



# THRESHOLD

climate change and environmental concern  
*Curated by Virginia MacKenny*

threshold

edge

verge

outset

entrance

upper limit

tipping point

point of beginning

'Threshold', an exhibition of environmentally engaged art, responds, in part, to the most pressing concern of our time; that of climate change. This year COP17, the United Nations Earth Summit meeting on climate change, will be held in South Africa. Hosted in Durban in December it is vital that the country as a whole is aware of its concerns. Given the particularly susceptible Western Cape eco-system it is here that South Africa will most feel the effects of climate change. Already warmer winters are threatening Elgin's apple crops and our unique fynbos and renosterveld heritage is under threat.



*Thomas Mulcaire 'Constant' (2009 - 11) Solar powered light installation*

'Threshold' implies an upper limit to tolerance levels as climate change shifts the balance long established in ecosystems. The exhibition, as its title suggests, engages the premise that not only are the climatic conditions of the planet at a tipping point, but that we need to enter into closer relationship with the earth, this place we call home. The exhibition is thus as much to do with perception, and the garnering of visual acuity and observation in the process of witnessing or 'being present', as it is with environmental awareness. Encouraging our ability to notice and be attentive to both optical and conceptual perceptions better equips us to actively embody our custodianship of the planet.

This exhibition re-engages traditional genres of art such as landscape and flower painting, approaching them in the light of climate change and environmental awareness to reveal changes in our environment. An example of work that exemplifies this is Andrew Putter's *Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis*, a photographic, digital articulation of indigenous flora from South Africa in the guise of Dutch 17th century flower paintings. The flowers are all indigenous to the pre-Dutch Cape, the ancestral world of the Khoekhoe and their arrangement posits, as Putter puts it, the "historical possibility of a novel, hybrid culture that might have emerged from a different kind of relationship between the Khoekhoe and the Dutch". However *Flora Capensis* is also a record of a floral world under threat. There are more kinds of plants in the Cape Floral Kingdom than there are in the whole of the northern hemisphere (Table Mountain alone supports 2200 species, more than the sum total of species in the United Kingdom) however many of these plants are now extinct, endangered or rarely seen. Putter notes that for "millions of years most of these flowers would have grown within walking distance of the studio where the photographs were taken, but to collect the flowers for these



Andrew Putter 'Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis 2' (2008) Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper

six photographs it was necessary to travel more than 2 000 kilometres, zigzagging across the Western Cape". Thus while commenting on the arrival of the Dutch in 1652 and colonialism in Africa, Putter's utilisation of the vanitas form is not only a reminder of human mortality, but broader issues of contemporary extinctions.

*Monet's Waterblommertjes* (2011) by Claire Jorgenson similarly co-opts an iconic image of flowers from the canon of Western art history and plays it out within a local context. *Aponogeton distachyos*, otherwise known as Cape pondweed or Cape asparagus, is native to South



Claire Jorgenson 'Waterblommetjies' (2011) Video

Africa and is found in the Western Cape in dams and marshes. Its buds (waterblommetjies) were used as a food source by the Khoekhoe and early settlers and have continued to be a part of indigenous cuisine. In Jorgenson's rearticulation Monet's colourful *Nymphéas* are cast in blackened ice and dissolve in a flood of sullied water. When the ice refreezes the particular forms are reduced to misshapen versions of their former selves. Jorgenson's work obliquely references the steadily melting ice caps, such as Marion Island's that has melted to just over 6% of its original size in the last 50 years. According to the South African Environmental



Nina Liebenberg 'Orchid' (2011) Fishbones, glue, perspex and bell jar

Observation Network (SAEON 2011) the resultant impact of such climate change is yet to be fully realised.

A mutant production of another sort is Nina Liebenberg's *Orchid* (2011). Delicately crafted from fish bones this ossified flower is preserved and presented in a bell jar. Akin to a scientific specimen or object of genetic manipulation it seems a clinical embodiment of an impossible objectivity. Displayed and protected in its glass dome, this sepulchre for a two-fold loss marks flowers and fish as more than materially delicate. Both now being threatened by human activity and exploitation, they may

soon be objects of beauty or desire figured only in the imagination or memory. Liebenberg's construction hence hovers between fact and fiction, a complex play of past and future manifest in what Liebenberg describes as 'what could have been'.

