

Special section editorial

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ABSTRACT

The project titled *Stairways and Ruins* was a three-year initiative undertaken by the research entity ViNCO (Visual Narratives and Creative Outputs) at North-West University. *Stairways and Ruins* is the fourth collaborative practice-led research project undertaken by artists and researchers through an open call for participation. The final stage of this practice-led research culminated in this special section of *Image & Text* (post-production phase), where artists and scholars (who did or did not participate in the exhibition itself) were asked to submit abstracts and subsequently articles on works featured in the exhibition, or on other works and discourses related to the themes emanating from *Stairways and Ruins* as prompts. *Image & Text* provided ViNCO with the opportunity to collaborate on this special section of the journal. This project, in collaboration with *Image & Text*, presents an opportunity for members of ViNCO, as well as participating artists and authors, to have their artworks showcased in a large-scale exhibition. At the same time, scholars are presented with an opportunity to publish scholarly articles on newly produced artworks or to explore tangential themes emanating from their current research foci. The themes covered in this special section encompass topics related to dystopia, memorialisation, gender identity, fragility, loss, an artistic conversation, graphic histories, and so on.

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Editorial

Stairways & Ruins

The articles presented in this special section of *Image & Text* emanate from the project *Stairways and Ruins* (2022-2024) – a three-year project undertaken by the research entity ViNCO (Visual Narratives and Creative Outputs through Interdisciplinary Research) at North-West University. It is the fourth such project,¹ where collaborative practice-led research is conducted by artists and researchers through an open call for participation. The three-year span included the launching of the project (2022), the production of artworks for an exhibition (2023), and finally the production of scholarly texts, which began in 2024.

The first phase thus comprised conceptualising and launching the project, and inviting prospective artists to submit abstracts and ideas for artworks – a phase described in this context as pre-production (Combrink & Marley 2009). In the call for participation, artists were asked to produce a visual artwork using the idea of stairways and ruins as a prompt. This theme was developed from the writings of Bessie Head and Sol Plaatje:

I am building a stairway to the stars. I have the authority to take the whole of humanity with me. That is why I write (Head cited by Coundouriotis 1996).

There is always a return to the ruins, only to the womb we cannot return (Plaatje 2009 [1989]).

The notion of stairways can refer to building dreams, transporting to other places, and the like, while ruins hinge on things such as wreckage, the ashes of times gone by, and issues of loss.

During the first phase, interested artists were briefed on thematic and conceptual possibilities of stairways and ruins, including archival matters, memorialisation, myth, auto-ethnography, and (re-)imagined pasts and futures. The abstracts and preparatory artworks were screened by a panel comprising ViNCO members as well as the appointed curator, Andrew Lambrecht, who is the curator of Historical Paintings and Sculpture at Iziko Museums of South Africa. Artists whose submissions were accepted were encouraged to keep reflective journals of their processes, as these could assist in producing scholarly texts during the third phase, as outlined below.

From here, the second phase, namely production, unfolded. This entailed creating artworks and setting up the exhibition. The exhibition was put together with great sensitivity by Lambrecht, who worked with the then curator of the North West University Gallery, Amohelang Mohajane, as well as postgraduate students, who learnt much about curatorial work and related endeavours, including receiving and unwrapping artworks.

The exhibition ran from 17 July – 31 August 2023 at the North-West University Gallery in Potchefstroom. Twenty-five artists from across South Africa participated in this exhibition,

which drew large numbers of visitors. Some works were the result of collaborations between visual artists and poets, as well as other collaborative outputs – something that is encouraged in a project of this kind.

Artists submitted artists' statements, which are available in the digital catalogue, with high-quality images taken professionally for this purpose. A video fly-through was also produced.² This material was crucial for the documentation and preservation of the work done, and for the third phase, where authors of this present special section of *Image & Text*, as well as future scholars, can consult the material on ViNCO's website for visual and other information on the project. Numerous walkabouts by ViNCO members and the ViNCO director, Dr Annemi Conradie-Chetty, were also conducted.

The third and final phase of the project thus entails what is referred to as post-production in this context (Combrink & Marley 2009). Here, artists and scholars (who did or did not participate in the exhibition itself) were asked to submit abstracts and subsequently articles on works featured in the exhibition, or on other works and discourses related to the themes emanating from *Stairways and Ruins* as prompts. *Image & Text* provided us with the opportunity to collaborate on this special section of the journal, which is dedicated to *Stairways and Ruins*.

Along with its predecessors, this project creates vast opportunities for ViNCO members as well as participating artists and authors. Artists have their work featured in a large-scale exhibition where less experienced artists also get to show their work alongside that of established artists; this is a significant moment for many artists. The exposure of the exhibition to the public, also by means of walkabouts and the digital capturing of the exhibition, contributes to having a documented and highly visible output that also invites scholarly consideration, as is the case with the articles contained in this special section of *Image & Text*. Such exposure is salient, for example, for artist-scholars who wish to apply for Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) accreditation of their outputs. Authors have the opportunity to engage with newly produced artworks in their writing, or to explore tangential themes emanating from their current research foci, and to have their work published here.

