

What seems to be, is, to those to whom it seems to be, and
is productive of the most dreadful consequences to those to
whom it seems to be, even of torments, despair, eternal death.

William Blake

Jordan Sweke

THE ETERNAL DEATH AND SELECTED PREVIOUS WORKS

2014-2018

Do we serve the earth as it serves us?

MY LACES ARE MUDDY. These boots have lasted well. So many kilometres and no visible wear. Tying them I wonder why the dirt they carry looks so good on my carpet. I wonder why I feel sick in the city.

The cold front is more visible on this side of the mountain. The wind should be good. I might get rained on but I have my snow jacket and plastic bags for my equipment. Most people stay out of the forest when it's cold. All the better for me, no distractions.

Accelerate. The sooner I reach the forest the sooner I can leave this car behind and use my feet.

Curious how, along this road, the trees get more as the buildings get less. From walls to fences, overgrown with ivy. Trees leaning over the road with branches missing like amputated limbs. Finally, dirt beneath my tyres. Almost there.

I hope I have everything in my bag. It doesn't matter, let me just leave this car. I need to be up there before it starts raining.

A good pace from the start. Faster. Further away from the road. The cold air burns my nostrils but I'll get used to it. The muscles in my legs are tight. It's like a competition with myself. Maybe, if I push it, I can get up there faster than last time. Wild flowers among fields of tree stumps. Colour, death and re-birth beneath the needles. How meek, this planet of ours.

The wind gusts. Those blue-gum leaves are a long way up but I can hear them so clearly, rising and falling in arbitrary rhythm as the air flows over them. Each resonating its own tone within the harmony. Ultimate abstraction.

Blue sky and white clouds, wispy and light. Moving almost as if in fast forward.

An old telephone pole leans like a misplaced crucifix against the backdrop of the mountain. A broken wire swings in the wind like a noose.

The clouds are moving so quickly over the sun. I must set up my tripod and capture this for a time-lapse.

Perfect. A still frame from blue sky to thick grey cloud in one clip. Droplets on my lens now. Icy wind. Camera into the plastic before worrying about myself. Then into the underbrush for shelter. My food is wet but I'll eat it anyway. I'm hungry and it's only water after all.

The rain is getting heavier. I ask myself if I should head back for the car. But no, I'll stick it out. Scarf around my face and beanie over my head, hiding in the thickest bushes I can find. This actually works quite well. I can hear and see the rain all around me but it's not hitting me. Already soaked, but content for a moment.

The rain is dying down. Time to move on towards my favourite clearing. The same spot but how different it is each time. One week has passed since my last visit and this entire section of the forest has turned from empty branches to countless new-born leaves sprouting at every gap. All these leaves in a week. We think that balance happens at ease, independent of us. But effort exists there. Fragility and symbiosis. A part of ourselves that we are neglecting.

The stream is gushing from the rain. I feel as if I can reach out and touch the sounds with my mind. Textured and soothing. Immersive. Infinite depth.

My thoughts cascade as the water flows. Into me, over me and out of me. My eyes closed, muscles comfortably unmoving, hairs raised, mind calm, bathed in whiteness.

Where is this water going? Is it produced by the earth or is it finite?

What is this connection I feel? So many questions yet an ambient omniscience. I feel there is more to be seen with eyes closed. Landscapes of thought. Out of body, rising upward through the leaves and between branches to settle in the clouds. Lightness of being. Power. Everything is balanced and delicate. Are we not natural beings and this our home? Are we not custodians? Why do we squander this gift? And do so little to change our ways? Are we driven by greed to kill the us all around ourselves?

Do we serve the earth as it serves us?

The landscape around me is presence in excess. Life under every step and at every glance. My reflection is less important when fish swim beneath the ripples.

The clouds have cleared and the sky is blue again. The gentle wind loosens the last dead leaves toward the soil. Crickets everywhere, like an orchestra, yet each one actually searching for a mate in the atmosphere.

Every now and then a cloud blows over and the light changes.

The dimming and brightening reminds me of the way emotional reactions affect exterior scenes in dreams. The leaves are glistening. The air is clean and I feel clear.

I see a star.

What is to say that I am not an astral being? Gliding through space at will? That I am not one with others and the cosmos as I am with my thoughts? That we can't achieve anything we can imagine? That we shouldn't imagine a nothingness? I want to submerge and slip through. Engulf and be enveloped. Expanding across the universe, inhaling every atom.

I feel roots from my feet into the earth. Grounded in flight. Each part of the forest feels perfect, but something further always captures my attention. I long to share this experience but fear my enthusiasm won't be shared.

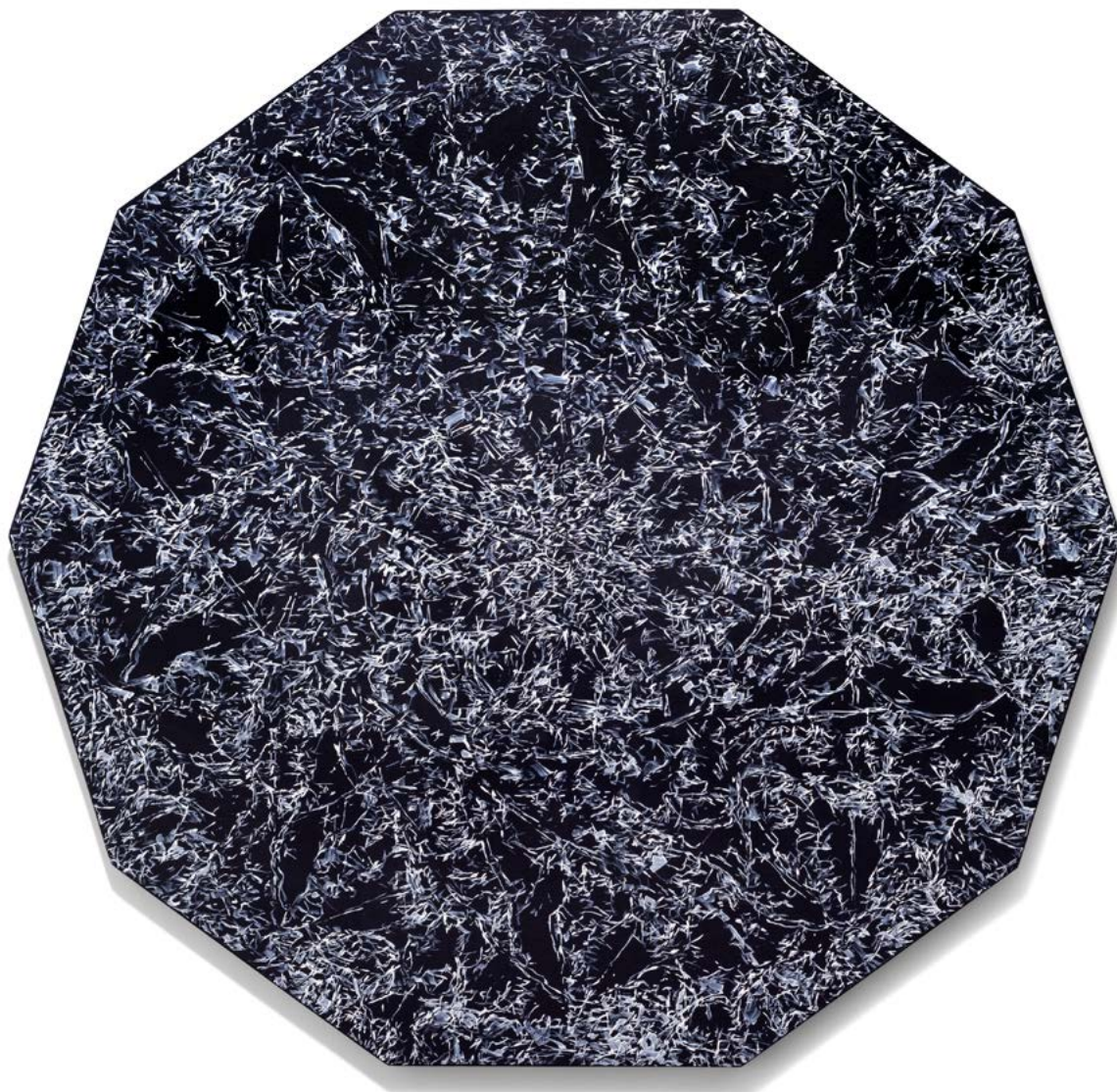
How has that rock fallen to balance so perfectly upon that other rock? A mystery and a more pleasing geometry than much of the architecture I have seen. These trees grow here. The stars are burning spheres of gas millions of light-years away. Inconceivable. We exist among countless galaxies in an expanding universe as we enclose upon the earth. A dichotomy.

A bird calls and I am driven to follow.

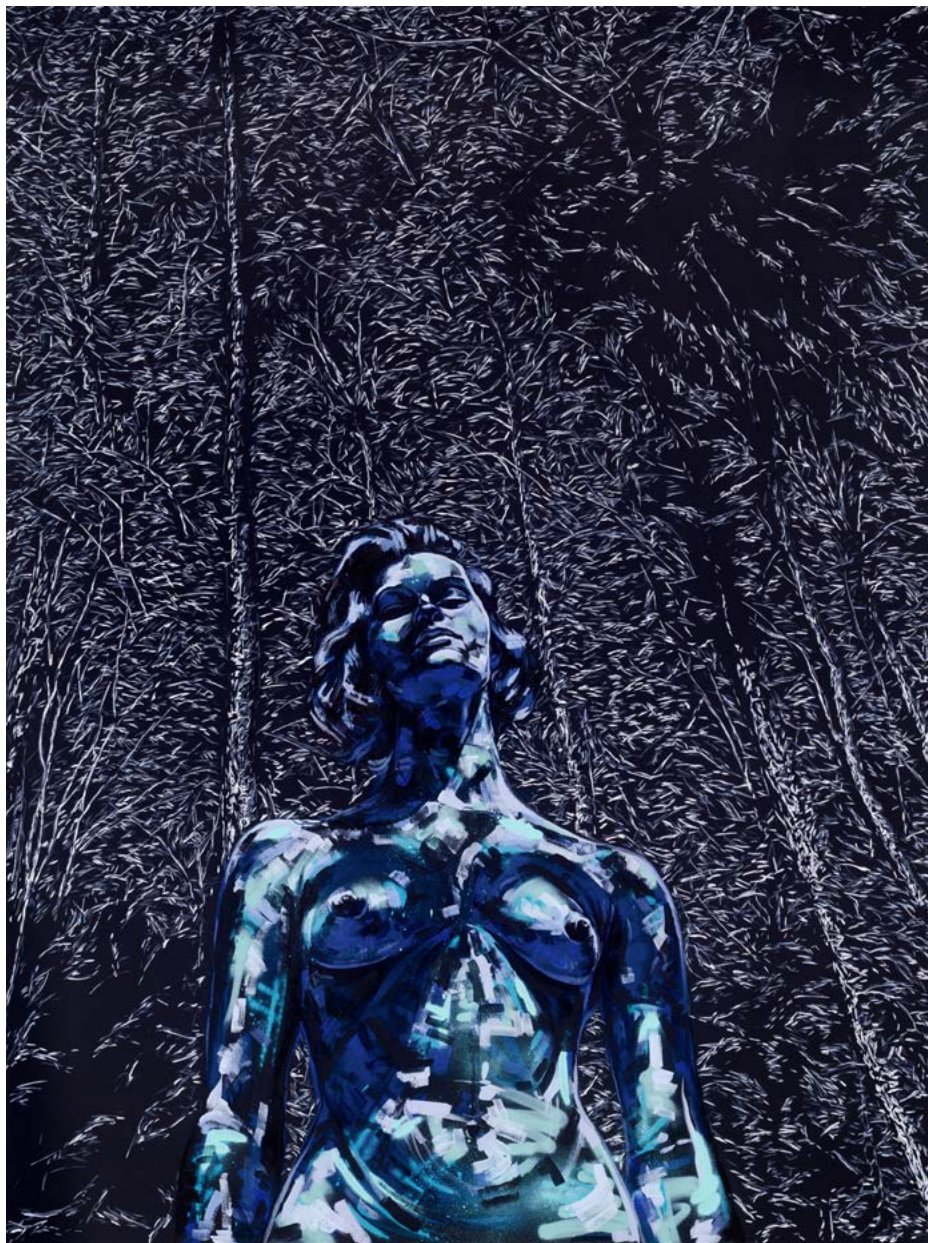
This rain came from nowhere. Heavier than before. Why am I running for shelter? Wet is good. Some change from the everyday. Some freedom from comfort. My feet are still and the field is wide and open around me. My arms raise on their own. It worked. What I came here to capture has worked on me. I am standing in the sideways rain, smiling.

