

SALON NINETY ONE CONTEMPORARY ART COLLECTION

JORDAN SWEKE | THE ANTIDOTE

26 OCTOBER - 26 NOVEMBER 2016

MY REFLECTION IS LESS IMPORTANT WHEN FISH SWIM BENEATH THE RIPPLES. [1]

WRITTEN BY NATASHA NORMAN

Good artists are curious. This has been a stalwart of both my own teaching practice and that of my teachers. Why? Because curiosity involves an exploration, a humble finding and thinking. In many ways this is the 'antidote' that Sweke seeks: the curiosity of looking through the binary lens into the world between.

I use the time watering my garden with my bathwater as a meditation. I am always amazed how far the bathwater stretches. If it has been a decadent soak I can water just over half the flowerbeds: irises, hydrangea, plectranthus, aloe, nasturtiums, vying for sunlight beneath the bougainvillea and banana leaves.

The natural environment has returned to our concerns, not as prime time sensationalism but a deeper more civic responsibility. Research is being conducted not only into the science of environmental change and what daily steps can be taken to combat that, but also why science, a purported 'objective' study, cannot be consumed with the same objectivity by leading politicians and international corporations.

There is overwhelming evidence that we are "biased information processors" who engage in "motivated reasoning" to try to bend facts about the world to comport with what we want to believe. (Mooney 2016 [2])

Curiosity, particularly "science curiosity" according to the researcher above, is identified as the space where a less polarized and more complex understanding of the world can develop.

The mournful croons of 1991 pop hit Acid Rain by South African Wendy Oldfield have matured into hard hitting debates around conservation, with fines imposed for negligent mining practices and a movement to cut down alien trees (there is a heated debate about the removal of pines from Tokai's forestry to make way for indigenous fynbos). In many practical ways our society is grappling with antidotal means of addressing our relationship with natural environments. What remains key in these activities is the fact that society and environment are linked by relationship.

The human condition is defined by a connection to environment. Kastner [3] notes in his preface to a Phaidon volume Land and Environmental Art (1998) that the environment remains "the biggest of the big pictures" against which human activity plays itself out. Beyond the "bloom and rot" of our lives we also aspire to mark, inscribe and gesture in and on the landscape. We hold a curious drive to translate and transgress space. Culture's continued fascination with land is a testament to the way it functions both as mirror and lens to the human condition.

Sweke's embodied approach to art and the environment owes much to this historic cultural legacy of the artist faced with the natural world. The Romantics foregrounded their subject of the sublime in nature, 1960s Land Art pushed the gallery boundaries even further - toppling the modernist end-game. There were also individual artists making quieter body-land reflections such as Ana Mendieta, Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Strydom van der Merwe. Sweke's work foregrounds a personal experience of natural spaces in both his photography and paintings that begin with a walk or a hike away from the urban centre. He brings this experience back into his paintings in the energy and immediacy of mark making on a flat painted surface. Embracing the caustic flatness of a canvas surface, he reanimates the lived experience through a limited palette of expressionist marks that, in their simplicity, evoke a sense of space beyond the painted surface.

Grappling with this exaggerated sense of flatness in his painting is the site where Sweke begins to unravel the boundary between binaries. Balance/imbalance, abstraction/representation, positive/negative, void/object, depth/flatness: the viewer is left in the unsettling space between. And this space between sight and painted object is relentless. Sweke has given himself strict colour parameters (French Ultramarine, Burnt Umber and Titanium White) in which to articulate this tension. En masse his installation forces a more subtle engagement with form and illusion.