Attendant on the flowers are works representing bees. Vital to the ecology of the planet, bees are increasingly listed in the Invertebrate Red Data Book and analogous lists, as threatened or facing extinction. United Nations' scientists note that the collapse of honeybee colonies is becoming a global phenomenon and general consensus puts the degradation and destruction of bee habitats down to human activity. Declines in flowering plants and the use of damaging insecticides as well as the worldwide spread of pests and air pollution are all contributing factors.



*Tony East 'Indicator' (2009 - 11) Salt, gold-plated silver, aluminium*



*Kim Gurney '626 insects - IUCN Red List' (2009) Honeycomb panel, tags, wax, shellac*

The precarious position of bees is signalled by Kim Gurney's tagged honeycomb work with its blank tags representing threatened species on the IUCN Red List. Tony East's delicate life-size gold-plated silver origami bee on a weathered sundial of salt is a poignant ode to the fragility of the ecological web essential to our survival. East's work memorialises that for which time is already running out and is a pertinent reminder that it is often the smaller things that are of inestimable value.

The importance of witnessing details is evident too in Jeremy Wafer's 10-minute video *HIVE* (2006). Presented in a fixed frame, the image shows the threshold to a wild hive in the trunk of a tree on



Jeremy Wafer 'Hive' (2006) Video

the street in Melville, Johannesburg, where he lives. In the exhibition space the hive is, in a sense, displaced, its strict focus necessitating reflection. Wafer notes that his interest here was to work with the "interrelation of the inside and the outside, with the ways in which we are constantly negotiating boundaries: between the personal and the political, between inner and outer experience, between that which we experience directly and that which we imagine ourselves into or hope for".

Wafer notes that pre-colonial and non-capitalistic modes of life acknowledge a sense of place "defined through an open relationship

of use, a series of movements across time and space modulated by and in dynamic relationship with food, water, topography, weather patterns, social relationships...". He notes that in contradistinction to colonial and later capitalist systems that embody "fixed relations of control and ownership...", earlier modes of responsiveness to change are "organic and communal in form".

Both Wafer's videos, *HIVE* and *Clouding Over*, have a straightforward presentation that calls for us to simply observe elements of nature. Such witnessing is less passive than at first sight. Stephanie Kaza, in her book *Mindfully Green* (2008), engages a Buddhist approach to witnessing nature noting that "much of our ignorance about ecological degradation is the result of not seeing, not smelling, not tasting, not hearing and not feeling the deeper impacts of environmental suffering". Seeing what is going on and paying attention are basic practices that enable one "to make the connections between individuals and systemic suffering [which] is part of becoming a useful witness" (Kaza 2008:19-20). The importance of this is underlined by the emphasis SAEON puts on "long-term environmental observation [which] is essential to inform appropriate adaptation measures" (2011:9) and the various



Gavin Young 'Mutoko' (1997, recovered 2009) Oil on marine ply, duckboard, vellum



Gavin Young 'Tshihundjo' (1997, recovered 2009) Oil on marine ply, duckboard, vellum

witnessing programmes run by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) and other monitoring bodies such as PHOWN (Photographs of Weaver Nests). The general public are encouraged to contribute information to these forums and aid scientists in collecting data that, in its turn, often drives change.

Attending to that which goes missing is Gavin Young's series *The Birds of*

*Angola* (1997). Investigating the loss of birdlife in the Angolan Civil War (1975-2002) Young visited the area around Cuito Cuanavale, the site of intensive struggle during 1987-88 by the SADF (supporting UNITA) against FAPLA and Cuban soldiers. As a form of witnessing, Young painted indigenous Angolan birds decimated by the conflict on the underside of vellum stretched over detritus from the war. For Young, these images signal Angola's colonial past and the devastation of the Angolan environment that occurred during the war. His project was, as he puts it, a way of "reactivating the airwaves". Recreating images of birds not seen in the area for years his act of recovery was recognised by locals who identified, in the vernacular, birds' names such as 'Mutoko', 'Tshihundjo', and 'Ondia Makunde'.