Jordan Sweke

The Eternal Death



Fragmentary Void No. 15
2018. Oil on Decagonal Canvas. Diameter: 1800 mm.



Imagining Realities II

2018. In collaboration with Skubalisto. Oil, Acrylic and Spray paint on Canvas. 1720 x 1290 mm.



Cecilia IX
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1500 x 2300 mm.



Cecilia VIII
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1220 x 1530 mm.



Cecilia X
2018. Oil on Canvas. 2300 x 1500 mm.



Goudveld II
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1290 x 1720 mm.



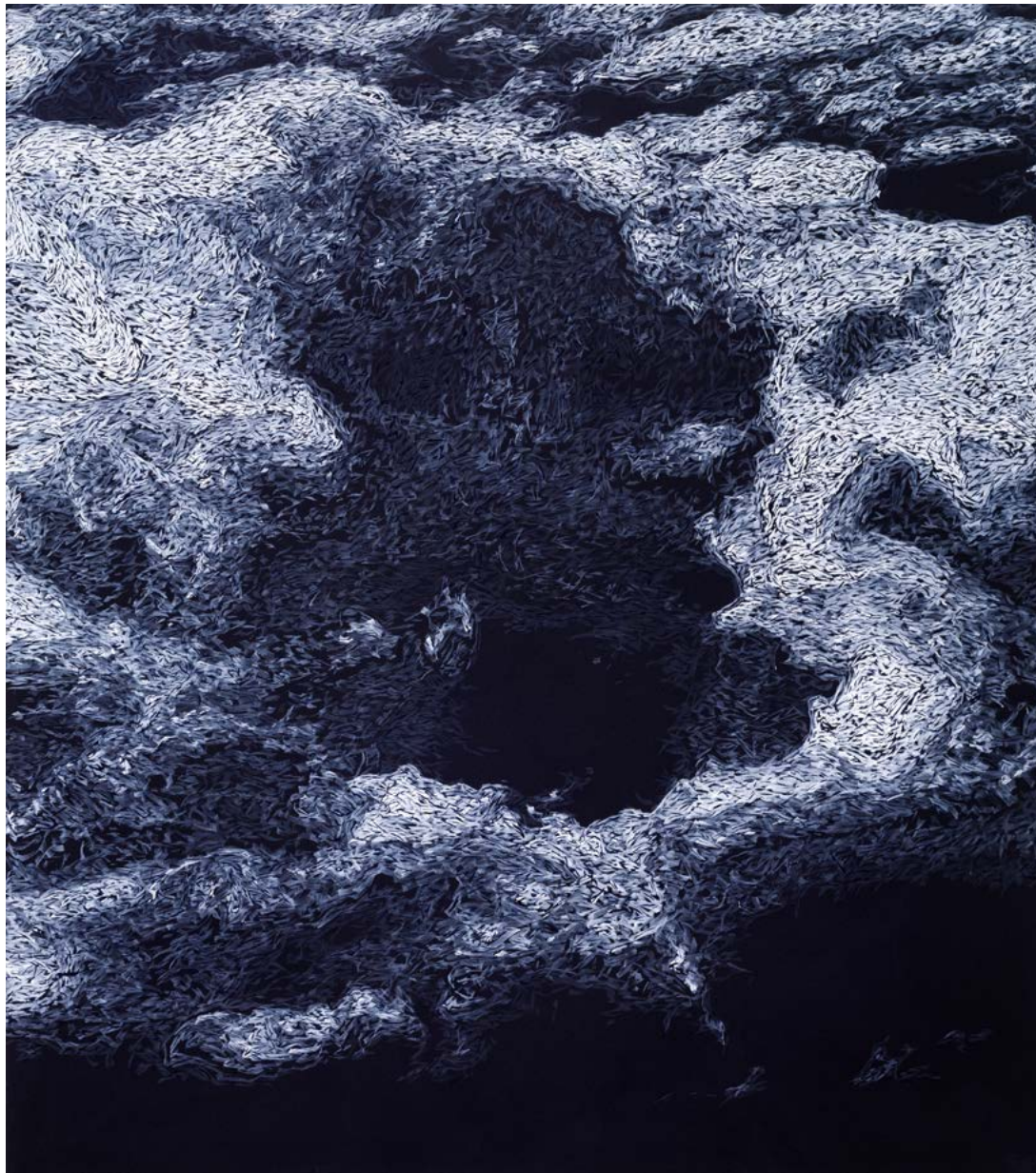
Invisible Things VII
2018. Oil on Circular Canvas. Diameter: 1750 mm.



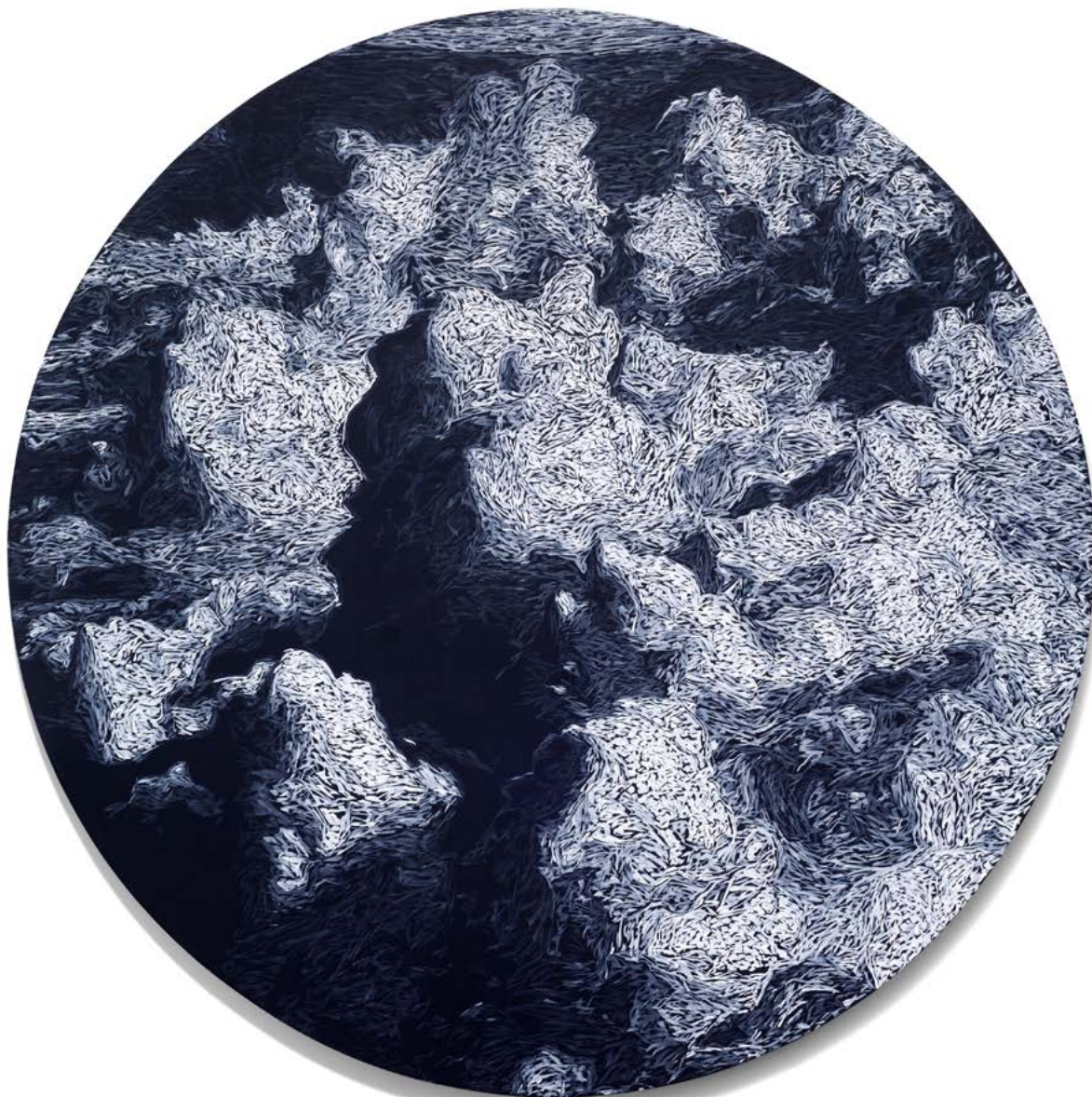
Invisible Things IX
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1500 x 1700 mm.



Invisible Things VIII
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1500 x 1700 mm.



Invisible Things VI
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1700 x 1500 mm.



