

Elfriede Dreyer, Song of the philosopher, 2023



Acid rain, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 30x61cm

We cannot remain ignorant about global warming, air pollution, toxic and radioactive wastes, deforestation and acid rain. The Scottish chemist Robert Angus Smith (1817 - 1884) is known for his research on air pollution and in 1852 he discovered what came to be known as 'acid rain'. He is sometimes referred to as the 'Father of Acid Rain'. In cosmic alchemy, the combining of elements effects change and evolution: Earth + Earth → Land; Land+ Land → Continent; Continent + Continent → Planet; Air + Planet → Atmosphere; Atmosphere + Water → Cloud; Fire + Air → Smoke; and Cloud + Smoke → Acid rain



Animal Farm, 2023. Charcoal and pastel on 250gsm Fabriano, 50x70cm. Framed

George Orwell is generally considered the prophet of false utopia. His pessimism in *Animal farm* as well as 1984 elicited much criticism due to his total rejection of the possibility of an ideal society. His despair undermined the power of his warning about the regular failure of utopic systems. My work comments on the current South African condition of economic and social collapse despite the governing party's utopian ideology of upliftment and redress after the end of apartheid.



Anthropocene 4, 2023. Mixed media on archival paper, 100x70cm

My *Anthropocene* works show gradual erasure of our natural ecosystems. The term 'Anthropocene' describes the current period in the history of planet earth when human activity and the dominance of human presence are having a major impact on the planet's climate. A 'good' Anthropocene is a situation in which humans take responsibility for their actions' impact on the environment and nature. Especially feminists note how humans, nature and technology have a reciprocal impact on each other and change the

definition of being human. Donna Haraway predicts more and more mutations between humans and machines and in *The posthuman* (2013) Rosi Braidotti argues that environmental consciousness brings about a reconsideration of posthumanism, since a heightened sense of the interconnections between the self and others is brought about. Such a sensibility rejects self-centered individualism and is aimed at the wellbeing of the larger community.



Are You Playing with the Cat or the Cat with You?, 2023. Charcoal and pastel on 250gsm Fabriano, 50x70cm. Framed

I created a hybrid of cat, mouse and human in this work. The French philosopher Montaigne (1533-1592) argued that people have an innate capacity for sympathetic imitation ('copycatting'). However, he did not see it as only a human characteristic, since he viewed animals as also having relationships with each other and greeting each other with joy and demonstration of goodwill. He made the well-known statement of 'if I play with my cat how do I know she is not playing with me?' Montaigne identified a solipsistic circle of similar behaviour in humans and animals. Humans conduct conversations with themselves as if they are mute, which is animal-like in character.



Big Bang/Big Chill, 2023. Acrylic, oil, aluminium and spent paint on Perspex, 40x120cm

According to scientists our universe began with an explosion of space - the Big Bang. Starting from extremely high density and temperature, space expanded, the universe cooled, and the simplest elements formed. Gravity gradually drew matter together to form the first stars and the first galaxies. The heat death of the universe (also known as the Big Chill or the Big Freeze) is a hypothesis on the ultimate fate of the universe, which suggests the universe will evolve to a state of no thermodynamic free energy and will therefore be unable to sustain processes that increase entropy. The conjecture that all bodies in the universe cool off, eventually becoming too cold to support life, seems to have been first put forward by the French astronomer Jean Sylvain Bailly in 1777 in his writings on the history of astronomy and in the ensuing correspondence with Voltaire. In Bailly's view, all planets have an internal heat and are now at some particular stage of cooling. Jupiter, for instance, is still too hot for

life to arise there for thousands of years, while the Moon is already too cold. The final state, in this view, is described as one of equilibrium in which all motion ceases.



Philosopher's Gold 1 & 2, 2023. Oil and ink on plastic, 101x88/95cm

In June 1886 Jan Gerrit Bantjes discovered the first gold on the banks of the Witwatersrand in

Johannesburg. This discovery revolutionised South Africa from mainly an agricultural society to the largest gold producer in the world. For the alchemist, gold represents the perfection of everything on any level, including matter, mind, spirit and soul. American philosopher William Gass says that true alchemists do not change lead into gold; they change the world into words.