Young's stretched skin paintings evoke a rudimentary and sutured version of *Robert's Bird Book*, that standard of bird watchers in Southern Africa since its first publication in 1940. David Bunn observes that ornithology "is one of those classificatory systems closely associated with the colonial intellectual tradition" and that on "one level, the desire to classify Angolan avifauna springs out of an Enlightenment need to order the unfamiliar species of the colonial



unfamiliar species of the colonial environment". However he also notes that by "allowing the rich colour plates to migrate, to be repainted, on pieces of flotsam, (Younge) takes a first step in replenishing a blasted wilderness with ghosts of past biodiversity" (Bunn 2007:36).

While recognising bird watching as a colonial project might upset notions of the tradition's benign nature, it is pertinent to note that the practice of teaching our young to notice what inhabits our world may in itself be dying out for reasons other than the end of imperialism. Unaware of the biodiversity and rich interdependency of species that populate our country South Africans are so habituated to the proliferation of invader flora and fauna that we often fail to even notice the presence of foreign species.

In James Webb's series *There's No Place Called Home* (2004 ongoing) he covertly places speakers in trees broadcasting songs of birds alien to the area. Testing our ability to observe that which has no rightful place in our environment the work is never publicised, but the sites are photographically documented. Webb's work, in a perverted twist of logic, is often most effective when it is not noticed at all. *Calls of the Australian Magpie broadcast*



*James Webb 'There is No Place Called Home: Calls of the Australian Magpie broadcast from speakers hidden in trees in Kirstenbosch Gardens' (2011) Lightjet print*

*from speakers concealed in trees in Kirstenbosch Gardens* (2011) wryly frames the plundering habits of colonialism through reference to Britain's antipodean penal colony. The magpie, known as an inveterate thief, is placed in South Africa's largest botanical gardens established for the collection and preservation of indigenous flora by colonisers who claimed the land for themselves.

Lien Botha's image of a Sociable Weaver's nest in the South African Museum speaks to collecting and displacement in another way. This time highly visible and in a place of permanent public display the weaver's nest, a large structure, home to and supporting not one, but a colony of birds, is chopped from its moorings, isolated and hung from chains in a glass vitrine. Outside the museum

walls, glimpsed through a window, a tree can be seen. Dislodgement here is literally embodied - a lodging, and its inhabitants, removed from their natural environment. The violence implicit in this quietly suspended object exemplifies less preservation and more forced removals.

Enforced relocation and dislocation is an embedded vocabulary in South African history and politics and exploitation of our natural resources has distanced us from each other; the land and ourselves. Engaging how we might avoid alienation Julia Martin, in her introduction to *The Jewelled Net - towards a South African theory: practice of environmental literacy*

(1999), references the maxim “Home is where the heart is”, asserting that “to be at home we need to be here” (1999: 2). This injunction to reconnect is powerful, but ‘being here’ is neither simple nor easy. Our tendency to think ourselves elsewhere is exemplified in Webb’s Ikebana series. Highlighting the uncritical acceptance of invaders into a country’s floral vocabulary solely for aesthetic reasons he exhibits alien species in the minimalist Japanese flower arranging style. Revealing a double trespass he alerts viewers to the eroding power of transplanted cultural traditions such as exemplified in Van Riebeeck’s recording in 1659



Lien Botha 'Sociable Weaver's Nest, South African Museum, Cape Town' (2009) Inkjet print

of the flowering of the first imported rose (Martin 1999: 2) which along with other imports soon changed the South African landscape irrevocably.

'Being here', or grounding, is a central theme in the exhibition. Jeremy Wafer has become known for a particular engagement with ground from his vocabulary of termite nests, rocks, paths, floors and aerial maps providing a range of references to the earth or perhaps more appositely, our connection to that which is beneath our feet.

If observation is key to recording environmental change, 'thinking into' what one observes is often vital to understanding it. Wafer's *Tropic of Capricorn*, for instance, calls viewers to scrutinise a non-distinguished piece of ground directly under the artist's feet. It needs information in order to be understood and really 'seen'.

