violence has become a socially endorsed punitive project for maintaining [Afro and Eurocentric] patriarchal order” (Moffett 2006), as well as for acting out selfish obsessions. If social changes towards reducing incidents of women and child abuse are to occur, it is clear that men must take a more active role in speaking out against perpetrators, and live accordingly. How an actual improvement in circumstances for women and children is going to happen in South Africa is difficult to see, but I have a strong belief that, as individuals, men can actively practice Ubuntu, and find ways in which we can directly influence situations in our immediate environments for the better. In South Africa, we have a Constitution that champions human rights of all, but this can only translate into a better life for those who are downtrodden if ever more men become publicly involved, even to the extent of joining organisations such as Brothers for Life (http://www.brothersforlife.org/pledge-oppose-gender-based-violence.html, accessed on 28th December 2014). Also, I commit my life to acting upon principles such as those espoused by the then deputy president of South Africa, Kgalema Motlanthe, as part of the “Not in my Name/Brothers for Life” initiative (Fahey 2013: 12), including to live by the exhortation to “NOT to look away, NOT to be bystanders...
and NOT to be silent”. It is my hope that my sculptures will serve as rallying points for such activism, and will encourage other artists to create works that raise awareness about these issues and encourage abusive men to change their ways, for the good of all.

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Dinilesizwe Komani grew up in Mdantsane, near East London, Eastern Cape, South Africa, and has just completed his BTech: Fine Art at Walter Sisulu University under the supervision of John Steele. He is currently teaching at Khayalethu Special School, and is exploring possibilities of undertaking further study, either towards a teaching qualification or a Masters degree in Fine Art, or both eventually.

John Steele grew up in Gauteng, and first worked with clay as a studio potter in Rhodes Village in the Witteberge Mountains of the Eastern Cape, and then as a pottery manager in Mthatha, prior to taking up his present post as Senior Lecturer in the Fine Art Department at Walter Sisulu University in East London.
In memory of the Ndebele homestead: women as earthen builders and mural artists

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The Ndebele homestead has attained international status as an icon of artistic expression that is often linked to the equal grandeur of the culture’s beadwork, but both have a much less celebrated origin. The touristic image of the colourful Ndebele homestead that first emerged in the early 1950s did not include an awareness of the community’s history of dislocation, diaspora, labour tenancy and insecurity of land tenure, and it now only exists in the memories of elderly Ndebele women and men. Their memories include recollections of the histories of homesteads that they knew: earthen building, mural decoration, maintenance as well as the celebrations often held there as a part of female and male initiation rituals. The Msiza village north of Pretoria, for instance, rose to prominence in the late 1950s, only to be swallowed up by the prevailing pattern of western tourist consumption, but the narratives of the women responsible for designing building decorated houses were ignored over decades. Much the same was true of the narratives of rural Ndebele women from the Mpumalanga Highveld. Nevertheless, Ndebele women succeeded in securing particular identities that were forged around the homestead. A homestead would be built of earth and the walls decorated in fine detail that displayed the builder’s regional identity in particular. The homestead was a site of regular female initiation rituals, control space and place. Over time the Ndebele homestead has become a profound and significant artefact of memory.

Key words: memory, Ndebele, earthen building techniques, labour tenants, transfer of knowledge

The renowned mural art and beadwork of the Ndebele of South Africa that won its creators world-wide renown in the 1950s have largely disappeared and its legacy now remains mainly as a residue and icon of the media world of advertising and marketing, as well as the world of African artefacts and curios.

The artistic image and stereotype of Ndebele art originated during the mid-1950s in the village of Speelman Msiza at Klipgat (in Sochanguve north of Pretoria), which was located in the present-day Sinoville suburb of Pretoria and consisted of only a few homesteads; its
residents were subsequently forcibly removed. This village had a considerable impact on both the popular and scholarly writing on Ndebele ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’. Since then, the ‘Ndebele’ images and artifacts that have found their way into present-day advertising and marketing are alienated (‘disjunctive’) from the real world of their origin and history (Bakker & Van Vuuren 2006: 128-129).

Current manifestations of Ndebele mural art and beadwork are an appropriation of the tradition’s artistic and architectural expressions that involves a complete lack of the recognition of the intellectual property rights of the Ndebele women who originated and developed the tradition of design. ‘Ndebele’ or ‘Ndebele-ness’ now finds its most common expression in the advertising of products. Colourful images and patterns first used in the context of the Ndebele homestead are now ubiquitous on products such as mugs, glasses and clothing, or used in the marketing of a supposedly authentic South Africa by the tourism industry. Ndebele earthen builders and artists adapted to the economics of local and global tourism, but most of the Ndebele women who created this uniquely expressive mural art have been forgotten, and remain anonymous (Van Vuuren 2012: 345).

When Ndebele art and architecture rose to prominence in the late 1950s the general public was unaware that only a handful of Ndebele women were exposed to the tourist world and that the majority of Ndebele women lived their lives isolated from interaction with tourists. These women lived their lives as mothers in labour tenant families that had no security of tenure, no fixed term labour contracts and they were regularly faced with farm evictions. Even where they were allowed freehold, it was in the homeland of KwaNdebele where living conditions were harsh and they faced long hours daily of commuting between their residences and the urban labour market (McCaul 1987). It remains ironic that the artistic, colourful style of Ndebele decoration was that it was quite distant from the tough realities of rural life.

The early scholarly discourse on the Ndebele of South Africa followed two trajectories that explored two distinct fields of interest and originated two to three decades apart. The earliest ethnographic account on the Ndzundza-Ndebele, by HCM Fourie (a theologian), appeared in 1921 and was written in Dutch (see Kuper 1978: 108). The second ethnography, by the linguist ethnographer NJ van Warmelo, appeared in 1930 and was a study of the Manala Ndebele. Neither publication paid any attention to the material culture of the communities they studied. Van Warmelo’s publication includes a number of photographs — the earliest pictorial evidence of Ndebele beadwork on record. Similar images were published by the photographer, AM Duggan-Cronin in 1935 (compare Van Vuuren 2012: 333). Indistinct images of thatched roofs and a courtyard wall built of mud and stone are visible in the Van Warmelo photographs.

More than two decades later, in 1949, a University of Pretoria Professor AL Meiring, documented the homestead complex of Speelman Msiza, near Pretoria. One of the reasons behind Meiring’s project was the fact that the village was in the process of being relocated as part of a political agenda at the time (Surplus Peoples Project 1983). His commendable drawings and comments paved the way for future research on the architecture, art history and anthropology of the Ndebele, but also generated popular interest in so-called ethnic tourism in South Africa.

A remarkable range of popular literature in the tourism genre emerged between the 1950s and 1980s, including weekly and monthly magazines, tourism brochures and postcards (Van Vuuren 2012). The Ndebele of Msiza attained national and international fame as a result of their ‘tribal’ art and architecture and the extensive beaded attire of their women transformed them into a ‘tribe’ whose members had succeeded in preserving their tribal past (Bakker and Van Vuuren...
However, these early authors and academics failed to notice the traumatic effect of forced removal on the members of the Msiza. Even after their relocation in 1955 and the rise in popularity of the Msiza village as a tourist outlet, most authors seemed unaware of its role within the wider political engineering processes of the time (Bakker & Van Vuuren 2006: 124,126,128). How the Msiza family coped with their forced removal and how this event survived in the memories of the descendants remains to be recorded. One member of the family who was born in 1955 was named Fuduka or “Relocate”. The forced removal experienced by the Msizas was part of a long history. Thousands of Ndebele were dispossessed after 1883 and forced into labour indenture until 1888 (Delius 1989) were subsequently treated as landless rural labour tenants until the 1970s.

Media manipulations of the Ndebele style never connected the story of the Ndebele of Msiza with the fate of fellow community members elsewhere in the former Transvaal Highveld (now mainly Mpumalanga). The single striking difference between the skillful ‘Bantu’ architects’ artistic use of colour as represented by the Msiza at Klipgat, and earlier in Sinoville, and the approach of fellow Ndebele on farms was that the greater majority of the latter did not produce colourful beadwork or mural art at all at the time (Van Vuuren 1983: 165,173, Schneider 1986: 64).

The beadwork (glass beads) of the period 1930 to 1950s was mostly mono- or tricoloured, with white beads the dominating colour (see images in Van Warmelo 1930). Even the beadwork of the Msizas, before their relocation in 1955, was predominantly white (Meiring 1955: 33). Early museum collections, at such as that of the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History in Pretoria, include Ndebele aprons that confirm this trend (J.A. van Schalkwyk 2015: personal communication).