Rhino in the room 2, 2023. Intermedia on canvas, 52x40cm

In 1911 a verbal duel took place between the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) on the presence of a rhinoceros in the room (in the Cambridge room that was their legendary place of battle). Their argument was concerned with verification, truth, perception and difference. My transmutation here concerns a hybrid between a rhino, an elephant and something else. What we see has a history and is only a present version; it is not always in the shape of what was before nor represents future change.



Rhizome, 2022. Epson ink on Hewlett Packard Gloss 235gsm, 84x119cm

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987, 1980 original French) the French psychoanalysts Deleuze (1925-1995) and Guattari (1930-1992) present their idea of rhizomatic thought as a form of transcendental survival. They describe the rhizome as a bulbous plant that can take on diverse form in any direction and it becomes a metaphor for people that migrate and move in the global context. The philosophers identify cultural patterns of 'rhizomatic' behaviour that is grounded in displacement, uprootedness and multiplicity Rhizomes can adapt to desert and other harsh environments by changing their leaves and other biological aspects, all in an effort to protect themselves against loss of water. The rhizomatic model follows a superficial and random pattern of growth and does not function according to chronological and logical organisation. Many societies today are characterised by such cultural patterns.



Robot, 2023. Pencil on 250gsm Fabriano, 50x70cm. Framed

In posthuman virtual reality dehumanisation develops and hybrids of humans and machines are created. The American feminist Donna Haraway (1944) describes the cyborg as a hybrid of social reality and fiction. She says: "Take evolution. The notion that you would or would not 'believe' in evolution already gives away the game. If you say, 'Of course I believe in evolution', you have lost, because you have entered the semiotics of representationalism - and post-truth, frankly. You have entered an arena where these are all just matters of internal conviction and have nothing to do with the world. You have left the domain of worlding. The French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) said that animals are mechanical beings that function like automata or machines, that is, they do not show signs of non-material souls. According to him animals do not think rationally; they do not talk or philosophise. This viewpoint that elicited much criticism can be considered as visionary of today's cyborg and robotic culture.



Scorched earth, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 30x61cm

In *Scorched Earth: Environmental Warfare as a Crime against Humanity and Nature*, Professor Emmanuel Kreike argues that the environmental infrastructure that sustains human societies has been a target and instrument of war for centuries. This has led to famine and disease, displaced populations and the destruction of people's livelihoods and ways of life. In *Scorched earth* it is explained why ecocide and genocide are not separate phenomena, and why international law must recognise environmental warfare as

a violation of human rights. The Second Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) – one of the most destructive modern armed conflicts in South Africa's history – was caused by the clashing political ideologies of imperialism and republicanism, the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, tensions between political leaders, the Jameson Raid and the Uitlander franchise. In March 1901, Lord Kitchener, the commander of the British forces, decided to cut off the supply of food to the Boers and introduced a 'scorched earth' policy. About 30,000 Boer farmhouses and more than 40 villages were destroyed, and men, women and children were left homeless.



Ships of Neurath, 2023. Mixed media on linen, 100x100cm

This work is based on the literary figure of 'Neurath's ship' coined by the science philosopher Otto Neurath (1882-1945). He asks the question of whether an object or an entity is still the same after some or all its original components have been replaced, and whether its identity is retained. He bases his theory on the legend of the Ship of Theseus according to which Theseus (the

mythic founder-king of Athens) rescued the children of Athens from king Minos, killed the minotaur that threatened them and escaped with them on a ship to Delos. The people of Athens acknowledged and commemorated this heroic act by keeping the ship intact through replacing planks and parts when it became worn and rotted. In *The Robot's Rebellion* (2004) psychologist Keith Stanovich interprets this concept as the constant revision of one's convictions. He brings rotted planks in connection with memes that become redundant or outdated. My transmutation of the Neurath concept is rendered as floating memes in the imagery of boats floating on the sea. It suggests the problematics of borrowing ideas or images and changing it to make it one's own. Is it still the same as the original? My imagery of 'boats' drifting on the sea contains an interpretation of Neurath's image of boats that are repaired at sea, but in subsequent philosophical discourses it was pointed out that Theseus's ship was repaired in the harbour of Athens, an analogy that suggests original identity.