The Tropic of Capricorn, the line defining 'southness', is manifest in Wafer's work in iterations in three different continents: South Africa, Brazil, and Australia. In each place he locates the Tropic by using GPS coordinates. Pacing 100m along the line he takes a photograph of the ground directly below him at every metre. Using a 1:10 ratio in the exhibition space the work occupies 10m of wall space. The viewer must similarly, albeit

on a reduced scale, pace the length of the work in order to engage it.

Depicting nothing except a patch of ground with its soil, pebbles and grit and occasional vegetation, the images are, on one level, non-descript. Here there is no particular 'significant form', in the sense that Clive Bell might have wished to single out the power of an aesthetic moment. The proximity of the terrain traversed, however, does mark an intense specificity. Keeping the viewer attached to the place occupied by the artist the photographs document not only the optical appearance of the ground but, with their haptic focus on textural detail, generate an immediacy and tangibility. The aerial view, normally considered a dominating and distancing one, in this instance, offers possibilities for intimacy. The closeness of what is in



Jeremy Wafer 'Tropic of Capricorn (Alice Springs)' (2005) Photographs (detail)

view, while looking directly down to the ground, disallows a scanning of the horizon, reducing our sense of relative distance. We can no longer locate ourselves by comparison with somewhere else. There is only 'here'.

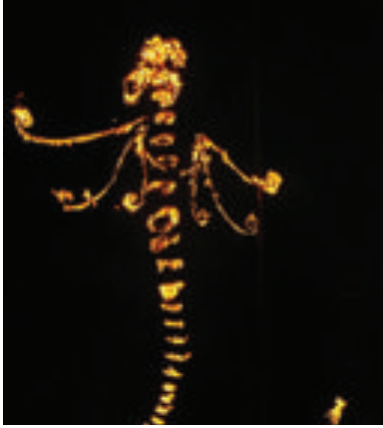
Often described as an imaginary line the Tropic of Capricorn is, in fact, determined by an actual event. Marked when the sun is directly overhead on the summer solstice (December 21 in the Southern hemisphere) it is determined by the moment at which the sun's shadow turns. It is, if one is sufficiently alert, a noticeable, non-physical marker. Ironically, when the sun is directly overhead is the moment when objects along that latitude cast no shadow. Shadow is dependent on angled light. Any object under the sun at that moment sits, as it were, in its own shadow. Thus the Tropic line is rendered both visible and invisible at the exact moment that it is determined.

This barely tangible moment of transition is a key to many of Wafer's concerns. The lack of shadow provokes a curiously flattened instant, as it is the shade cast by an object that allows it to stand out in relief. For a sculptor to work with such a levelling of form points to Wafer's concerns with both physical and conceptual dimensionality. Not focused on the

monumental or spectacular Wafer's *Tropic of Capricorn* keeps one located while referencing, beyond the frame, the global.

This ability to keep the viewer alert to what is close to us as well as what constitutes the larger picture may be the strength of much contemporary art production that situates itself in environmental issues. A pivotal work on the exhibition that directly engages this is Thomas Mulcaire's *Constant*. A solar powered square metre light of 1.360kw represents the 'solar constant' – the mean radiation from the sun that hits the planet's surface. The work directly manifests our connection to the powerhouse of our own solar system. The potential of the sun as a source of sustainable power is readily apparent, but equally evident in this work is the discrepancy between the size of the 15 solar roof panels necessary to power the work and the metre square work within the gallery. Clearly indicating the technological 'lag' between what is available directly from the sun and what can currently be recouped for our own usage, the work articulates the potential of solar power development.

A more indeterminate form of fire power is manifest in Brendan Dickerson's video of *Quetzalcoatl* (2010). Performed on Earth Day



*Brendhan Dickerson 'Quetzalcoatl'  
(2010) Kinetic fire sculpture*

a undulating creature is born out of flames and continues to burn as it dances. The return of the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl, god of dawn, knowledge and self-reflection, marks a shift in the Mayan calendar: Feared by many as harbinger of the end of the world, Quetzalcoatl, however, is a deity that acts as a saviour in these times of crisis. His homecoming marks a point when the human race is forced to become less materialistic if it is to survive. Dickerson's rendition with two snake heads represents the choices we have to make.