On the whole, the main designs and motifs of Ndebele beadwork and mural art maintained a remarkable continuity (Matthews 1971: 71, Levy 1989: 29). However, early designs in mural art were somewhat ‘simpler’, consisting of black triangles, razor blade motifs and large rectangular shapes on a white background (Meiring 1955: 30). These bi-coloured designs could still be seen in the remote Dlawulale region in Mpumalanga in the early 1980s. The mural art on white-owned farms in the rural districts of Middelburg, Delmas and Bronkhorstspruit consisted only of bi- or tri-coloured patterns (Van Vuuren 1983: 165).

These “plain” or “simple” images were part of a rural tradition of design, and in stark contrast to the elaborate multi-coloured designs that won the Ndebele such fame after the 1950s. Why these differences? Were they the result of different responses to different geographical or socio-political environments? Could it be that the Msizas found themselves having to survive in an urban environment and saw an opportunity to exploit their decorative tradition? Were the working conditions of other Ndebele labour tenants in the rural regions, a constraint that prevented them from paying attention to developments elsewhere?

This article argues that the famed “colourful Ndebele style” must be understood in a context that includes the group’s post-1883 settlement history, the role of women as homestead earthen builders and mural artists, and evidence that the differences in style and use of materials were a result of rational decisions made by Ndebele people in different situations. This article also sets out to explain the role of the aesthetic in the lives of Ndebele women, who decorated
their homesteads for use in ritual supporting their own empowerment in space while at the same time using the style as the ‘protection’ of their identities. It will also be indicated that Ndebele knowledge of earthen architecture and building has been transferred to subsequent generations, but whether this will be enough to ensure the preservation of the language group’s cultural heritage remains to be seen.

**Labour tenancy and its influence on the settlement pattern**

It is generally accepted that the Ndebele, an Nguni language group, migrated to the area previously known as the Highveld, but now straddling Gauteng and Mpumalanga, about four centuries ago. Starting around 1820, an historical event known as the Mfecane resulted in the annihilation or dislocation of thousands of indigenous people throughout Southern Africa. The Ndzundza-Ndebele, too, were caught in the wave of destruction that followed and nearly annihilated by Mzilikazi’s forces around 1822. Under Mabhoko they redesigned elements of their settlement architecture and built protected villages and fortifications in the impenetrable mountainous area in the Steenkampsberg (the mountains around Roossenekal, Mpumalanga). This enabled them to weather the attacks of the Swazi and the Boers on two separate occasions, and the Ndzundza-Ndebele rose to become a strong regional force (Delius 1989:17).

In 1883 their independence ended when they were forced to surrender to the Boers of the newly established Transvaal Republic (Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, ZAR) after a protracted war (Van Vuuren 1992: 118-123, Van Jaarsveld 1985: 237, Delius 1989: 234-5). The conquered Ndebele community was divided into small families and indentured on white-owned farms on the Highveld between 1883 and 1888. This diaspora had a significant long-term impact on their settlement patterns, architecture and sociocultural fabric, as well as their relationships with white people.

Serious constraints were imposed on the settlements of indentured labourers after 1883. The Ndzundza indenturees were scattered over most of the former Transvaal Highveld districts and also Pretoria and Rustenburg. It was decreed that no Ndzundza settlement or “kraal” (*umuzi* or “kraal”) would be permitted in the ‘heartland’ area (around Roossenekal) as defined by the ZAR. Families were forcibly separated, despite recommendations against this. Where settlement was allowed, no more than five homesteads per farm were permitted by the Squatters Act of 1883. However, the presence of four or more families per equal number of clustered Boer families helped to secure the survival of the three-generational Ndzundza homestead (Delius 1989: 234).

A range of legislative powers controlled the settlement, employment and mobility of black people in South Africa from the late 1800s (Van Vuuren 2011: 168). For decades, the Ndebele, who were first indentured between 1883 and 1888, remained marginalised and in servitude to white farmers. Their enforced role as indentured labourers meant that the Ndebele were unable to decide on their own places of settlement and residence, even far into the twentieth century. By and large, the farmer on whose land they dwelled determined the location of any new homestead, (*umuzi* or “kraal”). The farmer also determined the size of the homestead, which for his purposes was defined by the size of the family and the number of potential labourers it could offer. The farmer further decided on the family’s access to natural resources such as water and firewood, the number of livestock permitted, and their grazing and planting conditions (SM Mthombeni 1985: personal communication).

Ndebele labour tenants had regular disagreements with their landlords, often in the form of conflicts over livestock. White land owners frequently accused their black tenants of having ‘too
many head of cattle’ and of trespassing on their grazing land. (Indeed, many current land reform claim cases involve narratives of disagreements about grazing.) Disagreements of this kind often faced labour tenants with the choice between voluntary relocation or eviction. Notwithstanding the post-1883 restrictions on settlement size, it appears that some farm landlords either permitted, or lacked control over or knowledge of the existence of sizable clustered homesteads on their farms. Called abakhelwane (neighbours), these homesteads often consisted of three-generational homesteads under the control of a male head, known as the umnomuzi (head of the homestead). After 1883, the choice of a site for the homestead was mostly determined by the farmer landowner, as will be discussed later.

Mathako Mthombeni, once took me to his natal homestead on the slopes of the Tautseberg, near Groblersdal. His memory of the settlement was vivid and he could indicate the positions of his grandfather’s three wives’ houses, the position of the courtyard (isirhodlo), the remains of the cattle kraal, six graves of kin, the granary, the midden or ash heap, as well as the location of neighbours Kabini, Skosana and Sibiya Mahlangu (Van Vuuren 1983: 56). He could also ‘fill in’ the landscape around the village with narratives of his and the group’s experience there and showed me snuff boxes and a kettle on the grave of his grandfather, Saka, where the family phahla-ed (venerated the ancestors) before the male and female initiations. He could find his way around the linked overgrown settlements with ease and indicate landmarks, footpaths, fields and gardens. Mthombeni left the site after 1955, and his family was evicted shortly before 1962, but he continued to pay regular visits there in the company of his ukgari (father’s eldest sister). His recollections remind one of Cubitt’s (2007: 192-193, 196) remark that a landscape “develop[s] mnemonic connotations of an associative kind” over time - that is, memories that are stored in individual minds or the collective mind and preserved in oral story telling.

By contrast, the natal landscape of another Ndebele man, Maselwane Msiza, has been obliterated. During interviews in 2004, the only menemonic aids available were early photographs of his natal village, which had been located in area currently known as Sinoville. Other than two or three tall eucalyptus trees in the present suburb, even the ruins of the village had disappeared (Bakker & Van Vuuren 2006: 126).

Rural homesteads of this kind planted a variety of crops, including pumpkin, various types of spinach and tomatoes, as well as non-edibles such as gourds (indronyane, ikhapa) for use as containers. Ndebele men and women who grew up in the Stoffberg region and the Middelburg Highveld, and who have since lived in KwaNdebele, repeatedly expressed the desire to return to the fertile soils, good pastures and high rainfall of these regions. In hundreds of land claim forms that have been processed since 1994, memories of a prosperous past often manifests in a yearning to return to the farm life that the applicants once enjoyed as labour tenants. The prescribed Land Claim Form that the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights provides to prospective claimants consists of ten questions. Some questions investigate biographical detail, while others deal with issues related to alleged disposessions of rights in land. Question 6 is one such question. In response to Question 6 - “Please give reason for your claim” - most respondents express a desire to return to better soil for crops and good grazing conditions.

The climate in the former KwaNdebele homeland is harsh: many argue that the low rainfall, medium quality of soil, marginal grazing conditions and dry and hot weather are not conducive for growing fresh produce. Mthombeni described the soil at his grandfather’s homestead as ‘fat earth’ (ihlabathi inotileko) and Liesbet Sibiya of Matshirini in KwaNdebele complained that she could not grow the varieties of gourds - idronyane, ikhaphu or irhabha - that her community used as containers and scoops. These gourds and calabashes became a popular artefact in the
tourism industry when Ndebele women began attaching strips of multi-coloured beadwork to the lips of calabashes. They did the same with empty glass bottles.