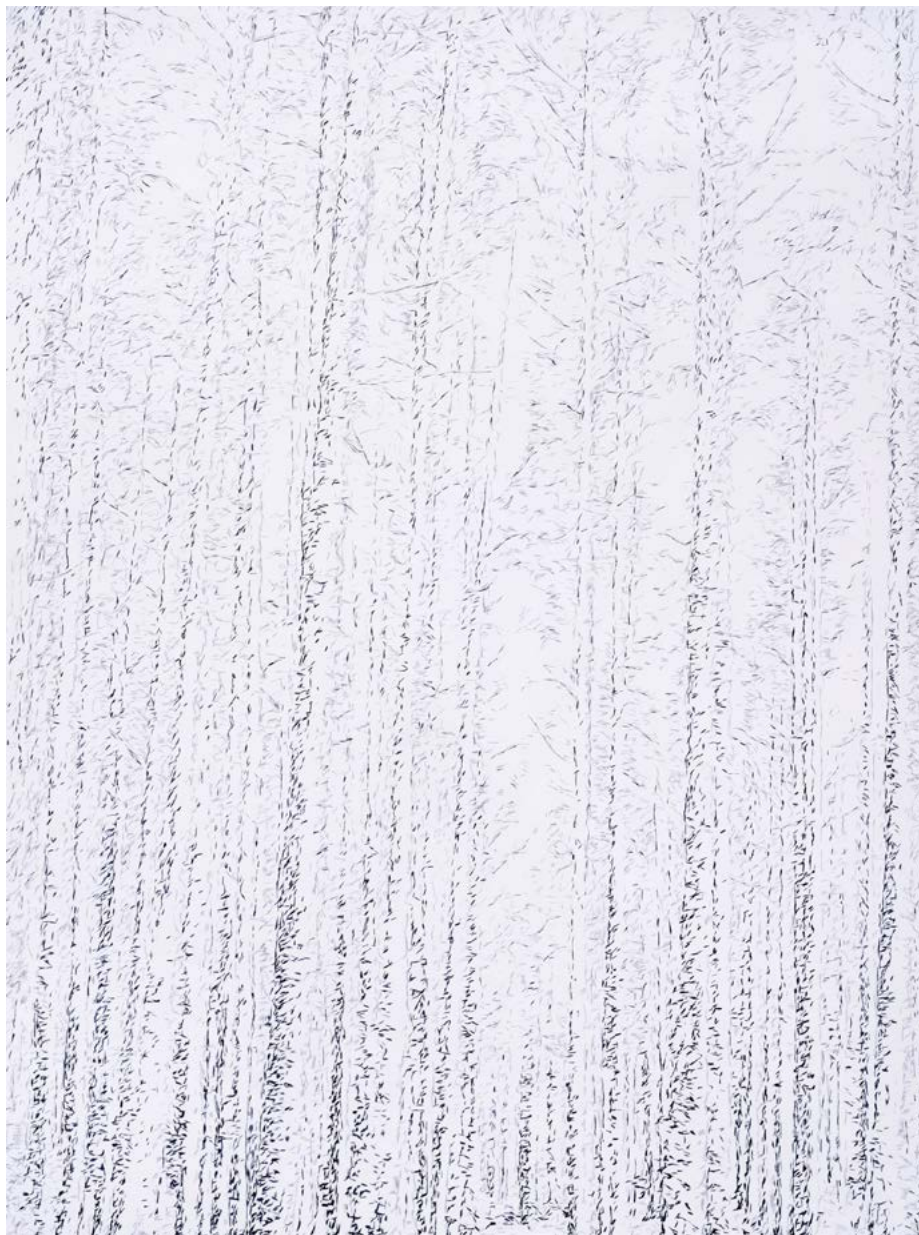
Invisible Things V
2018. Oil on Circular Canvas. Diameter 1500 mm.



Newlands IV
2018. Oil on Circular Canvas. Diameter 1600 mm.



Newlands V
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1700 x 1500 mm.



Newlands VI
2018. Oil on Canvas. 1700 x 1500 mm.



Cathedral II
2017. Oil on Canvas. 200 x 200 mm.

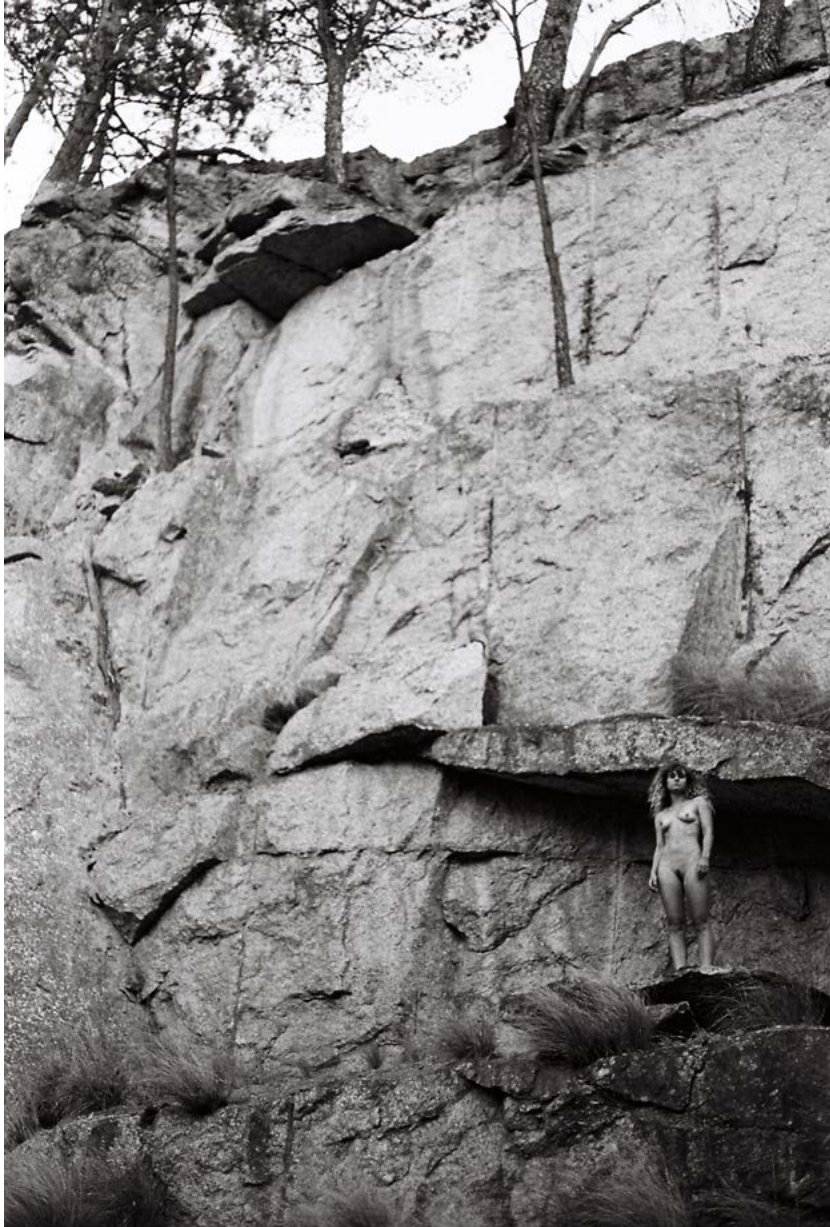


Invisible Things X
2017. Oil on Canvas. 200 x 200 mm.



The Eternal Death
2018. In collaboration with Jaekan Jivaro Coetzee. Kiaat. 1300 x 200 x 200 mm.
Hand Finished Series of 3.





Home

2018. Archival Print on Hahnemühle Museum Etch 380 gsm. 841 x 594 mm. Edition of 3.
Model: Caroline Mackintosh.



Home II
2018. Archival Print on Hahnemühle Museum Etch 380 gsm. 594 x 841 mm. Edition of 3.
Model: Dunty Latrobe.



Home III

2018. Archival Print on Hahnemühle Museum Etch 380 gsm. 594 x 841 mm. Edition of 3.
Model: Emma Elkonin.



Home IV
2018. Archival Print on Hahnemühle Museum Etch 380 gsm. 594 x 841 mm. Edition of 3.
Model: Hannah Mae

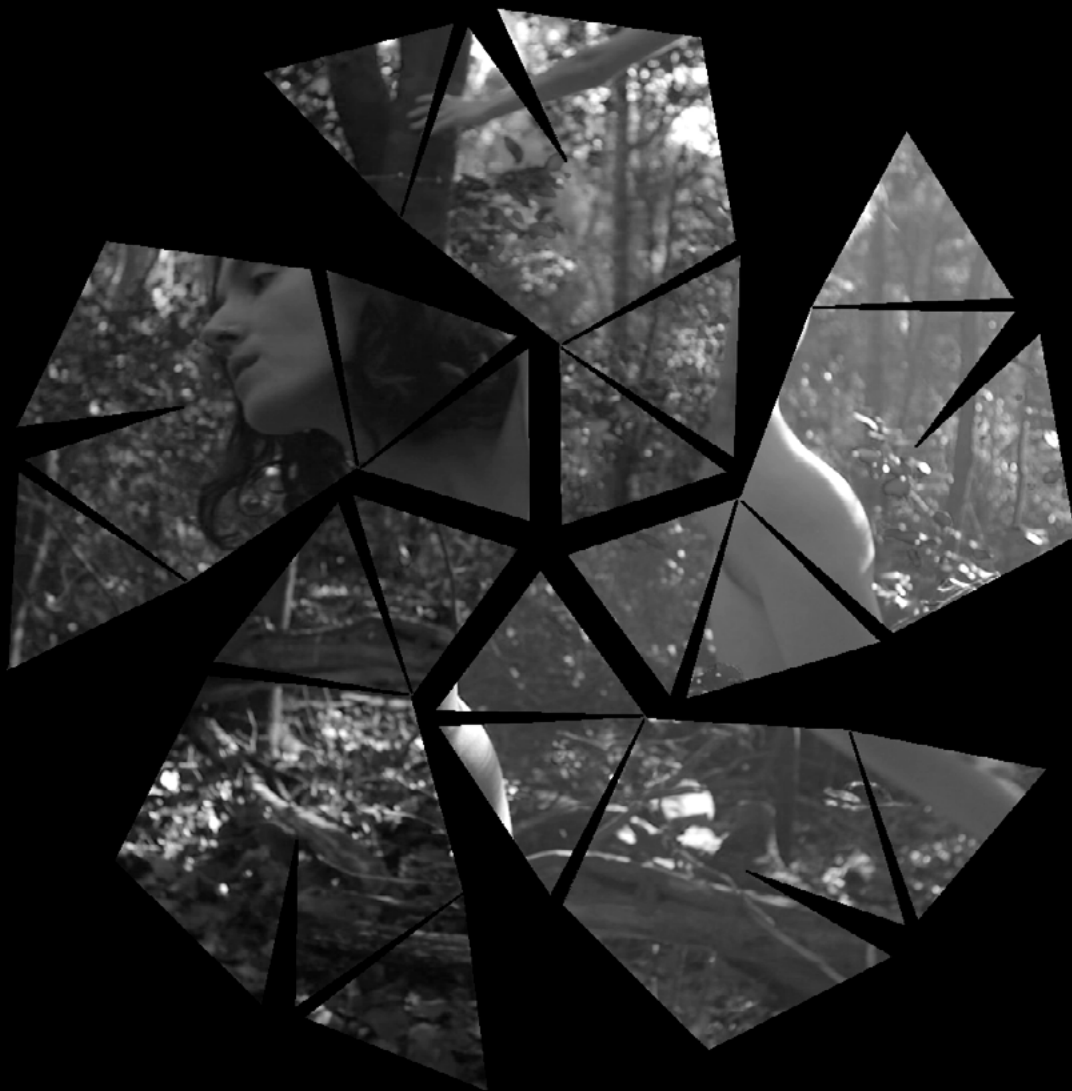


Home V
2018. Archival Print on Hahnemühle Museum Etch 380 gsm. 841 x 594 mm. Edition of 3.
Models: Jaekan Jivaro Coetzee & Electra Nathania