Rat Western's article "Phoenixes and ashes: A close reading of selected work from *Stairways and Ruins*" reflects on a number of works in the exhibition, which she views through the lens of Heidegger's assertion that art can manifest, articulate or illuminate cultural and temporal concerns emanating from the world and time of that culture. In light of Heidegger's further contention that art can reconfigure the traces of the past, Western explores works by Kiveshan Thumbiran, Nicola Grobler, Corné Venter, Louisemarié Combrink, Lesego Motsiri and Pieter Odendaal, Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, and Hénriel Fourie (in collaboration with Armand Aucamp and Paula Kruger). Western explores the diverse ways in which these works engage with (and reconfigure) history as part of a contemporary moment. She approaches this

exploration of the works through a reading of the cyclic, allegorical narrative of the myth of the phoenix.

Catharina de Klerk's article "Weaving more-than-human connections in Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn's *The nest* and Jo Roets's *Nest series*" explores how artists Heenop and Steyn's *The nest* (2023) sound installations and Roets's *Nest* (2023) sculptures highlight more-than-human connections through the representation of bird nests. These artworks evoke themes of fragility, loss, and transience, while accentuating the interconnectedness between humans and non-human agents. The artists, inspired by fallen nests and the materials birds use, invite reflection on the notion of belonging and hidden connections with nature through their use of metaphor and association. Informed by Sol Plaatje's notion of returning to what remains, the works encourage viewers to consider their place within a larger ecological network.

In his article "Hou my vas, Korporaal: Protesting masculinity in Hénriel Fourie's *Toekoms Spoke/Future Ghosts*", Juan M. Terblanche investigates how heteronormative, militarised masculinity is subverted in Fourie's short film titled *Toekoms Spoke/Future Ghosts* (2023). The film was exhibited at the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition at the North-West University Gallery in 2023. The film subverts heteronormative, militarised masculinity as historically constructed, especially during the Southern African Border War. Terblanche correlates the emasculated cover pages of the South African Defence Force magazine, *Paratus* (1970-1994), with Fourie's gender transgressive video stills and mediated objects depicted in the film. He contextualises heteronormative militaristic masculinity within Foucauldian discourse arguing that homogeneous masculinity was hierarchical and placed above other diverse gender expressions. Furthermore, a homogeneous masculine expression is dynamic, complex, and can be adapted (subjugated) to maintain a normative, propagandistic, and systemic ideal. However, Terblanche argues that this historical authority and its pervasive constructs are overturned in Fourie's contemporary work, where a defiantly diverse form of masculinity is grappled with in an uneasy, satirical, and gender-transgressive manner.

The article "Dystopian ruins: Nostalgia for a lauded past that never existed" by Liam Reinhold Rothballer explores ruins in the context of dystopian imaginations, arguing that the representation of '*ruins can speak of a past that shall (tragically) never be present again, but also of a fictionalised past that has never existed*' (author's italics). This fictionalised past, Rothballer argues, relies on a maturity of spatiality that works to produce nostalgia, which is then made desirable by loss. Conceptualising the ruin as a site for Romantic contemplation, Rothballer interrogates how the ruin-gazer (who nonetheless is bound by their socio-cultural boundedness) also necessarily experiences a sense of loss and grief when gazing upon the destruction of memory and societal collapse – ruins are not only nostalgic, but point towards a profound sense of the dystopic. This article also engages with Ricardo Liut's visual contribution of sun-exposed prints titled *Linger series* (2023) that Rothballer describes as 'a collection of broken memories, sectioned into hazy recollections'.

Niel Lowe's article "The cadastral map as imperial ruin: *All she surveys*" relates to Rothballer's explorations. Lowe asks: 'Wherein lies the charm of ruins? Why do the romanticism of colonialism and its relics persist?' The author explores how an encounter in New Zealand with a derelict Victorian fountain at Wairongoa Springs on the Taieri Plain, near Dunedin, prompted them to explore the 'intersecting object histories of this fountain through the metaphors of ruin, ruination and the gaze', drawing particularly on notions of mapping. This article highlights the similarities between the colonial legacies of South Africa and New Zealand, particularly 'cross-cutting themes of colonisation, expropriation and exploitation of natural resources through cadastral grids of property delineation'. Finally, the article explores, through both the author's writing and visual work, how historical injustices and colonial legacies of systemic violence intersect and challenge existing perspectives.