Decades of insecurity with regard to land use and settlement (since 1883) left a significant imprint on the lives of Ndebele women and men. Many experienced relocations between farms or were forcibly relocated to the ‘homeland’ of KwaNdebele in the 1970s, yet despite this, they often retained memories of a better life at their former homesteads on the Highveld than in the KwaNdebele homeland, especially as regards the quality of the soil. The soil types on the Highveld offered them opportunities to create a particular Earth Building Technology (EBT), which, it could be argued, also offered opportunities to create the type of architecture and style of mural art style that made them famous.

Shaping and molding the earthen house

Ndebele earthen houses evolved through three typological stages. The first was the pre-colonial grass (beehive) dome; this was followed by a cone-on-cylinder (“rondavel”) type of dwelling, and then the modern square and rectangular shapes more typically seen in recent decades until today. The layout patterns changed considerably after 1883 following the so-called Mapoch War, particularly as a result of the introduction of large courtyard walls (iirhodlo) and square and rectangular house forms (called iirhaesi: derived from “house”) (Van Vuuren 1983: 44-45; Meiring 1955: 26-35).

The cattle kraal (isibaya), now four-cornered in shape, occupied a central position in what archaeologists term a “central cattle pattern” (CCP) (Huffman 2007: 25). This layout consisted of a cattle byre in the middle of the settlement, which was surrounded by the homes of wives and children, storage huts and similar facilities. The houses of the wives of the polygamous male head were usually arranged in order of rank and seniority (Van Vuuren 1983: 49-51). This pattern, although still in existence in some rural areas, has largely disappeared. The influence of western building technology on the Ndebele earthen house became evident during their decades of labour tenancy on white-owned farms. Aside from the square shape of the house windows, doors, nails and wire were regularly used, as well as corrugated roofing. These developments cannot, however, be precisely dated or divided into stages; new styles overlapped with earlier types as these were gradually phased out.

By the late 1970s, cone-on-cylinder type houses (rondavels) were the exception and could only be studied as remains or ruins. These structures were mostly found on rural farms where the former builders and residents of these structures resided as labour tenants. Fortunately, the memories of these women and men were still vivid before that time; they provided invaluable data on the EBT, the natural environment and the living conditions of the time (Van Vuuren 2011: 172-175). Among other things, it was possible to collect data on the measurements of structures (Van Vuuren 1983: 260) and their spatial relation to the built environment, that is, the cattle kraals, granaries, and fields’ access roads – data that became impossible to collect even by the late 1970s in the fast changing built environments of the homelands of KwaNdebele and Lebowa.

The EBT of the Ndebele displayed a variety that was especially evident in wall and floor construction. The term earth is applied as a generic category which includes various soil types such as loam, clay or sand. The type of earth in a specific area which will not only determine the nature of the earthen mixture but also the choice of wall construction technique which leaves
a choice among wicker-on-earth (wattle-on-daub), moulded cylinders, cob, rammed earth, stone and mud or mud bricks. In addition ant-heap soil and cow dung are added to mixtures to provide structural strength. Differences in EBT were also partly determined by geographical phenomena. Along the Steelpoort River basin in the Stoffberg region, as well as the Bloed River basin towards the Groblersdal bushveld, homesteads were built on slopes where stone was abundant (Van Vuuren 1983:107). The quality of the red soil and termite funnels also allowed for durable earthen mixtures. Hut poles were cut from indigenous species of tree and tamboukie grass (*iqunga*) and ordinary thatching grass were in abundance. On the flatter Highveld surfaces in the districts of Middelburg, Bethal, Bronkhorstspruit and Delmas, stone wall construction was the exception, as was the presence of indigenous wood.

While modernisation and urbanization have had an influence on house-building in the Ndebele community, the division of labour with regard to the activity has remained the same. Even today, most Ndebele commute on a daily basis between the former KwaNdebele homeland and urban Gauteng. On the rural Highveld, farmworkers have increasingly relocated to rural townships since the 1990s or have relocated back to the former homelands of KwaNdebele or Dlawulale (former Lebowa), even if some continue to still work on farms.

The division of ‘traditional’ labour among the Ndebele is similar to that of other communities in Southern Africa, where men prepare and clear the building site, source the house frame material, thatch the roof and fix trusses and corrugated sheets. The earthen work and its decorated finishing belong to the female domain. Earthen work includes all the flat and vertical surfaces of the inner and outer walls, as well as the floor of the house and the walls and floors of the courtyard (*isirhodlo*) (Van Vuuren 1983: 76-78).

However, neither the earthen work nor the mural art involved are regarded as specialist skills. In Islamic Western Africa, the application of earthen work belongs to guilds of graded male masons who eventually become skilled patrons of knowledge (Marchand 2008: 24). In southern Africa the transfer of knowledge of earthen work among the Ndebele is the responsibility of elderly women, who train their younger daughters in the processes involved. This training will commence when a young girl (*umdazana*) assists her mother in the preparation of the earthen building mixture, which involves adding the required quantities of soil types, water and cow dung during the mixing process. When a young girl’s hands, wrists and arms become stronger, she will be allowed to mix the earth, and only as a teenager will she be taught how to apply the mixtures (*ukusinda*). In the past, only initiated girls and married women were allowed to actively apply the mixture (*ukupara*) to the house frame.

The application of the earthen wall surface consists of four processes. Firstly, a mud and dung mixture is packed (*ukupara*) and pressed against the wicker or stone wall frame, leaving a surface that bears clear finger imprints. After this has been allowed to dry, the next phase is to smear on a mud mixture that covers the rough surface of the first phase; this second process is known as *ukurhaya*. The third phase entails smoothing the dried second surface using cow dung and sometimes ant heap soil (*isithubi*). A small, smooth surfaced stone is used and the process which is known as *ukutshidza*. The fourth stage may either involve adding dung patterns to the surface (*ukukguphula*) or painting (*ukugwala*) decorative patterns in the “Ndebele way” (*Isikhethu*) (Van Vuuren 1983: 95).

Earthen work was arduous. Nomgidi Namrube, aged 63, who was born on a farm near Woestalleen, Middelburg, remembers that the members of the family only had access to a perennial well about a hundred meters downhill from the homestead. Her parents stored drinking
water in 210-litre steel drums, which to be rolled up and downhill between the homestead and the well. The farm owner later installed a water tank closer to the umuzi. As a girl of about ten years of age, she and her sisters would fetch dung from the cattle kraal and trample the building mixture. Two other women, Norhulumende Namtsweni and her sister Maria, who had lived in the sloped landscape of Mahlungulu for most of their lives, at Tautesberg, near Groblersdal, found that they had to adapt to the harsher Bushveld climate in KwaNdebele when they moved there, and become accustomed to new building materials that involved different EBT processes (Van Vuuren 1983: 155-156). In the Mahlungulu region where they had previously lived, the house walls were built from wicker (amakgokgo) and earth (wattle and daub) and were quicker to shape, as were earth and stone walls. The rammed earth technique (pise le terre), called umgigido or ibokisi from “box”, was the only option they had in KwaNdebele, due to a lack of good soil and less water. “Ukugigida kumsebenzi omkhulu sidiniwe,” she explained (“The box was hard work and we become tired”).

Another method of EBT of the Ndebele was the use of second-hand building material in cases where earth and wood were scarce. In 1978 I visited the ruins (amarhubhi) of a homestead on the farm Waterval near Stoffberg, Mpumalanga in the company of the owner, Sothakazi Mgwezane, who had to relocate to KwaNdebele in the early 1960s. This homestead was that of his parents, who were buried in the cattle kraal during the 1950s. He described how his mother, Nothembi, and his sisters would collect chunks of dry mud from a deserted house ruin close to theirs and used it to build a house for the boys of the group (ilawu). These recycled mud pieces had obvious advantages, since they could also be broken into suitable ‘bricks’ (Van Vuuren 1983:107). Roof trusses (makapa) and some poles (iensikana) from the earthen walls were recycled for decades in some building sites (Van Vuuren 1983: 155-156).

In the Tautesberg, the Mthombenis would re-use roof trusses form their homestead for their new establishment in KwaNdebele. Norhulemende explained that she took along some traditional thatching rope (isifunzi), which is plaited by women, when she relocated. She also brought from her birthplace some of the earthen colourants that had been used in mural art there, because she was aware that none of these products would be available in KwaNdebele (Van Vuuren 1983: 162-163). For her, the most challenging element in the relocation was adapting to the different soil types in her new environment. A white pigment (ipembe) that was dug from the hilly slopes of her birth place was nowhere not be found in KwaNdebele, nor was the reddish clay (inobovu) that she would harvest from deposits on the banks of the Bloed River (known as Irhunu).