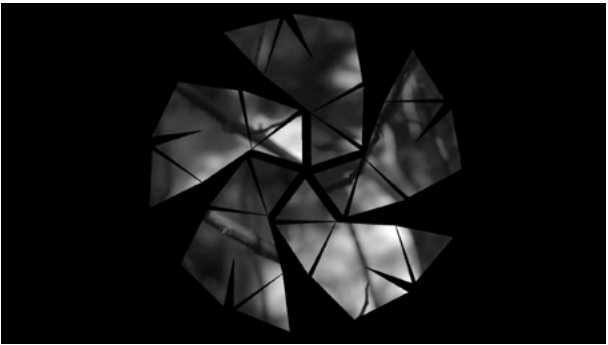
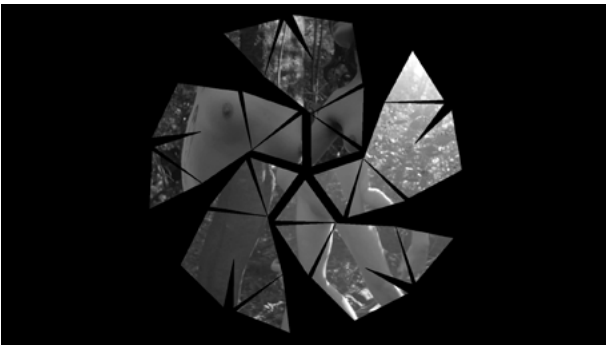
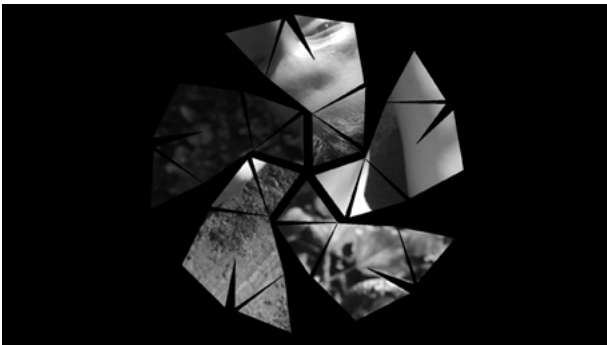
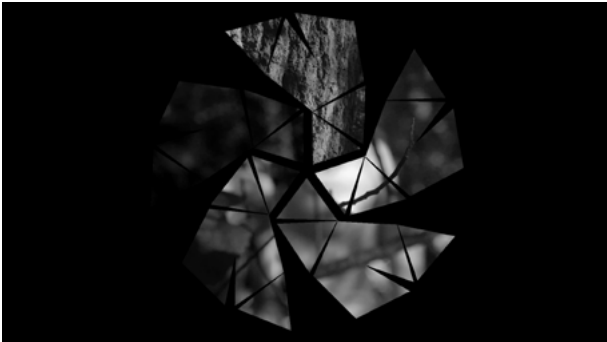


Newlands VII

2018. Woodblock Print on Fabriano Rosapina 285 gsm. 841 x 594 mm. Edition of 5 + 2AP.



Stills from *Carbon dioxide*
2018. In Collaboration with Thomas Dreyer. Video Installation.
Model: Jessica Smith.



Selected Previous Works



Fragmentary Void No. 10
2014. Oil on Decagonal Canvas. Diameter: 1800 mm.



Fragmentary Void No. 1



Fragmentary Void No. 2



Fragmentary Void No. 3



Fragmentary Void No. 7

Fragmentary Void Series
2014–2017. Oil on Decagonal Canvas. Diameter: 1800 mm.



Fragmentary Void No. 6



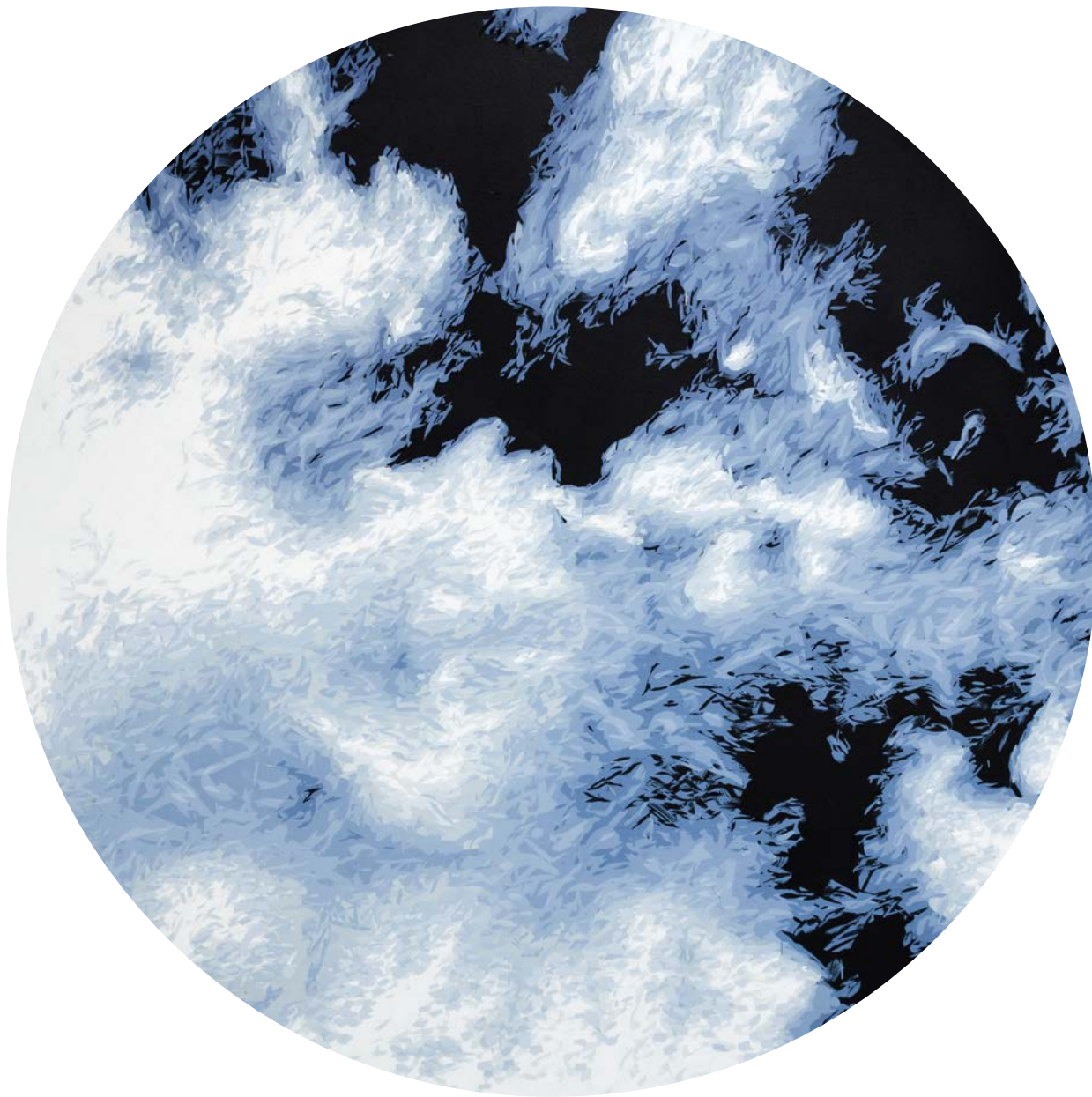
Fragmentary Void No. 8



Fragmentary Void No. 12



Fragmentary Void No. 13



Invisible Things II
2015. Oil on Circular Canvas. Diameter: 1750 mm.



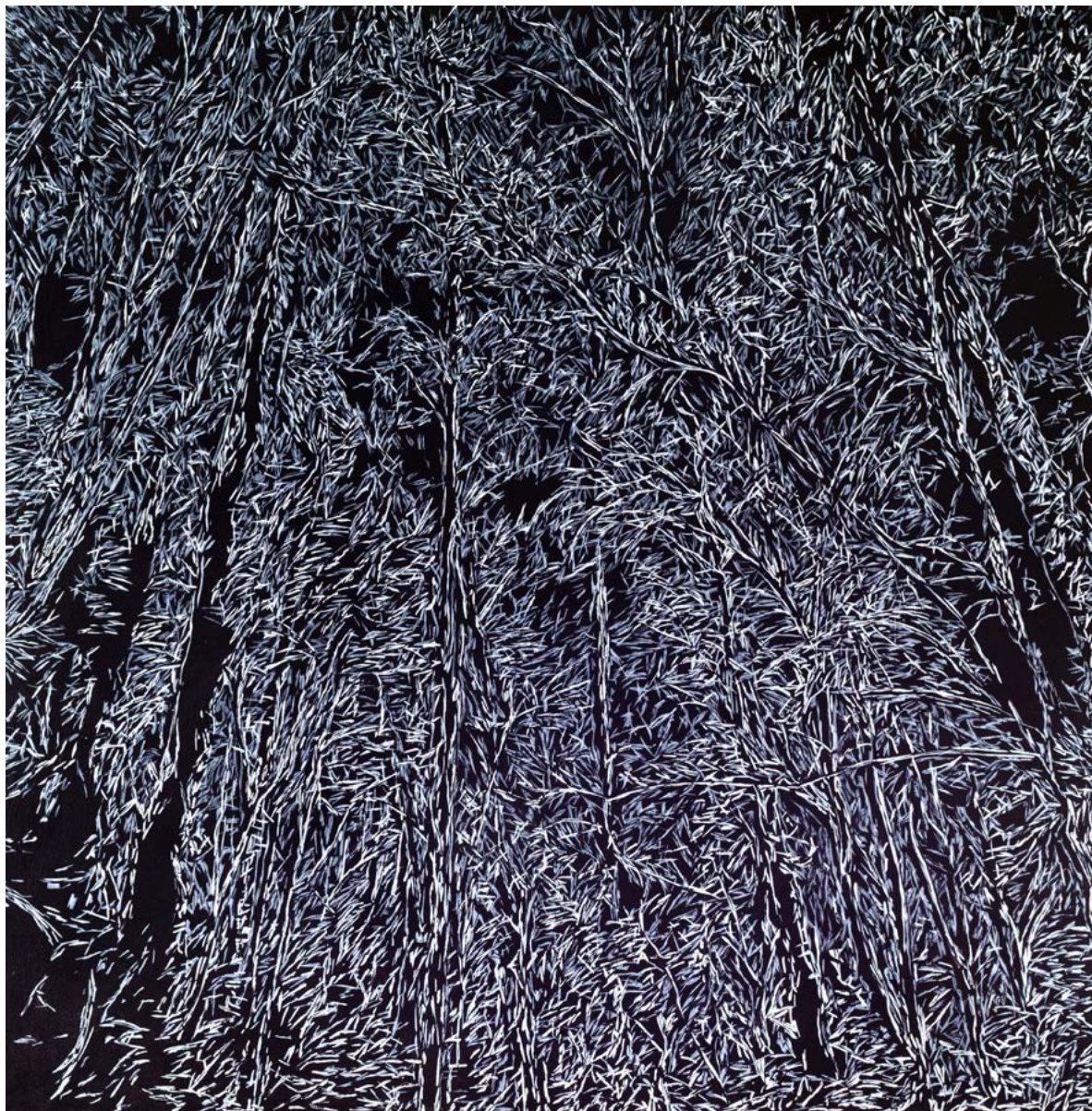
Invisible Things IV (Namib Sand Sea)
2015. Oil on Circular Canvas. Diameter: 1750 mm.