Song of the Philosopher 1, 2023. Mixed media on canvas, 120x122cm

The transmutation of word to image is a dance in rhythm and time. The Greek philosopher Castoriadis (1922-1997) talks about the romanticism of a horse galloping rhythmically into the unknown and he compares it to imaginative signification that knows no boundaries.

This analogy is applicable to the visuals of sound waves that show rhythm, repetition

and time. Listening to music can evoke different images different people. Musicologist Marianne Kielian-Gilbert maintains that music is characterised by interactions of 'textual' voices, therefore a single interpretation is not possible during the process of listening to or performing music. She refers to the feminists H el ene Cixous and Luce Irigaray who write about the potential of feminine language (*l' criture feminine*). They point to the autonomy of the female voice as well as the specific nature of feminine writing. For Kielian-Gilbert, Irigaray's textualisation of woman is not concerned with a universalisation of woman or a gender issue, but with difference.



Song of the Philosopher 2, 2023. Mixed media on canvas, 120x122cm



The rape of Africa (Table mountain), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 30x61cm



The rape of Africa (Utopia), 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 30x42cm

'The Scramble for Africa', also called 'The Rape of Africa', was the coordinated invasion, annexation, division and colonisation of most of Africa by seven Western European powers during an era

known as New Imperialism (1833-1914). This political idea was fundamentally utopian but resulted mostly in dystopia for the occupied territories. The 10 percent of Africa that was under formal European control in 1870 increased to almost 90 percent by 1914, with only Liberia and Ethiopia remaining independent. According to Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), this expansion of national sovereignty contradicted the notion of the nation state providing citizenship to its population.



Transfiguration, 2023. Mixed media on canvas, 30x30cm

The self and identity are constantly subjected to transfiguration due to social and environmental change. Alchemical transfiguration entails transformation of the self, inner liberation, and change.

I view my *Transfiguration* work as a kind of self-portrait depicting my eventual transfiguration from a mortal body into a spiritual being. The painting was inspired by Italian High Renaissance Master Raphael's *The Transfiguration* (1516-1520) that is found in the Pinacoteca Vaticana in the Vatican City. It was his last painting and from the late 16th century until the early 20th century various commentators regarded it as the most famous oil painting in the world. The artist depicts the transfiguration of Christ, a prefiguration of the Last Judgment and the final defeat of the devil in combination with a depiction of the healing of a possessed boy (an episode from the Gospels) in the lower part of the painting.



Uthiopia 2023. Oil and aluminium on linen, 122x122cm

Utopia [Greek: *ju:taupea*] is an imagined place, state or design where – according to the architect(s) thereof – everything is perfect. It is still encountered in many parts of the world in different formats, designs of state and cultures. Utopia as concept was coined by Thomas More in his book *Utopia (De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula utopia, 1516)*. He describes the fictional island of Utopia and

designs a social, military and state structure for the 'country'. During antiquity the designation of 'Ethiopia' was loosely applied to indicate all countries south of Egypt. Recent research exposed the presence of Ethiopia in More's publications and theorists such as the Ethiopian academic Mengisto Debele that is of the opinion that More actually meant Ethiopia with his *Utopia*. Debele is further convinced that European interpretations of More diminish and reduce the content of his works to a white European perspective that confuses non-Europeans. The word '*Uthiopia*' (Ethiopia + Utopia) has been created by Ethiopian researchers since.



Zoo City, 2022. Epson ink on Hewlett Packard Gloss 235gsm, 84x119cm Ed of 3. Framed

 In *Zoo city* the ideas of British author JG Ballard (1930-2009) on the character of the contemporary city and its inhabitants are transmuted. Ballard creates fiction with the themes of chaos, violence, transience and abandonment. In novels like *High-rise* (1975) he depicts dystopia in scenes of a luxury apartment building's collapse into a jungle of chaos. In other works such as *Crash* (1973) and *Concrete Island* (1974) the narratives are engaged with how modern sociological and technological conditions have changed the human psyche. Ballard suggests that intense technological conditions deprive humanity of its humanness and render them more animal-like, self-centered and violent. Critics and commentators have often described Ballard's dystopian visions as prophetic. In South African Lauren Beukes' novel *Zoo city* (of 2010, with the same title as my digital production, *Zoo city*, of 2007), the words 'being animalled' are used.



Zoo city 2 and 3, 2023. Mixed media on canvas, 51x40cm