Earthen houses were often built using a minimum of plant material in wall construction, complimented by techniques such as stacked earth (or cob), rammed earth, or the use of earthen bricks or cylinders moulds. Sara Nduli, explained that she and her daughters would use milk cans whose bottoms had rusted away as moulds to form mud bricks. The mud mixture would be added from the top and slightly compacted; after the mixture had been allowed to dry, the milk can would be lifted off, leaving a cylinder-shaped brick. As she explained the process, the entire wall of the house would be built from these cylinders because there was not sufficient wood for hut poles. A circle would be marked out and the mud cylinders placed on it, and stacked in layers before being shaped into walls in the regular way (Van Vuuren 1983: 107,109). The rammed earth technique was apparently the only viable option for wall construction in arid regions such as the former KwaNdebele bushveld and along the Oliphant’s River basin. In many areas on the Highveld, exotic species such as wattle and poplar were extensively used in wall and roof construction after the mid-1900s. Mud-and-wicker (wattle-and-daub) walls were a common
feature, and the entire hut frame would be constructed using poplar poles (*iinsikana*) and to a lesser extent wattle (Van Vuuren 1983: 78-83, 144).

Modelling and sculpting with earthen mixtures were quite common. The only pictorial examples available originated from the Msiza village either at Sinoville or at Klipgat. In 1979 I interviewed an elderly woman, Anna Kabini of Mapotla in KwaNdebele, who had decorated some of the cone-on-cylinder houses at the Ndebele museum at Botshabelo, Middelburg; she had built a stepped arch as part of the main entrance of the courtyard. She explained that a number of houses on farms in the former Eburhole regions between Middelburg and Loskop Dam featured elaborate arches. It is possible that the arch-architecture originated in this region and diffused to KwaMsiza, where it caught the attention of the media. Relief work in mud appeared mostly around the door entrances of houses, as well as on either side of the bench (*umsamo*) inside the house and in the corridors (*imikgothana*) of the courtyard.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**


Earthen modelling was also used to shape human figures in the form of busts or full-length stylised figures, which were integrated in the courtyard wall. By the late 1970s there were only two such examples left in the homeland of KwaNdebele (Van Vuuren 1983: 167-169). The women explained that earthen modelling became less feasible over time as women in KwaNdebele became increasingly tied to labour in the Gauteng cities, necessitating long commutes between their homestead and their work. They also said that the poor soil quality and a lack of water made earthen modelling cumbersome and laborious.
Decorating the earthen house

The socio-cultural context of mural decoration of the Ndebele homestead has almost never been appreciated by commercialised discussions of Ndebele mural art and beadwork, and this context was certainly not explained to visitors at the iconic village at Msizas.

The Ndebele mural art identity that women created over decades would be regularly revived during important ritual occasions. Women would repaint or revamp their homestead walls before female and male initiation; in the more distant past, this also applied to first fruits rituals and the period preceding weddings. During a funeral, no painting was allowed, as a mark of respect to the deceased (Weiss 1963: 36, Van Vuuren 1983: 159-160). As part of the preparation for the girls’ initiation ritual (*iqhude*), the mother and sisters of the initiate would take special care of the decoration of both flat and vertical surfaces. The regularly held *iqhude* became a significant occasion providing a context in which for women reiterated their social powers and identity within the homestead.

Ndebele mural art has been classified in terms of typology (Berman 1970: 207), chronology (Matthews 1970:83), and symmetry in design (Weiss 1963: 84). However, a simpler typology that has been proposed that resonates with history of migration, displacement and settlement of the Ndebele; this classification refers to the traditional motifs and designs using earthen pigments (often called *isikhethu*), as well as the designs and materials introduced by women on the basis of their contacts with the western world and the urban domain (Van Vuuren 1983: 165). According to this classification, the flat surface patterns in which cow dung (*ubulongwe*) was used were first reproduced on vertical surfaces (compare Berman 1970: 207). Motifs such as triangles and step figures were in reproduced in black monochrome, followed by large black images of razor blades (called *itjefana*) - the latter clearly a western influence. The first mural images at the KwaMsiza village in the mid-1950s featured some of these black razor blades on a white background (Meiring 1955: 30).

By the mid-1980s some of these monochrome patterns were still visible at the Dlawulale settlement on the plateau above the Steelpoort valley. There, Nojonasi Siluma, who was then 70 years of age but who has since passed away, occupied a homestead with blue razor blade motifs painted on a black background and framed on the top and bottom with white paint (*ipembe*).
According to her account, she would buy the blue powder pigment that she used for these designs from an Indian-owned store in Middelburg; the black consisted of soot and charcoal, adding mixtures of ash and cow dung. Nojonasi explained that when she visited the KwaNdebele homeland in the mid-1970s she was amazed to see that certain homestead settlements could be distinguished from each other by the differences in their mural designs and the paint materials used.

She and her friends had grown up and on the Nebo plateau at Dlawulale, some eighty kilometres from KwaNdebele and had spent most of their lives there. They recognised the mural art of the houses in Matjhirini (Klipplaatdrift) as a typical pattern from the Mahlungulu-Stoffberg region: it involved less variety in colour, the use of natural and earthen pigments, and prominent, high courtyard walls (*iinrhodlo*). Conversely, when they visited the Mapotla (Wolwekraal) settlement they recognised mural designs that were typical of the Highveld regions around Bronkhorstspruit and Witbank.

The shaping and sculpting of moistened earth of the house and courtyard was time consuming, and so was its decoration, and the process became increasingly costly. By that time, Ndebele women have become tied into the regional economy, often as sole providers and as caretakers of children in the wake of absent fathers. Women have increasingly less time at hand for the work of painting their homesteads, and mural art had become almost extinct.
Controlling space in the homestead: the work of ritual

Interlinking courtyards between houses are accessed via several corridors and thoroughfares, called *imikgothana*. To the lay observer, it is obvious that these corridors are intended to allow residents to move between the courtyards. In fact, the corridors are intended to organise the flow and maintenance of the *ukuhlonipha* rule in Ndebele society. According to the *hlonipha* principle, a bride honours and respects her father-in-law by observing a range of rules of avoidance. She may not face him, address him, or enter the same room or indeed any other restricted space where he is present, either sitting or standing. If her daily movements around the homestead bring her into close proximity to him, she must utilise the courtyard corridors to avoid him, even if it involves walking through a neighbouring courtyard to her destination (Van Vuuren 1983: 64).

Hunter (1979: 36-40) describes similar *hlonipha* restrictions in the Pondo community and provides a homestead diagram that explains the movements that ensure avoidance. *Hlonipha* avoidance practice can be understood as a performance that makes use of a repertoire of possibilities and exclusions. The tangible features of the built environment, such as courtyard walls and corridors, are intended to make sense of an intangible domain, and they are valued for their regulatory capacity. During the 1980s Ndebele men blamed the decline in *hlonipha* respect on a lack of “proper” homestead design — in other words, on designs that did not include corridors that allowed for a ‘flow’ of movement according to *hlonipha* principles. This perception is reminiscent of Moore’s (1996: 162) view as regards domestic spaces in Marakwet society in Kenya, which she argues reflect an ‘objectification of the male world view’. Today, Ndebele homesteads in rural areas are still built with corridor walls, but the old rationale for building them and the knowledge on which it was based have lost currency among younger people.

Female initiation ritual in Ndebele society transforms the social rank, status and control of space and resources of women. During the girls’ initiation ritual (*iqhude*), for instance, women transform everyday male space in and around the house, and in the process marginalise men by controlling and limiting their access to the homestead. During the female initiation, male space becomes female space that is dominated by the female relatives and age-mates of the initiate. The ritual is a temporary event held over weekends, but it empowers women to reverse male, patriarchal dominance in the settlement space (Van Vuuren 2012: 341-42). Women occupy central positions in the frontal courtyard (*isirhodlo*), the interior of the house and the public area between the front of the homestead and the cattle enclosure (Van Vuuren 2012: 340). Women outnumber men and men are excluded to outer areas around the core homestead. Men may be invited into the homestead during ritual occasions and announcements, but even the girl’s father is ‘told where to sit’.