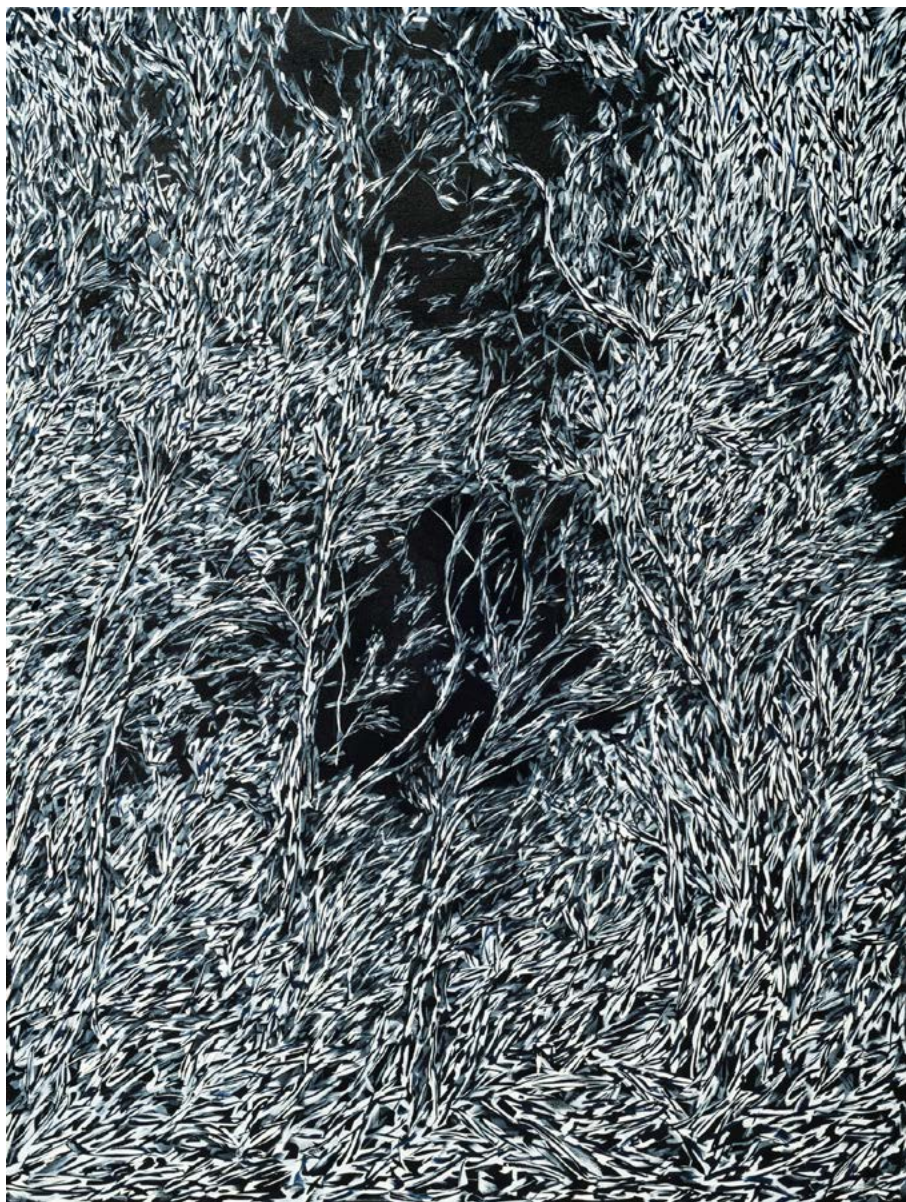
Invisible Things (Homage to William Blake)
2015. Oil on Circular Canvas. Diameter: 1750 mm.



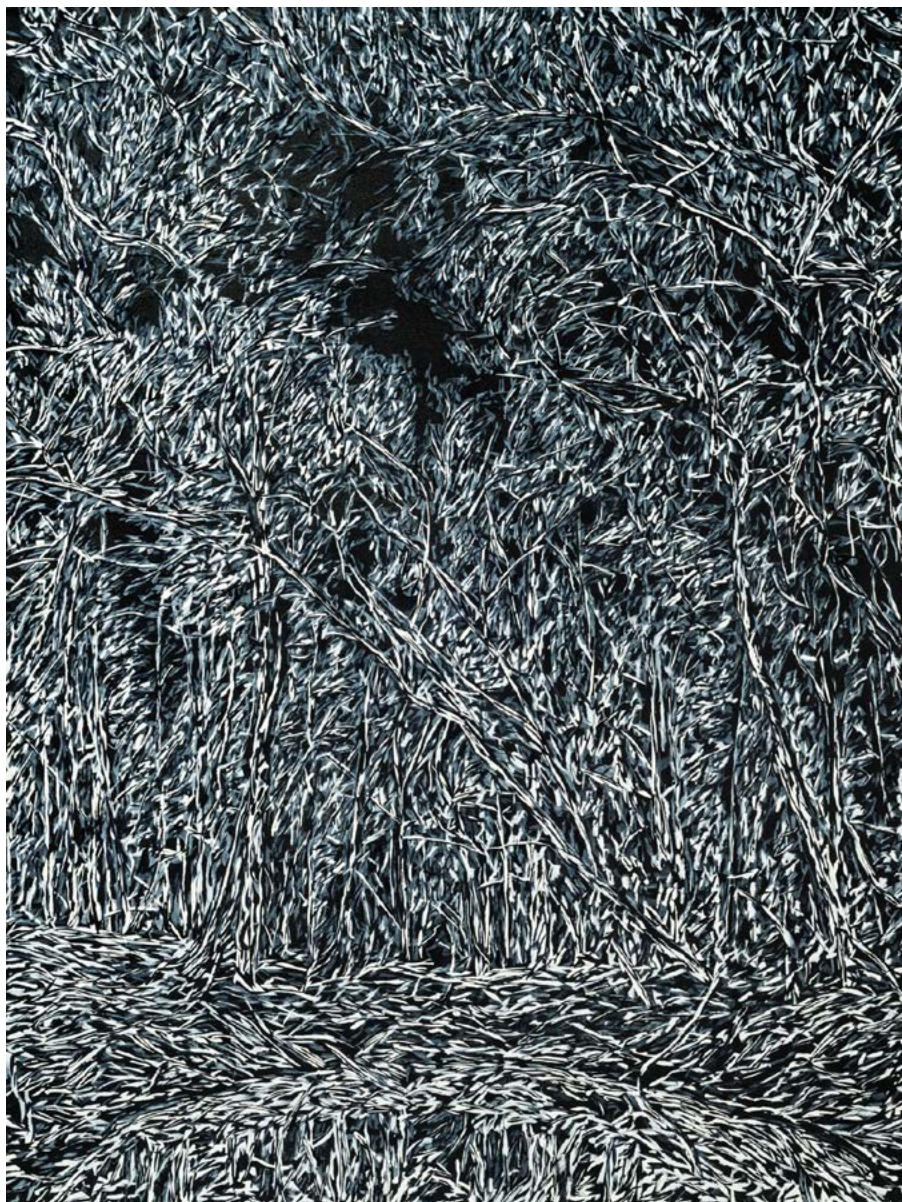
Yearning
2016. Oil on Canvas. 1570 x 2100 mm.



Cecilia
2016. Oil on Canvas. 1500 x 1500 mm.



Gouna
2016. Oil on Canvas. 1720 x 1290 mm.



Quiet Zone
2016. Oil on Canvas. 1720 x 1290 mm.



Cecilia Plantation
2015. Oil on Canvas. 1720 x 1290 mm.



Cecilia Plantation II
2015. Oil on Canvas. 1720 x 1290 mm.



Iris (flat)
2014. Oil on Geometric Canvas. Diameter: 2400 mm.



Iris (dome)
2014. Oil on Geometric Canvas. Diameter: 2400 mm.



Jubilee Creek
2016. Oil on Canvas. 1500 x 2250 mm.