The individual's tendency for "motivated reasoning" is in part a survival instinct based on our senses that have become dangerously

warped in an information age. The emotional trigger that tailors our response to information is based fundamentally on personal and deeply held beliefs. Contradicting such deeply held ideologies can cause an individual to hold onto the original belief more tightly [4]. Positioning a viewer in a more ambiguous space where curiosity is activated to find knowledge is an infinitely more progressive space of engagement. Beyond the snappy judgements, one-liner tweets and consumptive images of contemporary media, Sweke's exhibition emerges as an understated exploration of seeing and feeling. Taking those primal states based upon real experiences in natural environments as his starting point, he translates them into an artistic space built upon the illusionistic plane of the two-dimensional painted canvas. Pablo Picasso's famous dictum on art and lies applies here:

"We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies." [5]

Sweke's gallerist tells the story of friends that hiked in Machu Picchu, Peru. Overcome by the sight of the landscape at the summit of their peak they promptly burst into tears. Their fellow travellers sought comfort in the mediation of the sight through their camera phones. The natural sublime remains an experience beyond language. Despite its mediation by technology we are continuously left overwhelmed by the intimate complexity of such a relationship and its profound affect on our condition as human beings.

The Antidote is at its heart a restrained response to an overwhelming emotion felt by the artist in the natural sublime. Sweke's translation of this experience attempts to situate his viewer in a similar experience of the sublime - what the Romantics have described as awe, terror or danger. Current conceptions of environmental relationships may be turning to the civic, which, while progressive, are

also in danger of putting that relationship back into a stable and comprehensible space. Sweke attempts to disrupt any containable readings of The Antidote to place the viewer in a space of curious engagement, to evoke something of that indescribable feeling of the immensity of the natural in relation to ourselves and to gateway an articulation of binary thinking into the world between expression and experience.

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Footnotes:

[1] Title taken from a line in 2014 short story by Jordan Sweke titled Does our ruin benefit the earth?

[2] Chris Mooney. 2016. 'Researchers may have finally found an antidote to biased thinking about science' in The Washington Post [online] 3 August, 2016.

[3] Jeffery Kastner. 1998. Land and Environmental Art. Phaidon: New York.

[4] Chris Mooney. 2011. 'The Science of Why We Don't Believe Science:

How our brains fool us on climate, creationism, and the vaccine-autism.' [online] Mother Jones May/June 2011 issue. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/03/denial-science-chris-mooney>

[5] Marius de Zayas. 1923 "Picasso Speaks" in The Arts, New York, May 1923. pp. 315; Reprinted in Alfred Barr: Picasso, New York 1946

I feel a connection with nature.

Urged to question, yet a feeling of ambient omniscience.

More to be seen with eyes closed. Landscapes of thought.

The landscape around me is presence in excess. Everything is balanced and delicate.
My reflection is less important when fish swim beneath the ripples.

We think that equilibrium happens at ease, independent of us. But effort exists there.
Fragility and symbiosis. A part of ourselves that we are neglecting.

Do we serve the earth as it serves us?