This reversal of male space during the girls’ initiation ritual becomes a victory in what Lincoln has termed (1969: 93) “the battle of the sexes’. The interaction between men and women is mediated in space, both territorially ("you may enter here but not there") and conceptually ("only women here"). Ndebele women knit and weave this “invisible fabric of space”, as Jiminez (2003: 150) puts it, under their own terms and conditions. This is similar to Moore’s (1986) depiction of Marakwet women in Kenya as being ‘invisible’, yet powerful mediators of status and space.

Sadly, the intricately decorated Ndebele homestead is now little more than a memory. Few if any examples of this style of architecture and design are still standing, but concepts of ritual
space and ritual time remain as the only places and occasions when women are able to affirm their female identity and take pride in themselves through the wearing and display of colourful beaded attire.

**Transfer of knowledge**

In 1979, a master thatcher of the royal village of Mabhoko, John Thubana Mnguni was assigned to help build the Ndebele museum in Middelburg. He worked alongside elderly men on a demanding reconstruction project that involved following oral instructions on the building of the Ndebele grass dome house. Mnguni excelled at this, figured out difficult and complex processes of tying, weaving and knotting, and making his own drawings. Later he duplicated his newly acquired skills on a number of museum sites. He then transferred the skills he had acquired to his son, Godfrey, who assembled a team that presently builds replicas of all the types of Ndebele houses that have existed since pre-colonial times. Recently, at the KoMjekejeke heritage site of the Manala-Ndebele (compare Van Warmelo 1930) he and his team of mostly women earthen builders built seven structures, making use of the range of the Ndebele knowledge of earthen walling techniques. With his father John, he and a team of young men have also built two replicas of the grass dome house (*umthlathlana*).
Esther NN Mahlangu was employed by the Ndebele Museum at Botshabelo near Middelburg as a mural artist in 1980. In 1982 the French Embassy in Pretoria decided to commission an Ndebele mural artist to visit France and paint a mural at the Pompidou Centre. She was accompanied by her son, and the venture was the beginning of an international career. She has had commissions in France, Japan and the Netherlands, as well as many local ones, including one for the Johannesburg Civic centre and a BMW automobile painted in Ndebele colours that quickly became iconic. She also diversified her talent, applying her decorative ideas and techniques to a range of other media that include canvas, ostrich egg shells and motor car bonnets, as well as working as a live performer. During her performances, Esther Mahlangu chose to wear full ritual attire. She would even travel wearing the Ndebele blanket (umbhalo) and beaded aprons. Part of her son’s role was to manage his mother’s clothing, dress her for performances and take care of her painting materials and instruments. Wearing Ndebele clothing affirmed her Ndebele identity, she told me; it emphasised her isikehthu, or tradition (E. Mahlangu 1985: personal communication).

What Esther Mahlangu achieved many other Ndebele painters could probably also achieve. At home in KwaNdebele, she has established her own art school for local girls and boys, as well as the occasional foreigner. She also entertains them with local food and beverages. Her modest art gallery is stocked with bead work, mural art canvasses and other Ndebele artworks produced by her neighbours and other locals. Her studio is well signposted next to the tarred road and reads: “Esther es aqui”.

Figure 7
A student at Esther Mahlangu’s art school learning how to replicate mural art on canvas (photograph: the author, 1996).

Ndebele beaded aprons have been collected, curated and preserved by museums and art galleries for decades, but no effort has been made to preserve outstanding examples of Ndebele architecture and mural art. Its survival clearly lies in its replication. An ongoing transfer of indigenous knowledge to younger generations would be necessary for this to occur. An earthen architecture and mural art like that of the rural Ndebele will only survive if strong sentiments regarding its use and significance emerge and are developed by builders and artists. One model of this is the strategy used by architect/artists such as the Thubanas and Mrs Esther Mahlangu. Most other Ndebele agree that this is a commendable strategy but that they neither have the time nor the means to continue the tradition.
**Conclusion**

Where it is manifest in the world beyond that of the rural areas, the imagery of the artistic Ndebele has been appropriated by commercial interests, and thus fitted into what Urry (1990: 1) describes as the “tourist gaze”, which he argues “endlessly reproduces” the styles and locales thus appropriated (1990: 2-4). This certainly occurred in the case of the Msiza family, whose work and traditions were appropriated and manipulated during the post-colonial and apartheid eras. Their response — in particular, after their forced relocation – was to attempt to commercialise their own work. Some have criticised this as a form of “selling out”; Tilley, for instance would argue that the Msizas were caught up in what he described as a “prostitution of culture” in a complex relationship between dominant hosts and dominating guests (Tilley 1999: 254). Yet it is clear that they had no other option for survival, both on the personal level and as regards their styles of architecture and design. The Msizas figured out a way to avoid the fate of thousands of their fellow Ndebeles, who were caught up in the labour tenant system and found themselves with less and less time and resources to challenge the unequal forces of the tourism economy.

The Msiza women succeed in making themselves the focus of touristic engagement with their versions of Ndebele architecture and decoration, and their iconic beaded bodies and mural art paved a way for other Ndebele women to follow. Esther Mahlangu, for instance, has been able to exercise quite some power to negotiate the terms of her work, and thus determine the outcomes of and rewards for her skills. Yet the “real” tradition of Ndebele women is framed in the minds of the dominant tourism fraternity. Ndebele women might draw their own distinctions between authentic mural art and beadwork (or *isikhethu*) and Western styles (or *isiskuwa*) (Bakker and Van Vuuren 2006: 129) but they never distinguish or discriminate and apply the distinctions in the way that the Western world does – it fraternises obsessively with notions of authenticity.

Regionalism in terms of an earthen architecture and mural art was a result of the diaspora of the Ndebele after 1883. There is evidence that the creative ideas of Ndebele women on white rural farms, urban and peri-urban settlements and the homelands were inter-changeable to the extent that anyone within the cultural framework of the Ndebele world could be expected know the decorative styles that were typical of a particular area, even to the extent of knowing the materials used for earthen work in different regions. The Ndzundza-Ndebele never returned to their pre-colonial and early colonial territory around KoNomtjharhelo. After the abolition of labour tenancy in the late 1960s, their only option was to return to a territory and landscape that was alien to them. Almost a century of life under as labour tenancy remains as in vivid, living memory, but so do memories of the suitability of the soil and climate in the areas where they lived to their way of life.

The Ndebele women became the custodians of *isikhethu* or “tradition” through their narratives, which survive to the present. Female earthen builders, EBT specialists and mural artists adapted the form and style of their aesthetic and so presented a particular identity to outsiders. The Msiza women north of Pretoria were exposed to the exploitation of the tourism industry, but they also responded positively to the fact that it gave them access to the market economy. Their family members and friends on the farms of the rural Highveld and later the two homelands, KwaNdebele and Lebowa, did not have the same direct kind of exposure to or interaction with tourist, craft and curio markets, and they had to invent different survival strategies. Yet, communities of these former labour tenants produced earthen builders such as the Thubanas and artists such as Etsher Mahlangu, who rose to prominence and were followed by others from their settlements in KwaNdebele.
A remarkable feature of the mural art and beadwork prowess of Ndebele women has always been their ability to adapt to new demands in the craft and tourism industries. They change in their mural art designs from the mono-colours of the homestead walls on the Dlawulale plateau and the early Sinoville homesteads to the use of new colours and pigments in later work is a clear indication of how they carefully they have negotiated their use of their Ndebele identity, or isikhethu over many decades. The distinctive style of Ndebele rural art has found its way onto large public buildings locally and abroad, as well as automobiles and ostrich eggs. Today, their characteristic colourful beadwork can be seen to decorate not only ritual aprons but bottles, Western ties and modern arm bands, among other artefacts.

During the late 1800s the Ndebele homestead on the rural farms was a socio-economic safe haven from the arduous demands of indentured labour and later of labour tenancy. For Ndebele families, the homestead became the site of the quadrangular male initiation ritual (ingoma) for young boys, which fostered the male identity. But more importantly, the same homestead was the site of the formal introduction of young girls to womanhood with the iqhude ritual. Women repainted the homestead walls for such occasions, and wore illustrious beadwork, but they also took control of the space in and around the homestead.

It can be argued that the homestead acted as the primary site of the activation of female Ndebele identity, and that it survived numerous relocations since 1883. The colourful Ndebele homestead became a monument, a tablet and repository of the memories of these remarkable women. Sadly, however, apart from its commercial exploitation, that tradition is receding into the past, and may soon be forgotten as a living tradition.