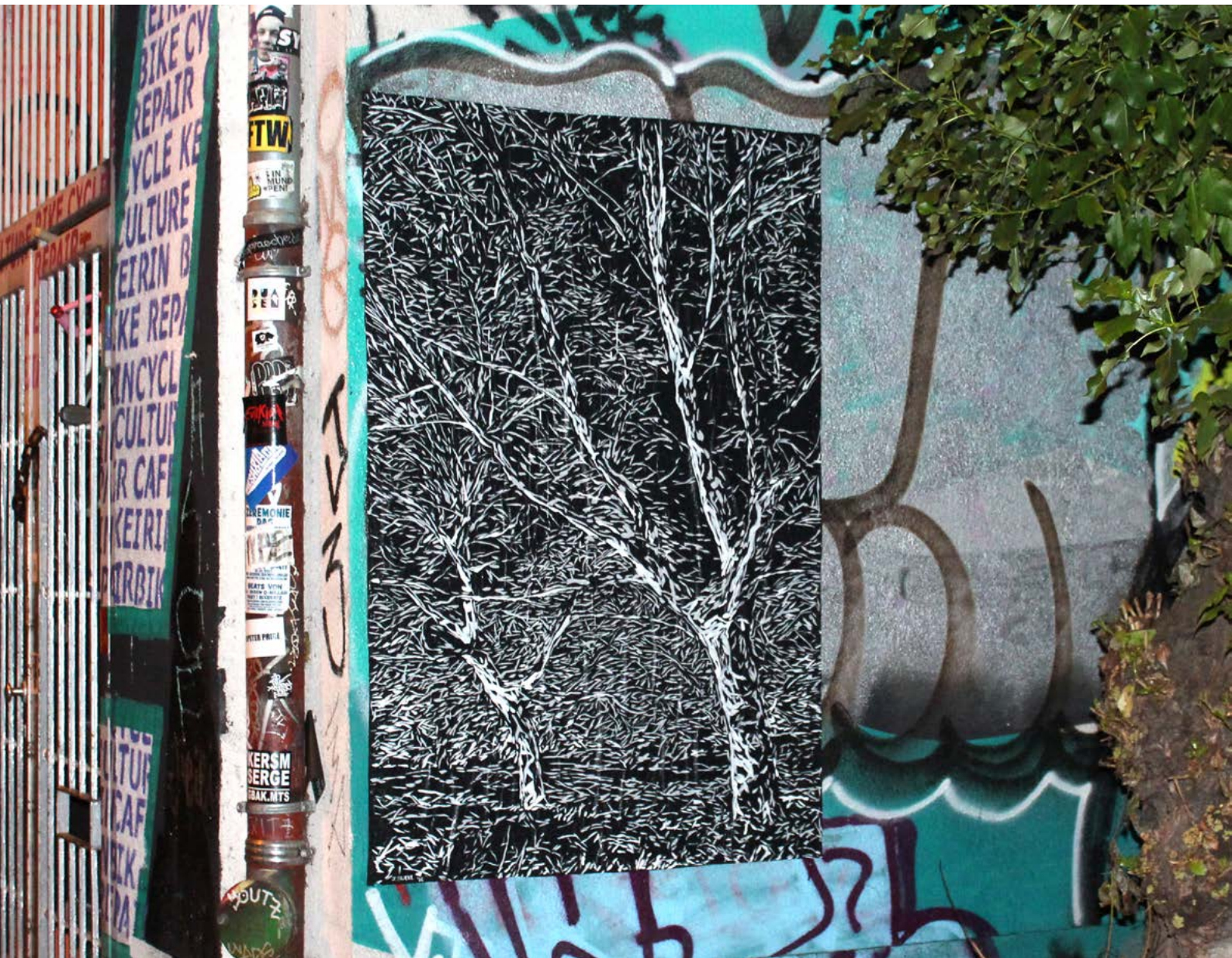
Upward Vision
2014. Oil on Circular Canvas. Diameter: 1800 mm.



Automatic Marks Made in Newlands Forest
2014. Indian Ink on Paper. 297 x 210 mm.



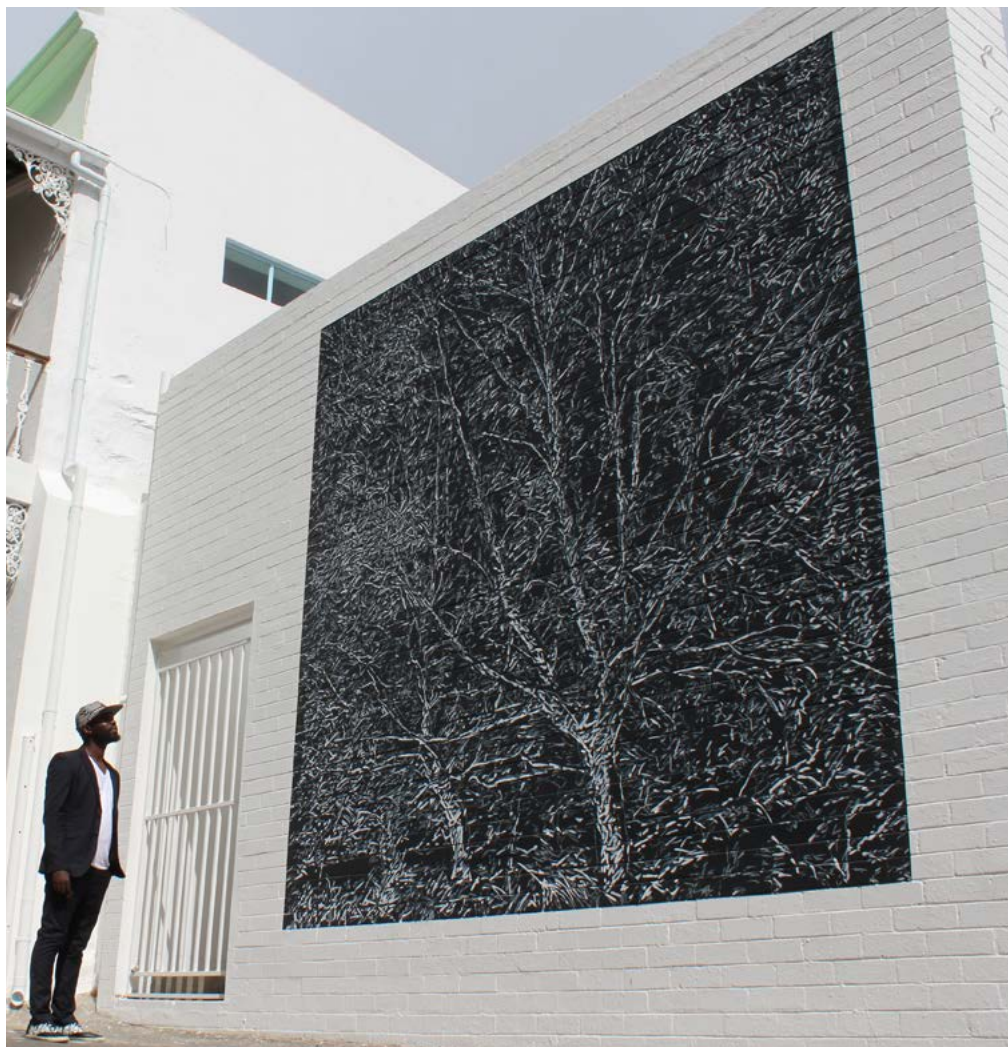
Tempio di Esculapio
2017. Acrylic on Canvas. 1720 x 1850 mm. Installation Shot, Centro Luigi di Saro, Rome.



Passer-by No. 2
2016. Acrylic on Paper. Warschauer, Berlin.



Passer-by No. 3 (top) and Passer-by No. 1 (bottom)
2016. Acrylic on Paper. Warschauer, Berlin.



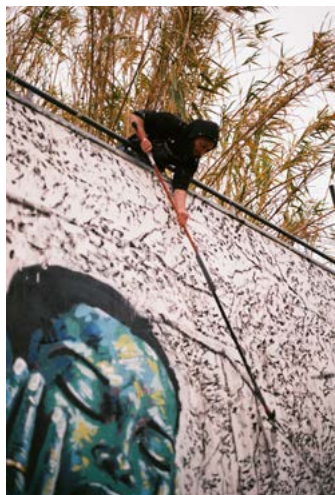
Have you passed through this night?
2017. Acrylic. Loop street, Cape town.



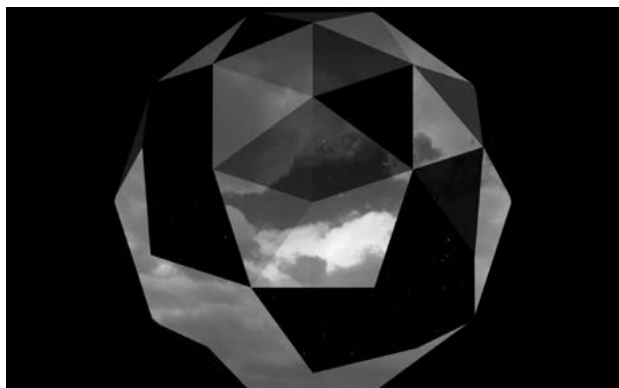
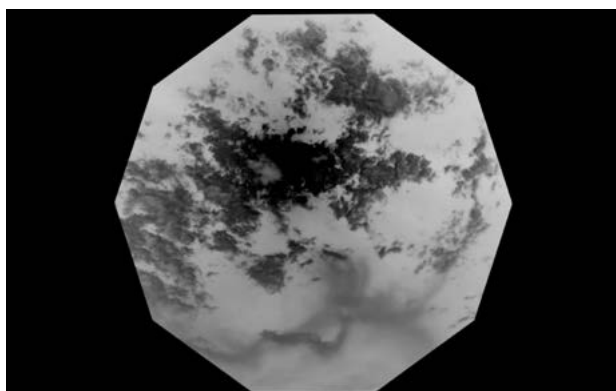
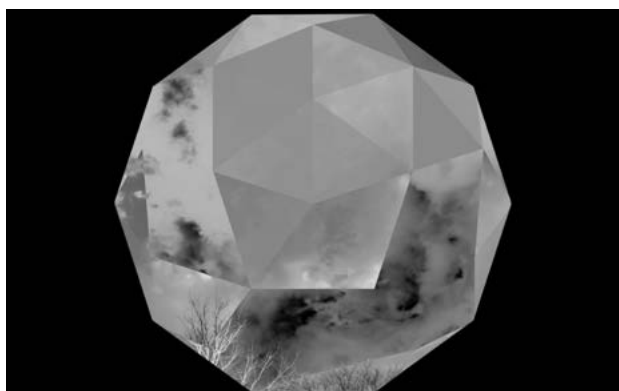
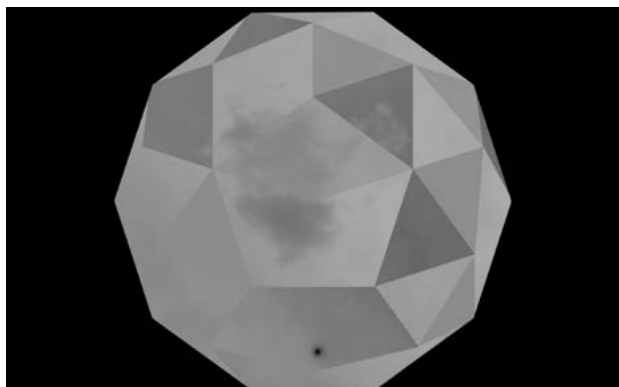
Grootvadersbosch
2017. Acrylic. SPRAR San Bruno, Finocchio, Rome.