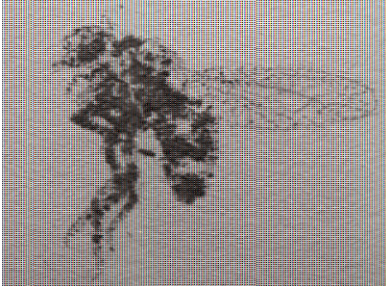
The destructive power of fire in the South African landscape, is represented in Stephen Inggs' photograph *Roostrandveld* (2010).

In Inggs' image, taken shortly after a runaway fire raged for days in the Western Cape Overberg, the trees still have their foliage, but the landscape is leached of colour - its monochromatic bone-like tones revealing the fire's death-dealing capacity. While cycles of burning are necessary for the revivification of life in the South African landscape (many plant seeds being dependent on fire's heat to germinate) increasingly, with rising temperatures, longer drought periods, as well as the careless, or sometimes deliberately destructive, behaviour of human beings, fire cycles are occurring more frequently, diminishing the land's regenerative ability.

As if residual from fire Jessie Hammond's insects of ash are carefully constructed by moving carbon grains with a pin. Shadows of creatures that once might have been they are immensely fragile,



*Stephen Inggs 'Roostrandveld' (2010)  
Archival pigment print on paper.*



Top to bottom: Jessie Hammond 'Untitled' (2010) Ash print

Lyndi Sales 'Carbon Cloud' (2011) Carbon paper

Lucas Thobejane 'No Water, No Life' (2010) Wood

embodying the most basic element of life and death. Carbon however has a particular negative contemporary currency today since it is the carbon emissions we are generating that are adding increasingly to an overheated planet. Lyndi Sales' equally delicate, laser-cut carbon paper *Carbon Cloud* is both an imaginative rendering and a reminder of the spectre that haunts our atmosphere.

While some threats remain invisible some are as highly evident as the corporate drive to mine the Karoo for shale gas. The strongest argument against fracking is its intensive use, and despoiling of water in already arid land. Lucas Thobejane's *No Water, No Life* comprises a series of carved wooden creatures; chameleons, birds, snakes, dogs and often hybrid combinations of half-man, half-animal, each attempting to get water from a tap. The endeavour is perennial in a world where water is scarce and where whole communities are often serviced by a single standpipe.

Thobejane's work is here represented by a bird, balancing on or scrambling over another as it attempts to get its beak into the tap and a monkey cleaning a pair of sneakers in the flow of water descending from the tap. These two works encapsulate the demands on our water from basic personal survival to consumer



Top to bottom: Alexandra Karakashian 'Oil Painting' (2011)  
Used motor oil on canvas  
Carolyn Parton '25.150kg Landscape' (2011)  
Reclaimed spent paint and canvas

production and consumption, the one indispensable, the other profligate.

The destructive power of industry and our consumerist world is exemplified in Alexandra Karakashian's oil leaching canvas. The slow seepage up the pristine cotton fabric tangibly

manifests oil's polluting power: while Carolyn Parton unpacks the western tradition of landscape painting. Building 'landscapes' from the detritus of the painter's studio she roups what would normally go into the landfill.

Daniella Mooney's two works each present a half-sphere concavity with their interiors rendered in blue. The one, *If the Doors of Perception were Cleansed* (2009), is an object of contemplation that encapsulates the infinity of a blue sky. The other, set in granite, is filled with water energised by the sun, and is a "consecration of sorts" as Mooney puts it. Symbolic of day/night, sun/new moon, the celestial sphere and the earth, this sense of sacralisation, while ancient, perhaps signals a return to a relationship with the land in the spirit of honouring and protecting it, actions essential if we are to keep the South Africa Constitution's injunction to preserve the environment "for present and future generations...".

*Threshold:*

*The point that  
must be exceeded to  
begin producing a given effect  
or result  
or to elicit a response.*



*Danielle Mooney 'If the Doors of Perception were Cleansed' (2009) Mahogany, Sapele and airbrushed perspex*

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The range of concerns in 'Threshold' will be extended by the publication of a book with the same title that presents a much wider selection of environmentally engaged work produced by artists in Southern Africa. To order a copy in advance contact Bronwyn Law Viljoen at:

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