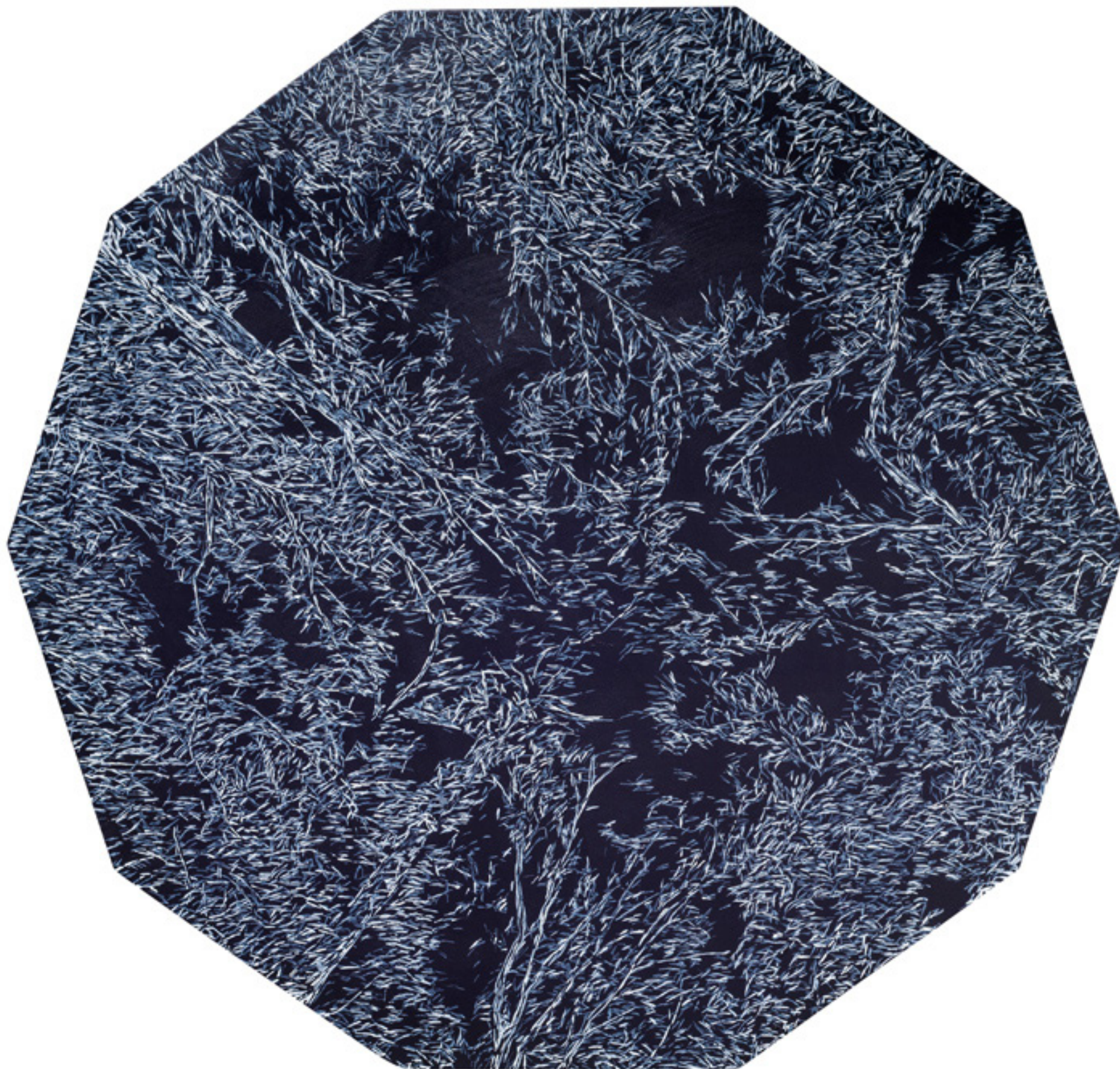
- JORDAN SWEKE



JORDAN SWEKE
Cecilia I, 2016
Oil on canvas
1500 x 1500 mm (UF)
R 20 000.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Cecilia II, 2016
Oil on canvas
410 x 610 mm (UF)
R 4 500.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE