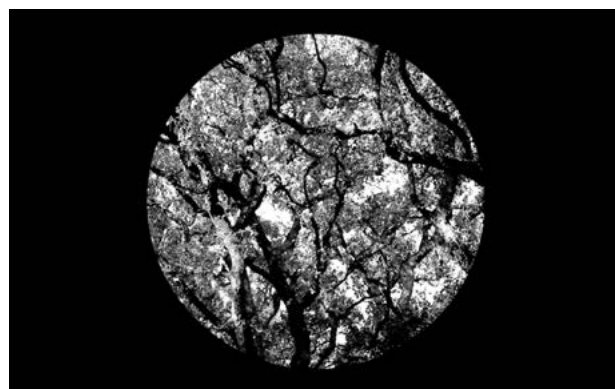
Realtà Immaginarie/Imagining Realities
2017. In collaboration with Skubalisto. Acrylic and Spraypaint. Corviale, Rome.



Behind the Scenes of *Realtà Immaginarie/Imagining Realities*



Stills from *Carbon*
2016. In Collaboration with Thomas Dreyer. Video piece.

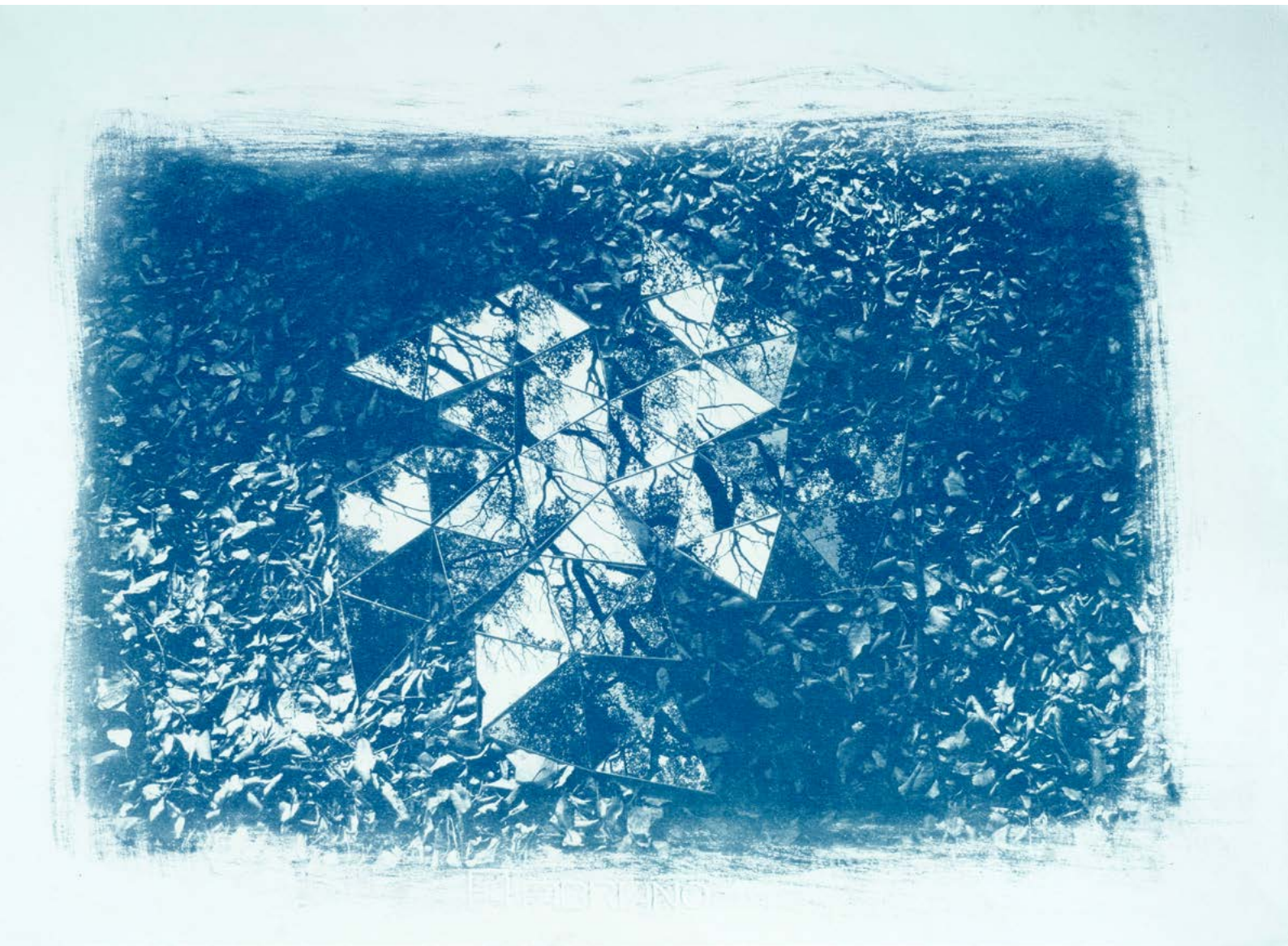


Stills from *Invisible Things Move Through Spaces Too*
2016. Video Piece.

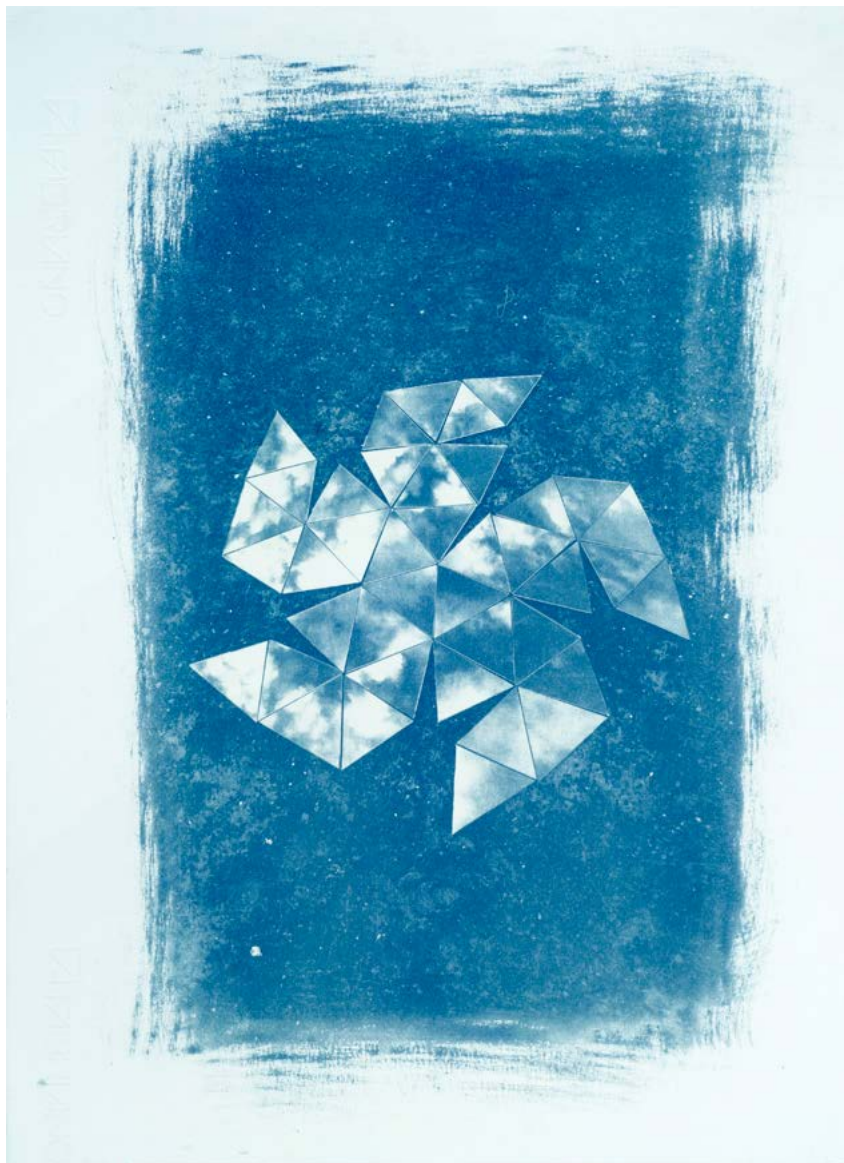


Details from *Madonna and Child*
2015.





Geometric Mirror Installation (Cecilia Forest)
2014. Cyanotype. 297 x 420 mm. Edition of 3.



Geometric Mirror Installation (Tankwa Karoo)
2014. Cyanotype. 420 x 297 mm. Edition of 3.

A bridge between

The most important principle of environment is that you are not the only element.

Mahavira

IT IS EASY UPON first reflection to review Jordan Sweke's practice as an archetypical duality of realism vs abstraction. Sweke creates visual manifestations that stretch from detailed abstraction, into cellular binaries and through into formal landscapes. One can often be compelled to explore this variety as simply deliberate contradictions. On the one hand, we observe organic forests, trees, sky or the sea and then when we approach closer to investigate surface details, these quickly become a dissolved and broken geometry – like pure gesture, with pattern and coded formula.

These contrasts of positive and negative spaces, lightness versus darkness, a chaos versus order, seem to evoke opposing narratives. However, by the artist's own account, the combinations of the contrasts converge into a third thread, a 'space' which is not so much 'abstracted' or 'realistic' or 'micro' or 'macro' but rather an in-between that the audience inhabits as they engage with the artworks.

Thus, as the audience we begin to investigate our relationship with Sweke's narrative and how it relates to us. It is clear the artist has manipulated imagery through distillation. There is a morphing of nature to focus the very strong desire for us to question our relationship with and impact on the natural world. Sweke explains that the natural settings rendered are heavy with impact and effect – many are colonial locations where foreign planting of alien species occurred simultaneously to a removal of local indigenous fauna. The viewer then rests in a limbo – between these various states of abstraction and reality. In turn, there is questioning of how we consider ourselves in these narratives.

This pondering serves the artist's bigger ambitions – to allow these feelings and considerations to act as a metaphor for our actions and effects within the physical world. Indeed, there is not just a prompt for us to see details and expanses in the imagery, or to recognize the reforming of 'positive' or 'negative' space. For Sweke, by constructing this third layer of experience, there is an acknowledgment of our role in this story. This is a role that he feels is both crucial and effecting but equally that which has perhaps no real positive effect. Titles such as '*Do we serve the earth as it serves us*', or '*Are we not custodians?*' actively ponder accountability, asking us to consider fundamentally '*What is our role in the natural world?*'

The 2018 sculptural work *The Eternal Death* (pg. 24), exemplifies this questioning narrative and dualities present in Sweke's working practice. A human figure (based on the artist himself) has been scanned with 3-dimensional software and then rendered in wood with a machine-arm router. Though a finished process, certain sections remain intact showing the digital printing machine cuts. There are other sections that have been deliberately finished to a smooth surface by hand. The figure holds a machete and the layers on the bottom half of the artwork suggest a hacking and cutting by such an instrument.