Works cited


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Anima and identity in artist and subject: installation artist
Jan van der Merwe and painter Kevin Roberts

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Jung’s notion of the anima (the female principle in the male unconscious) can be used as an interpretative strategy for artworks. South African painter, Kevin Roberts, and installation artist, Jan van der Merwe, are both male artists and thus, in a Jungian approach, might be seen to project the anima into their work, in an attempt at self-healing through making this female aspect present and whole in their lives. Indeed, both artists reflect, and reflect on, the female figure in their work, but interestingly by creating different identities for these implied women. Van der Merwe, working with rusted metal, that most material of materials, and thus, using a solid materiality of substances in space, suggests the absence of the female, with implied associations with loss, death, and a mere spiritual presence at most. By contrast, Roberts, using the less ‘material’ matter of paint, which at most creates an illusion of materiality, constructs the actual presence of the female with painstaking detail, pattern and precision. So the two artists in a sense subvert the identity of their respective disciplines of painting and installation in order to suggest presence and absence. This paper aims to explore the identities of both artists, without attempting to psychoanalyse them; the female identity implied as a core concept underlying their work, and the differing identities of the two disciplines.

Key words: anima, Jungian, van der Merwe, Roberts, installation, identity

Anima en identiteit in kunstenaar en onderwerp: installasie kunstenaar Jan van der Merwe en die skilder Kevin Roberts

Jung se idee van die anima (die vroulike hooffiguur in die manlike onderbewuste) kan gebruik word as interpretsiestrategie vir kunswerke. Die Suid-Afrikaanse skilder, Kevin Roberts en die installasie-kunstenaar Jan van der Merwe, is beide manlike kunstenaars en daaroms kan hul kuns, vanuit ‘n Jungiaanse perspektief beskou word as ‘n projeksie van die anima, in ‘n poging tot selfgenesing, deur die vroulike aspek aanwesig en te herstel in hulle lewens. Daar kan inderdaad opgemerk word dat beide kunstenaars die vroulike vorm in hulle werk reflekteer en kontempleer, maar interessant genoeg deur verskillende identiteite vir hierdie geïmpliseerde vroue te skep. Van der Merwe suggereer die afwesigheid van die vrou, deur sy benutting van geroeste metaal, en dus die gebruik van soliede tasbaarheid van substansies in die ruimte, met geïmpliseerde assosiasies met verlies, dood en moontlik zelfs ‘n spirituele teenwoordigheid. In kontras hiermee, gebruik Roberts die minder “materiële” materiaal naamlik verf, wat hoogstens ‘n illusie van materialiteit skep, met nougesette detail, patroon en presisie, om die werklike teenwoordigheid van die vrou te konstrueer. Die twee kunstenaars ondermy dus as ‘t ware die identiteit van hulle onderskeie dissiplines naamlik skilder en installasie en suggereer daardeur teenwoordigheid en afwesigheid. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die identiteite van beide kunstenaars, (sonder om te poog om hulle te psigoanaliseer) seonderskeie vroulike identiteite as ‘n kernkonsep onderliggend aan hulle werk en die uiteenlopende identiteit van die twee dissiplines.

Sleutelwoorde: anima, Jungiaans, van der Merwe, Roberts, installasie, identiteit

Jung’s notion of the anima (the female principle in the male unconscious) can be used as an interpretative strategy for diverse, selected artworks. South African artists Kevin Roberts (1965-2009) and Jan van der Merwe (b 1958) are both male artists and thus, in a Jungian approach, might be seen to project the anima into their work, while the principal difference
that underlies their approaches to art making is obviously that Roberts is a painter and van der Merwe an installation artist, so their material, technical and visual identities clearly differ.

Jung viewed the individual as the carrier of culture (Bennet, 1983: xiii). This implies a collective purpose, not only for the individual but particularly for the artist. While the purpose of all art might be the construction and the “acquisition of content or meaning” (Wollheim, 1987:22) on the one hand, and a manifestation of the intention, expressive or conceptual, of the artist, painting and installation use almost opposing means to achieve these results. Paint, as Roberts uses it in thin layers, is a most immaterial material, barely a skin, that with colour, contour, pattern, painstaking detail and shading creates an illusion of materiality and realism, while installations, as in van der Merwe’s approach using actual objects covered in rusted tin, placed in clearly demarcated spaces that the viewer enters, are material and very real. Yet in Roberts’s painting the female figure seems present, while in van der Merwe’s installations an implied female is often absent. Roberts constructs an illusory presence while van der Merwe constructs a real absence.

This paper will attempt a psychoanalytic interpretation of selected diverse works, moving from the identity of the two artists themselves, to the identity of the female subjects of both works, and finally to the identities of two different categories of art making, painting and installation. We will focus on one of van der Merwe’s installations, Biegbak/Confessional, 2003, because it consists of so many part, although we will refer to others, and will relate the work to a number of paintings by Roberts.

Two artists

We have argued in previous articles that it is worthwhile starting such an interpretation with the personal context of the artist or artists, but will not here repeat the argument. Roberts and van der Merwe are male artists, in mid-career, who have achieved notable success. Both studied fine arts at the same institution, worked or continue to work at that institution, have lived in the same town. Roberts was a highly regarded South African painter of serene, dreamlike and very symbolic female figures, placed in recognisable local landscapes, often in the presence of water and surrounded by a variety of ordinary objects that contribute to the layering of symbolic “shades of meaning and inference” (Bennet 1983:24). Roberts, because of difficult family circumstances, was kept apart from his mother for a considerable time in his youth, which fact is perhaps implicated in his obsessive repetition of the female figure in his paintings. He recreates the whole and good female, the anima, as well as a kind of Arcadia, a perfect place for her.

Van der Merwe was raised in a working class but liberal Afrikaans home in Ladysmith, KwaZulu-Natal, by a number of loving women, including his mother and grandmother, and he also recalls a fond relationship with his father, who died after a long illness when the artist was a teenager. After this, the women became “the anchor in the family” (van der Merwe 2014). After working initially as a display and decor artist, which may be linked to his choice of installation as a medium, van der Merwe studied fine art and is a full-time academic as well as a practicing artist. He clearly experiences a sense of loss and nostalgia for family members and this leads him to a reconsideration of his personal, as well as a more universal human, history.

These two lives cannot necessarily be directly read into the works, although both artists use symbolic material and repeat images and themes, which can indicate archetypal projections. Wollheim (1987: 265) refers to artists’ “return[ing] so tenaciously” to a subject and relates
this to the person’s earliest wishes, desires and memories. Wollheim (1987: 266) furthermore compares the interpretation of symbols in artworks to dream interpretation in psychoanalysis, but does caution against this, as does Arnheim (1966: 219):

No genuine work of art can ever be limited to sex or love or food or religion or politics or any particular matter at all. It may, however, use any of these things as symbolic material... Far from hiding their referent, artistic symbols give tangible appearances to the ideas they represent. They revile and clarify the issues of human existence.

The above implies that artworks, like dreams, should be considered in series, in order to usefully interpret themes. In the work of both artists, there is an element of obsession, in repeating themes and ideas, as well as compulsion, in the great labour used to produce the work. One thinks of Jung’s archetype of the hero The acts of painting, of stitching (whether implied as in the “stitching” of brushmarks or the actual stitching of rusted tin) and covering every surface or object in densely packed pattern or rust, in crafting such densely patterned and detailed works, could be said to be ‘heroic’, in that it demands great dedication and commitment. The hero is a Jungian archetype, and refers to one whose task is “inescapable. It is renewed every day... Showing up, and dealing, with whatever must be faced in the chasms of fear and self-doubt, that is the hero task” (Hollis 2004: 62). Producing such works requires concentrated craftsmanship, time and an intense focus, in an almost meditative experience that might be compared to painting an icon. Making art is a personal mission, a transformative task when undertaken in this spirit. So for both artists, there might be said to be an element of self-healing, of remembering, honouring or creating whole and good objects. According to Arnheim (1966: 339), “[g]enuine artistic activity is neither a substitute nor an escape, but one of the most direct and courageous ways of dealing with the problems of life”.