Fragmentary Void No. 13, 2016

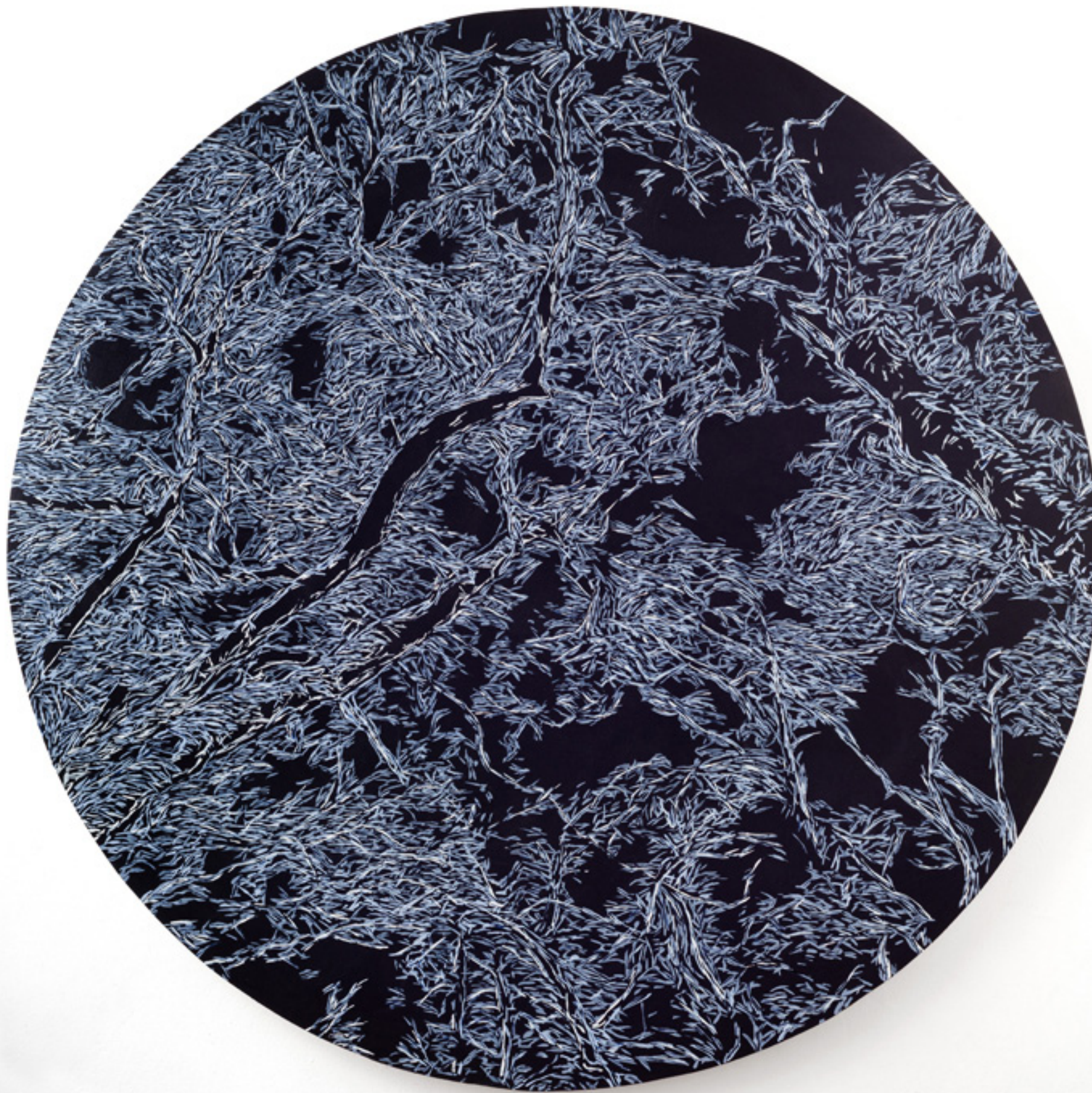
Oil on shaped canvas

1800 mm diameter (UF)

R 22 000.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Goudveld, 2016
Oil on canvas
2250 x 1500 mm (UF)
R 36 000.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Hlatikhulu I, 2016
Oil on circular canvas
1790 mm diameter (UF)
R 22 000.00 excl. VAT