A number of articles in this theme engage with practice-led approaches, such as those by Lowe, and the contribution by Colette Lotz and Louisemarié Combrink, titled "Creating sacred spaces: A study of storyworld building". This article was produced collaboratively by Lotz and Combrink, who reflect on the phases of making as well as post-production themes relevant to the works, which are described as sacred storyworlds. Lotz's production processes are explored (as main author and artist), where she illuminates how she transformed photographs of clouds and other structures into bilateral symmetrical images reminiscent of Rorschach Inkblot Tests. This manipulation causes the works to assume an abstract and otherworldly aspect. Salient themes that are explored include the liminality of these sacred spaces and how their symmetrical appearance works to achieve this celestial and reflective quality.

"That which remains: Memorialisation in art and the 'living' melancholy object" by Lyrene Kühn-Botma is another article that presents practice-led reflection. Kühn-Botma addresses the concept of melancholy objects, and looks at how digital devices act as such objects that can 'reiterate and remind of the devastation' of ruination and loss, as such devices are ways of engaging with what remains of the deceased. Her article explores how practices and objects become symbolically charged in the bereavement process, finding 'their way back into the everyday life and living spaces of the bereaved'. From here, she considers her own artistic practice as a research artist to explore the complex relationship that a grieving person has with melancholy objects, 'from the point of view of inner pictures in an inner world of the imagination'.

Lindi Cameron's article "Navigating grief through contemporary commemorative art practice in the form of graphic tapestries" combines practice-led reflections on her own work and comparative analyses of artworks that resonate with her work in terms of conceptual and processual matters. Cameron's diptych assumes the form of graphic tapestries where photographic and other images are physically woven into works that express the author's processing of grief in a tangible way. Using a rhizomatic approach, Cameron works with archival memorabilia, also highlighting the usefulness of this approach in the context of commemorative

art where the rhizome invites multiple entryways and possibilities as it develops, allowing for variation, offshoots, and expansion. Similar modes of thinking informed the creation of Cameron's diptych *NVR* (2023) and *DVR* (2023) (abbreviations of her late parents' initials). Here, the rhizomatic approach allows the artist to explore growth, interconnectedness, transformation, resilience and adaptability through the creative process and the reflection that follows.

The contribution "Artistic conversation: Louismarié Combrink in conversation with Jan van der Merwe" entails a conversation focusing on Van der Merwe's approach to artmaking; an approach he has also applied in his teaching. This approach comprises five overlapping phases, namely conceptualisation, materials, processes, techniques, and presentation. Van der Merwe's contribution to *Stairways and Ruins* – an installation-like piece titled *Speelgrond/Playground* (2023) – forms the foundation of this conversation, where Van der Merwe demonstrates how he applied these phases to his own work. This approach can be applied by artists as well as art lecturers when working through a creative process.

In their article "*Sivivane sogogo! An artistic reimagining beyond shadow and stone*," Jessica Lindiwe Draper, Louise Hall, and Justine Wintjes reflect on an interactive and interdisciplinary installation entitled *Sivivane sogogo!* (2023) that was installed by an artist's collective (TheCollective) at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum (KZNM). In a playful and experimental manner, the artists combined stones, prehistoric hand tools, rock engravings, and *morabaraba* game boards with gestural writing and shadow casting. Collaborating with the KZNM's staff members and viewer-participants, *Sivivane sogogo!* increased all participants' receptiveness while challenging conventional modes of museum display, research methodologies, and heuristics. Learning from two previously related iterations of The Collective in the KZNM, the writers state that handling ancestral objects in a multisensory installation envisions deep time by connecting past and future generations to land and non-human subjects. A haptic engagement with objects positioned the installation within the field of New Materialism, where objects offered material information beyond the boundaries of conventional viewing practices. Surprisingly, the use of a shadow that casts a board for viewer-participants to play *morabaraba* enabled a material presence in the absence of a real stone board. The installation enables a paradigm shift in the intersection of museum practice and practice-based artmaking, where co-constructive agency between all participants, including museum staff and the public, is enabled.

The article "Graphic history and style: Dada Khanyisa's drawings for 'The widow of Marabastad'" by Deirdre Pretorius and Adri Haese explores the role of visual styles in South African graphic histories, focusing on Dada Khanyisa's chapter "The widow of Marabastad" from Richard Conyngham's *All rise* (2021). By analysing Khanyisa's visual approach and use of subjectivity, the authors highlight how graphic narratives can challenge traditional historical representations and invite readers to critically engage with the past. The study positions Khanyisa's work within a growing tradition of resistance comics, emphasising the illustrator's conscious role in shaping

historical memory through art. This article invites discourse on South African visual narratives with regard to often-overlooked or silenced histories.

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Notes

1. See <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco> for an exposition of previous projects, which included *Creative Creatures* (2007-2009), *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* (2009-2011), and *Reflective conversations* (2012-2014).
2. The catalogue and fly-through are available at <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/stairways-and-ruins-exhibition>.

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