Both artists, it could be argued, practice a kind of “worldmaking as art form” (DiGiovanna 2007). This category, usually applied to literature and the creation of fictional worlds, is an aesthetic approach in which “richness, connectedness and distinctness from the lived world” (DiGiovanna 2007:115) create other worlds, “made from nothing by use of symbols” (Goodman 1978:1). Such worlds are made from repetition, repleteness, uniformity, an inner logic and coherence. So the quiet, peaceful other world that Roberts makes through series of paintings, according to DiGiovanna the making of worlds usually requires series of works - and the physical, melancholy other world that van der Merwe makes through installations in which ordinary objects and spaces are transformed by rust, are worlds that one can enter either optically or physically, but certainly in both cases, imaginatively and poetically, because both are “dense worlds with an immersive quality” (DiGiovanna 2007:120) (figures 1 and 2).

These are not ‘new’ worlds as much as remade worlds, and they fit the psychoanalytic explanation that excessive repetition might be an attempt on the part of the artist to recreate the ‘good’ object or the ‘good’ mother, in line with Fuller’s notion that Michelangelo’s pietas and sculptures of the Virgin and child were a manifestation of his longing for his lost or absent mother (Fuller 1988). It might equally be a recreation or manifestation of the feminine side of the artist’s own psyche. All these works can be seen as psychological attempts by the artists to make themselves and their worlds whole. “[They are] the process of understanding the actual world” (DiGiovanna 2007: 116).

Both artists carefully construct their realities, with the complexity attendant upon any convincing worldmaking. Roberts’s carefully constructed and patterned illusory worlds can both be compared and contrasted with van der Merwe’s “extreme vision of reality” (Rosenthal 2003: 33).
The anima archetype and other symbols

Both artists use symbols, which always have both personal and collective meanings: “in the work of art, particulars and universals are simultaneously and immediately present” (Arnheim 1966: 22). These symbols create a constant interplay and various levels of meaning, some of
which may be intended by the artist while he may not be consciously aware of others, such as archetypes. These are collective, archaic, “primordial types”, or universal images (Bennet 1983: 58).

In Roberts’s paintings, the female figure is very present and may even seem about to enter our, the viewer’s, space, as in Penelope (figure 3), where the bulk, curves and patterns across the lower part of the body almost protrude from the surface. She is combing her hair, which is reminiscent of the many western paintings of women at their toilette and she fits the description by Bennet (1983: 124) of those series of pictures by certain artists of an unknown woman who cannot be identified with any actual woman, which in Jungian terms is clearly indicative that the image is an anima archetype. Roberts’s women are idealized, which, according to Wollheim (1987: 276) “promises to liberate the artist from the pains and uncertainties of toil – as well as from other attendant anxieties”, by creating something better and potentially more perfect. This occurs through identification of the artist with his material and subject, as well as through the reconstruction or making whole of what is missing, in this case arguably the mother figure or anima aspect of Roberts’s own personality. The idealized figure or memory is “coaxed back into humanity”. One could argue that Roberts, in his constant repetition of this idealized female figure, is both recreating his lost mother and creating a psychic sense of wholeness.
On the other hand, women are often implied but always absent in van der Merwe’s installations. *Biegbak/Confessional* (figure 4) is a kitchen, surely a female space, the so-called “heart of the home”. All the objects, kitchen sink, oven gloves, apron, washed and packed dishes, are associated with women and women’s traditional roles. In addition, the reduced colour, the worn and weathered surface of rust everywhere, suggest time and even history having passed, so one could interpret this work as recapturing the fond memory of beloved women who have been and gone from van der Merwe’s life. One senses, not idealization, but the absence of familiar, known and, in that sense, ‘ordinary’ women, women who were once real. Rust is a metaphor for the breaking down of stuff, the passing of, and fight against, time, the loss of lives through time. According to Jung (1969: 29), the “Mother” is a powerful archetype for a man, “sometimes she leaves him with a sentimental attachment that lasts throughout life”, which could be harmful or could “spur him on to the highest flights”. Jung (1969: 141) furthermore points to the feeling of great discomfort, of not being at home in the world, when the mother is missing. It is perhaps this “loss of the archetype” that communicates a feeling of such sadness and longing to the viewer who enters such an installation. It could also be seen as trying to re-establish the connection with the archetype, an act of self-healing.

One enters van der Merwe’s installation, which is entirely closed off from the outside world, through a curtain, as if entering a private or sacred space, even womb-like in its containment (figure 5). Entering the installation entails a moment of suspense, even apprehension, as in entering someone’s personal space, a momentary sense of entering the unknown or the hidden. Roberts uses a similar device in some paintings, of veiling or curtaining the female, so that she becomes more mysterious and elusive (figure 6). Van der Merwe’s installation resembles, in its solemnity and melancholy, a monument or memorial, and the lack of a person or figure allows that we are lured into the event itself, becoming a participant once inside, rather than a mere outsider or viewer.
Both Roberts and van der Merwe make use of many ordinary objects and substances in their works, both to construct a sense of the familiar and, also, symbolically and poetically. Roberts often paints a plastic chair or crate, a cup or bowl, a small pool of still water, patterns on clothing, while van der Merwe covers found bowls, chairs, furniture, an apron or a glove with patterns and layers of rusted metal (figure 7).
Figure 7
Details of paintings by Roberts and an installation by van der Merwe (photo: Kevin Roberts and Jan van der Merwe).

Jung (1983: 81) points out that many of these are female symbols, related to the anima archetype. He refers to “mother-symbols” that reflect fertility or fruitfulness, care or nurture, a container-like womb or womb-like container: still water, vessels, pots and bowls, circles, to which could be added the home, cupboard, kitchen, women’s clothing:

The qualities associated with [anima] are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility.

Roberts could thus be seen to lack the mother or anima, and he must create and idealize her, while van der Merwe misses her and the “love that means homecoming, shelter and the long silence from which everything begins and in which everything ends” (Jung 1983: 92). This imparts a particular spiritual and sacred quality to his installations. He refers to them as monuments or memorials, albeit they are of a contemporary and not a traditional kind.

Another important difference emerges in examining these works. Both artists play between interior and exterior, which according to Bachelard (1994: 212) is philosophically about being and non-being. Roberts often indicates an interior as a shelter by means of a trellis, grid, curtain or screen, which demarcates the space of the figures from the outside landscape. Thus the figures are related to and connected with, but protected from, nature, suggesting the relationship of anima and nature. The female may be in a patio or green house, a place of ease, pleasant coolness, soft light, a vision of Arcadia, a utopian but unattainable state. Van der Merwe’s absent women in Biegbak/Confessional are in the space of a house or home, symbol of the unconscious and also female: “the unconscious is housed”, according to Bachelard (1994: 10). This interior (in both the sense of space and psyche) is connected to the exterior by a projection above the sink of a window showing a backyard, in which it is raining (figure 8). So the room offers maternal protection against the elements, although at the same time the limited space of the yard is constrictive, suggesting perhaps the traditional and more limited role of women in the past and in history, while the rain adds to the melancholy mood.
Furthermore, van der Merwe’s window is a digital projection, and similarly, in the sink, a television screen shows, over and over again, two hands washing a bowl in water (see detail figure 9). The water is clean, becomes dirty in the process of washing, then the image loops back to become clean again, and so on. The act of washing dishes is a female one, and furthermore van der Merwe (2014) remembers that his grandmother would pray while washing dishes. So this is a small daily ritual of care and service, and also spiritual, in which case the cleansing can refer to renewal and rebirth, and the water in the contained space represents the anima. The hands, in fact, are the artist’s own, so he takes on the female role in his reminiscences of important women, paying homage to them and memorializing both them and his remembered home, that “crypt of the house that we were born in” (Bachelard 1994: 15). According to Bachelard (1994: 56), the house is always the past, always childhood, always the deep psyche and its childhood wishes, dreams and associations.

These images of van der Merwe make use of digital technology, new technology set into the more ancient time-changed material of rust. So reality plays off against the virtual, and the viewer experiences both actual, tactile objects and illusionary images: the real and the not-real. Roberts also uses this device, for example playing off a depiction of a ‘real’ bird against the depiction of bird patterns or a bird on a fabric screen (figure 9). Both artists could be said to explore many aspects of their chosen genres to suggest beauty and the mundane, memory, completeness and nostalgia, the female present and absent, reality and illusion, in their constructed worlds.

Figure 8
Roberts, 1999-2004, detail of Continuum-point and van der Merwe, 2003, detail of Biegbak / Confessional (photo: Kevin Roberts and Jan van der Merwe).