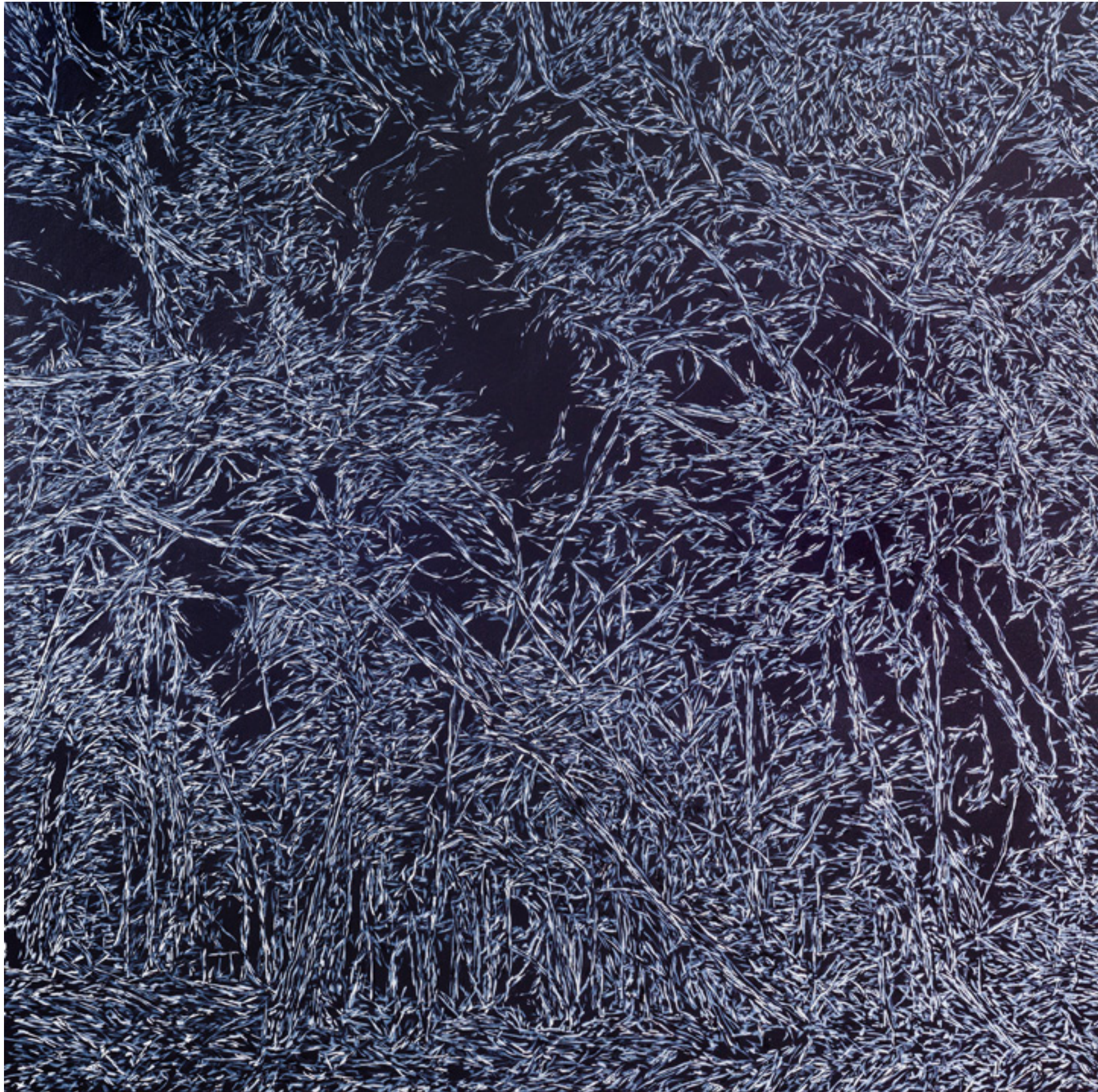
JORDAN SWEKE
Hlatikhulu II, 2016
Oil on canvas
610 x 410 mm (UF)
R 4 500.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Hlatikhulu III, 2016
Oil on canvas
610 x 410 mm (UF)
R 4 500.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Jubilee Creek, 2016
Oil on canvas
2250 x 1500 mm (UF)
R 36 000.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Nature's Valley, 2016
Oil on canvas
1745 x 1745 mm (UF)
R 25 000.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Newlands, 2016
Oil on canvas
1000 x 1270 mm (UF)
R 16 000.00 excl. VAT



JORDAN SWEKE
Yearning III, 2016
Oil on canvas
610 x 410 mm (UF)
R 4 500.00 excl. VAT

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SALON NINETY ONE is a boutique-style gallery and art consultation service, showcasing works by emerging & established contemporary artists of all disciplines, passionate about developing a new brand of local talent. The gallery specializes in affordable & accessible contemporary South African art, design and illustration. Since its inception in 2008, this space has served as a platform for upcoming South African artists to gain exposure through sharing their creativity & vision. Salon91 offers seasoned collectors & first-time buyers unique investment opportunities into the emerging South African art market, coupled with service that is personalized, friendly & professional.