Conclusions arise of *perhaps* the figure cutting himself away from this solid wooden form. Equally this serves as a comment for the artist on the destruction of natural environments by human hands. In both instances Sweke uses this sculpture as a 'third space' and a bridging. There is a combination of natural materiality and digital process as well as of realism and abstracted pixilation and these all serve to catapult the audience from omniscient observer to face head on their actions, their effects, and our place within nature and the whole world around us.

Emma Van Der Merwe

Are we not custodians?

THE ROLE THAT HUMANS currently assume in relation to nature is complicated and differs depending on the individual and society or community which they inhabit. There is no single definition of any word, as language is flexible and ever-evolving and our differing definitions of 'nature', those that are inclusive and exclusive of humans, reflect a diversity in people's views. This diversity proves how difficult it is for us to understand the concept of nature and our relation to the natural world.

For the purpose of this text I have deconstructed my conceptual and practical processes as I view them at this point in time. In no way do I wish to prescribe specific interpretations of any of my work. This text is an overview of my practice and modes of thinking and serves as a source of information regarding certain processes. It is important to me that I state and emphasise the value of the role that the viewers' unique personal readings play in the functioning of the work, as it is the interaction between differing identities and cultural conditionings which affords the work its power to act and affect change.

There is an apparent cognitive dissonance occurring in our psyches as to whether we are, in fact, a part of nature, and this dissonance can cause destructive behavior on our part towards the environment. I believe that this relationship with nature, and our view of ourselves in relation to the environment, need to be re-imagined and re-constituted.

In order to perform this re-constitution, it is necessary to find a mid-point between the opposing binary concepts of humans as being included or excluded in their perception of nature.

In sitting between binaries concerning our relationship with nature, I find myself sitting between other binaries that arise within the same context: The beautiful and the tainted, light and dark, day and night, imagination and reality, positive and negative, good and evil, digital and real, traditional and contemporary, rational and emotional, male and female, hope and despair, harmony and chaos, macro and micro, abstraction and figuration. The large variety of opposing concepts apparent in everyday life serves

to exemplify the importance of thinking about binary concepts in new, imaginative ways, in order to avoid dissonance and conflict, both mentally and socially.

In my work, I try to find middle grounds between concepts or states which can appear to be opposites, however retain significant and undeniable conceptual overlaps. Examples of this marriage are the geometric and the organic, the abstract and the mathematical, the rigid and the fluid.

Through this harmony of opposing elements, the viewer may be directed towards contemplating the intrinsic links which exist between all living and non-living matter; the notion that we are all constructed of the same basic building blocks of carbon, atoms and energy and that through the use of imagination and altered perspective, harmonious and symbiotic relationships may be possible between elements of our existence that seem to us to be in total opposition.

In the context of our relationship with nature, this viewpoint describes the destruction of nature on our part as a self-destructive act, as we are intrinsically linked to the planet and all of its matter, not only through our part in global symbiosis but at our core structure as physical beings.

This directing of the viewer towards a place of contemplating our evident disconnection with nature is aided through the use of rhetorical questions in selected titles and text pieces, such as, *Does our ruin benefit the earth? Do we serve the earth as it serves us? Are we not custodians? Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this night?* Questions such as these address the viewer directly and force one to ask such questions of ourselves, possibly even at a subconscious level.

The idea of abstraction vs figuration can be seen in my paintings. From a distance, they hold a strong sense of photo realism, yet, as one approaches, the abstract nature of the marks and their rhythm become more apparent. At a mid distance, they enter the liminal space between the binary of abstraction and figuration, which opens up

a large space for the viewer to take an active role in interpreting, and in so doing, creating, along with the artist.

This sense of up-close abstraction and distant photo-realism plays into notions of digital space, where thousands of tiny squares of plain colour are used to create crystal clear resolution from a distance.

This links strongly to another aspect of my conceptual framework, the notion of moving from the digital/technological to the highly traditional/analogue. My paintings begin as digital photographs, which are digitally manipulated and painted in oils through the use of a series of projection layers. The end product is of a seemingly traditional nature, given its medium, yet is deeply imbued with notions of the digital and fragments of its largely digital process.

This notion of moving from a digital space into a traditional space links to the use of liminal spaces between binary concepts, in this case: new/old, digital/analogue, contemporary/classic.

The sculpture, *The Eternal Death* (pg. 28, in collaboration with Jaekan Jivaro Coetzee), began as a 3D scan, which was then digitally rendered and manipulated before being machine-arm routed in wood and then finished by hand. Again, this was a process of moving from a highly technological/digital origin towards a seemingly traditional end product, a wooden sculpture, which retains discernible aspects of its digital journey.

Another medium that falls into these notions of digital into traditional is my printmaking strategy, as can be seen in, *Newlands VII* (pg. 31). This work originates from a digital photograph that is digitally manipulated into colour spectrum layers, which are engraved into a wood block one by one while colour layers are printed into an edition in between engraving layers. Here is a movement from digital machine-routing to analogue printing press.

A further example of this kind of progression may be seen in my works entitled *Geometric Mirror Installation (Cecilia Forest)* and *Geometric Mirror Installation (Tankwa, Karoo)* (pg. 62–63). These works began with the digital rendering of a geometric

pattern, guided by the structure of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome. Mirrors were then cut into forty triangles of three different sizes and dimensions, which were then composed in varying landscapes to reflect and fragment what appears above them. These installations were photographed on 35 mm film before being printed in a darkroom using a 19th century photographic printing process called Cyanotype, using ammonium citrate and potassium cyanide to produce cyan blue prints. These works also exemplify a marriage of the geometric and the organic, the man-made and the natural, as well as digitally imagined spaces.

The interrogation of the ways in which space affects humans is another aspect of my work that relates to notions of digitally created spaces. Imagined spaces may become man-made spaces carrying agendas, aimed at affecting humans in certain ways. An example of such a space is Cecilia forest, an area I have drawn extensive research from over the past seven years. Named after Cecil John Rhodes, this stretch of Birch forest (along with many other local spaces such as Newlands Forest, Rhodes Memorial, and Tokai Forest) has been constructed to create a Eurocentric ideal of natural beauty as the colonizers did not appreciate the beauty of the natural Cape landscape. The pines, oaks and birches that replaced indigenous fynbos have grown into beautiful forests over the past century and at the same time have wreaked havoc on surrounding indigenous microcosms. For many years, there has been debate over the post-colonial legitimacy of these spaces. Is their beauty worth their destruction of indigenous fauna and flora? Are we, as humans, in a position to be cutting down any trees, indigenous or alien? This urges us to think about the agendas behind constructed spaces, and responsibility for the longevity and symbiotic integration of such spaces.

There is an emphasis in my work on just how important and essential natural spaces are to the human psyche in terms of mental well-being. It is evident to me that mental illness breeds in cities as people get sick with boredom as a result of desensitization through urban conditioning.

"The real hopeless victims of mental illness are to be found among those who appear to be most normal. Many of them are normal because they are so well adjusted to our mode of existence ... they are normal only in relation to a profoundly abnormal society. Their perfect adjustment to that abnormal society is a measure of their mental sickness."
(Huxley, 1959, pg. 28)

Likely, the most important aspect of my work is its use of the sublime as an emotive method. The sublime can be described in many various ways according to the nuances of varying philosophies. I tend to lean towards a Kantian understanding of the concept:

“Whereas the beautiful is limited, the sublime is limitless, so that the mind in the presence of the sublime, attempting to imagine what it cannot, has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt.” (Kant, 1965, pg. 47)

Kant emphasizes a connection between the sublime and morality in that through moral training we are taught the importance of our own faculty of reason over nature. The sublime challenges our comprehension of natural phenomena. It is ill-matched to our senses, violent yet still involving pleasure, overwhelming to our faculties in a kind of harmony, a unique vibration of rapid alternation between violence and pleasure. Kant states that the culture of humans believing that they are transcendent of nature is necessary for the sublime. This exposes, at root, the mental assumption of our own authority over nature, given our senses of reason. The sublime alerts us to our insignificance while comforting us with the power of feeling a part of such an incomprehensible universe.

Another major aspect of my conceptual mode of thinking is the use of imagination in the process of creation. I believe that imagining creates reality and that any reality is possible through the use of persistent and focused imagination.

“Imagination is the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow.” (Blake, 1906, pg. 24)

In *Imagining Realities* (pg. 56) and *Imagining Realities II* (pg. 10), Skubalisto and I have expressed visions of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature; visions we hope will interact with the imaginations of others and play a part in shaping future realities.

The subtle incorporation of the machete as an implicit object present in various works within *The Eternal Death* exhibition relates to various aspects of my conceptual framework. The machete is interesting as a heavily loaded object with a history of

human-on-nature violence, human-on-human violence, as well as a tool for peaceful habitation and symbiosis. *The Eternal Death* (pg. 24) alludes to the idea of destroying ourselves through our destruction of nature through the incorporation of the machete. The machete is rendered in three-dimensions from the same material (Kiaat) as the human subject holding it. The fact that the subject is made of wood, holding a machete, a tool usually used for cutting wood or acts of violence and self-defence, alludes to notions of violence against the natural world having a direct effect on our personal experiences.

I feel that nature desperately needs to be our focus. We need to acknowledge the paramount importance of our custodianship of this planet and use our unique faculties of reason and imagination to act as protectors and nurturers as opposed to enemies or careless inhabitants. We urgently need to cultivate a culture of gratitude and respect for every aspect of our natural environment and begin to recompose the way we have been conditioned to view nature through living in urban spaces. By considering the commonality between all living things, the implications of even our most insignificant deeds must be recognized. I believe this applies to both interpersonal relationships/ human communities, as well as our placement within the natural world.

Jordan Sweke

REFERENCES

- Blake, William and Archibald Blomefield. *The Letters of William Blake*, New York: C, Scribner and Sons, 1906.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World Revisited*, Great Britain: Chatto & Windus, 1959.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965.

www.jordansweke.com
Instagram: @jordan_sweke
jordansweke@gmail.com

The Eternal Death works taken from
Jordan Sweke's solo exhibition The Eternal Death 2018, at Everard Read, Cape Town
Previous work selected from Jordan Sweke's previous works, 2014–2017

The Eternal Death soundpiece and video available at www.jordansweke.com/the-eternal-death

Self-published by Jordan Sweke and Everard Read
Cape Town, South Africa, 2018

Outside cover: Goudveld II
Inside cover: Cecilia IX

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of Jordan Sweke.

© Jordan Sweke 2018