Figure 9
Left: Van der Merwe, Biegbak/Confessional, detail of television screen and digital image.
Right: Roberts, detail of The Lady and the Unicorn, oil on board (photo: Jan van der Merwe and Kevin Roberts).
Two artmaking and worldmaking genres

Painting can be seen as a more traditional art form than installation, but strong arguments are still made for its relevance. Wolfson (2014), in the article “How Painting can Help Save the World”, actually, says that while the purpose of all artmaking can be said to be to “imbue objects with presence”, painting does this in particular (and by implication, valuable) ways. Firstly, it takes a very simple raw material, “coloured mud”, and manages to “somehow charge this with presence” (Wolfson 2014: 5). Secondly, painting gives pleasure, “a special form of pleasure, or the much maligned property of the decorative” (Wollheim 1987: 45), which, no matter how much this may be eschewed by more avant-garde art, still has the power to engage and entrance the artist, who becomes both artist and crafts-person, and the viewer in “visual delight” (Wollheim 1987: 98). Wolfson (2014: 7) claims something specific and profound about painting:

[it has] twin aspects..., stability and instability... . Painting offers two contradictory experiences. On the one hand, a painting is a flat two-dimensional object…. On the other hand, a painting offers the possibility of a three-dimensional experience, the illusion of moving into space and discovering form. Stability and instability. Fact and imagination. Actual and fictive. ... Real and unreal. Real and more real. Painting, through the coexistence of two seemingly opposite experiences, interwoven into an actual unity, may provide the receptive [viewer] the possibility of moving from an experience of fragmentation into an experience of wholeness and integration, not only within oneself but with the world at large.

So a viewer looks both at and in the painting, and it is this dual looking, claims Wolfson, that gives it its metaphoric affect. Wollheim (1987:47) also refers to the twofoldness of seeing that one experiences when looking at paintings: simultaneously one sees both the surface and the images or representation that may appear to be on, in or under this surface.

While painting is an engagement of the artist with surface (and all that makes up a surface, such as colour, brush mark and pattern), installation art is an engagement with space, which is given meaning by some sort of intervention. This is not to suggest that painting does not engage with space. Wollheim (1987: 275) claims that with painting, there is the actual space in which one stands to view the work, and the virtual space that the painting represents, again a twofold experience of seeing. Furthermore, the painter can “[make] for himself increments of space within which he can impose his will” and thus construct or invent his own world. By contrast, installation implies that the viewer is no longer ‘outside’ the work looking in, as with painting, but the viewer must now engage with and participate in the space: “the work and the space having melded together into an approximation of a life experience, the sphere of art has effectively been compromised, even democratized” (Rosenthal 2003: 25). This is art working in the gap between art and life, as Rauschenberg famously claimed to do. Rosenthal (2003: 24-25) points out that, while installation is of recent date (about 1970) as a phenomenon of contemporary art, this date ignores much earlier spatial interventions in search of meaning, such as the caves of Lascaux, the Sistine Chapel and many other sacred and religious spaces.

However, a major difference between the space of painting and the space of installation is the engagement of and with the viewer. With an installation such as Biegbak/Confessional, the viewer enters the space, feeling a moment of anticipation as he/she steps through the screening curtain and is then engulfed in the space and its atmosphere, becoming a spect-actor, according to Lewis and van der Merwe (2013). Furthermore, he/she must stand and looks in certain ways, looking down into the sink, bending to see into the cupboard. This can be seen as inducing a moment of silence and respectfulness, in a humble pose that is intended to remind one of loss and remembrance, and that makes one participate in a kind of ritual.
Furthermore, whereas more traditional forms like painting and sculpture generally consist of one object, installations generally consists of many objects, or none (Rosenthal 2003: 25), and so singularity is replaced with multiplicity. Rosenthal (2003: 28) categorizes installations into filled-space or site-specific: the prototype of the former is Kurt Schwitters’s *Mertzbau*, a “walk-through environment... [that] enveloped the viewer” (Rosenthal, 2003:33). Van der Merwe’s are classifiable as filled-space installations, because there is “coherence between the parts... one to another”, and the site is not crucial. According to Rosenthal, filled-space installations tend to be more literary or psychological in intent, while site specific ones are perceptual or conceptual. This would further argue for a psychoanalytic reading of such work. These installations are “re-enacting or simulating far-off locations” (Rosenthal 2003: 43).

The space of this particular installation speaks of house or home. This is archetypally significant: as Bachelard (1994: 4-5) writes, “...our house is our corner of the world ...it is our first universe... experienced in reality... [and] by means of thought and dreams”. Furthermore, the house, as containment and shelter, is a doubly female space, it is Mother (Bachelard 1994: 45), a womb, a space of the anima. The house is also the unconscious,

So van der Merwe’s installations are both real and virtual, as well as an alternative world. Roberts creates an illusory world, in which still figures sit, while the surface patterns and marks bring the viewer to twofoldness. Van der Merwe engulfs the viewer in a world of real but totally altered objects. While both worlds are silent, the feeling of Roberts’s is calm, still and even pleasurable, while the over-riding feel of van der Merwe’s is sadness and melancholy. Both artists refer to, even borrow from, history: Roberts from historical western painting, such as Renaissance ones, while van der Merwe’s is a personal history and also the history of peoples, such as the Afrikaners, so both make works that “acquire a historical meaning or content” (Wollheim 1987:187).

Both engage with intricate surfaces. Roberts covers much of the painted surface with pattern, which creates a form of fretwork, which functions to “weld together large zones of the picture” (Wollheim 1987: 329). Van der Merwe covers every surface with rusted tin, carefully glued or stitched so that every object is transformed into something worn, weathered and, by association, aged, becoming the sad stuff of memory or history.

The psychological account of meaning which I favour ... roots meaning in some mental condition of the artist which, when it finds outlet in the activity of painting, will induce in the mind of the spectator a related, and appropriately related, mental condition (Wollheim, 1987: 357).

**Conclusion**

We have attempted to analyse some of the visual and symbolic aspects of a series of complex paintings and a very complex installation. I have only touched on some of these and must acknowledge that the process is hardly complete. However, it can be argued that both artists, in their compulsive repetition of themes and time-consuming and repetitive techniques, are seeking absorption, engagement and possible self-healing. Roberts recreates his anima as a clearly defined woman, constructed from the illusory “material” of oil paint, while van der Merwe uses the substantial material of rust over found objects to create the very absence of this figure, but in both cases the possibility of healing and wholeness can exist for the artists and for the viewer, too.
Roberts offers a world of beauty, calm and peace. Van der Merwe, with his ‘counter monuments’ calls for viewer participation, so that a moment of defamiliarization, or awakening, becomes possible, and the viewer engages both with the artist’s personal memories, with collective, historical memories and with archetypal memories. In this intensely felt looking and remembering might lie healing. According to Jung, “[p]ainting the picture or modelling in clay is like a voyage into the inner world of the psyche” (Bennet, 1983: 105).

Notes


2 Roberts himself often spoke about the time away from his mother and other family circumstances, although he never related these to an interpretation of his paintings.

3 This article focuses on installations by van der Merwe that can be seen to reflect the female principle, or anima, but it is noted that other works deal more with the male principle or animus, for example, those that refer to the image of the soldier, or victims of war in general, who could be male or female.

4 DiGiovanna (2007: 117), while focusing on literature like the books of J.R.R. Tolkein, states that visual artists, too, can be concerned with worldmaking. He mentions Hieronymous Bosch, the Pre-Raphaelites and Odilon Redon as examples of this.

5 Both artists refer to the intention to create ”the poetic”: for Roberts, this means both the lyrical, as well as that ambiguity that could create webs of associative meanings, feelings and atmosphere (Roberts 1999-2004; Stevens 1995: 154); for van der Merwe, this refers to a more spiritual, sacred quality in the work (van der Merwe 2014).

6 The cupboards and plastic containers can be related to drawers and other intimate places to contain or hide things. Bachelard (1994: 74) sees these as the equivalent of the secret inner or psychological life, “the... hiding-places in which human beings keep or hide their secrets”.

7 Jung (1983: 82-83) also points out that there is a negative or dark aspect to the anima archetype, which is not present in the works in question. These include the witch, the dragon or serpent, the grave, the sarcophagus, deep water, death, anything that is “secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate”. He refers to these dual aspects as “the loving and the terrible mother”. He states that this double image arises both in the collective unconscious and from the personal mother, but gives the former more weight as her influences “do not come from the mother herself, but rather from the archetype projected upon her, which gives her a mythological background and invest her with authority and numinosity”.

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