

LAMENTING CHAOS. VULNERABILITY EXPRESSED IN ART

by

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UKULILA NOKUBA NOSIZI NGENXA YESIPHITHIPHITHI (XA IZINTO ZINGAHAMBI
NGENDLELA EFANELEKILEYO OKANYE NGOKUNGALAWULEKI). UBUTHATHAKA
OBUBONAKALISWE KUBUGCISA

Ibhalwe ngu

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Eli phepha lingeniswe ngokungqinelana neemfuno zesidanga

SEMASTAZI KWEZOBUGCISA BOKUZOBA

Kwi

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EYOMDUMBA 2026

DECLARATION

I declare that *Lamenting chaos. Vulnerability expressed in art* (2026) is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or cited have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I declare that I have submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or any part thereof, for examination at the University of South Africa for another qualification or to another institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Mouret', with a stylized, cursive script.

HE MOURET

February 2026

TITLE:

Lamenting chaos. Vulnerability expressed in art.

SUMMARY:

This study examines anxiety through a posthuman lens, using rhizome theory and the concept of “becoming”. It embraces a fluid state of environmental connection, accepting real and perceived chaos. Through visual art, a tensional relationship between trauma, vulnerability and obsessive control is explored, establishing its impact on female artists and their creative work.

The study interrogates chaos and order, fear and control, despair and resilience in the works of Julie Mehretu, Leora Farber and Joana Choumali, through a review of literature, textual analyses, autoethnography and practice-led artmaking. Employing new materialism, multidirectional thinking and convergence theories, the research highlights how selected works from these artists intersect with my creative praxis as an embodied expression of lamentation and grief. My artmaking resulted in the exhibition *Disquiet* (2024), which, through art, provides a dialogical response to the ambivalences and resilience required to live a precarious life.

LIST OF KEY TERMS:

Anxiety; archetypes; control; cyanotype; fear; grief; becoming; posthuman; tacit knowledge.

TITEL:

Weeklaag oor chaos. Kwesbaarheid uitgedruk in kuns

OPSOMMING:

Hierdie studie ondersoek angs deur 'n postmenslike lens, met behulp van risoomteorie en die konsep van "wording". Dit behels 'n vloeibare toestand van omgewingsverbintenis, wat werklike en waargenome chaos aanvaar. Deur middel van visuele kuns word 'n spanningsverhouding tussen trauma, kwesbaarheid en obsessiewe beheer ondersoek, wat die impak daarvan op vroulike kunstenaars en hulle kreatiewe werk bepaal.

Die studie gebruik 'n literatuuroorsig, tekstuele ontledings, outo-etnografie en praktykgedrewe kunsmaak om chaos en orde, vrees en beheer, wanhoop en veerkragtigheid in die kunswerke van Julie Mehretu, Leora Farber en Joana Choumali te ondersoek. Met behulp van nuwe materialisme, multidireksionele denke en konvergensieteorieë, beklemtoon die navorsing die oorvleueling van my kreatiewe praktyk met geselekteerde kunswerke van hierdie kunstenaars as 'n beliggaamde uitdrukking van weeklaag en hartseer. My kunsmaak het gekulmineer in die uitstalling *Disquiet* (2024), wat 'n dialogiese reaksie bied op die ambivalensies en veerkragtigheid wat nodig is om 'n onseker lewe te lei.

LYS SLEUTELTERME:

Angs; argetipes; beheer; sianotipe; vrees; hartseer; wording; postmenslik; stilswyende kennis.

ISIHLOKO:

Ukulila nokuba nosizi ngenxa yesiphithiphithi (xa izinto zingahambi ngendlela efanelekileyo okanye ngokungalawuleki). Ubuthatha obubonakaliswe kubugcisa

ISISHWANKATHELO:

Olu phandolwazi luphonononga ixhala ngokwembono yobuposthuman¹ ekwiyindlela yokuhlalutya ejonga ubudlelwane phakathi kwabantu, ubuchwepheshe, indalo nezinye izinto ezingengobantu, endaweni yokubeka umntu njengoyena obalulekileyo, ngokusebenzisa ithiyori yerhayizom², kunye nengcamango ethi “ukuba kwinkqubo yenguqu eqhubekayo”. Kwamkelwa imeko eguquguqukayo yonxibelelwano nendalo esingqongileyo, ukuba umntu unxulumene, uyinxalenye ephilayo yehlabathi elingenakuqondakala, nokuba kwimeko yokuyeka ukufuna ukulawula yonke into, kunye nokwamkela ukuba ebomini kukho izinto ezingekho ngqiqweni nezingaqikelelwanga neemvakalelo zokubhideka anokuba nazo. Ngokusebenzisa ubugcisa bokuzoba, kuphononongwa ubudlelwane obunoxinzelelo phakathi komonzakalo wengqondo, ukuba buthathaka, nolawulo olugqithisileyo, ukuze kuboniswe indlela ezi zinto ezichaphazela ngayo amagcisa angabasetyhini, kunye nomsebenzi wawo wobugcisa.

Olu phandolwazi luhlalutya iingcamango zesiphithiphithi nocwangco, uloyiko, ulawulo, ukuphelelwa lithemba, nokomelela xa kujongwa imisebenzi kaJulie Mehretu, ULeora Farber, kunye noJoana Choumali, kusetyenziswa uphononongo loncwadi, uhlalutyo lwetekisi, autoethnografi³, kunye nokuveliswa kobugcisa obukhokelwa yinkqubo yokuzoba. Ngokusebenzisa ithiyori yematerialism entsha (egxininisa ukuba izinto eziphathekayo, indalo, imizimba, nezinto ezingengobantu zinendima ebalulekileyo ekubumbeni ihlabathi nakwimveliso yolwazi, hayi nje abantu bodwa), ukucinga

¹ Imbono yobuposthuman- yindlela yokuhlalutya egxininisa ukuba abantu abahlali bodwa embindini wehlabathi, koko bajongwa njengabanobudlelwane obusondeleyo nobuchwepheshe, izilwanyana, indalo, nezinye izinto ezingengobantu. Le mbono icela umngeni kwiingcinga zesintu ezibeka umntu njengoyena ubalulekileyo, ize ikhuthaze ukuqonda ubudlelwane phakathi kwabantu nabanye ubukho ngendlela ebanzi

² Ithiyori yerhayizom- yindlela yokucinga, nokuhlalutya echaza ulwazi, iingcinga okanye unxibelelwano njengolwakhiwo olungenaziko linye, apho zonke iindawo zinokunxibelelana ngokukhululekileyo.

³ Autoethnografi- yindlela yophando apho umphandi asebenzisa amava akhe obuqu ukuze aqonde aze ahlalutya imiba yenkcubeko, yezentlalo, okanye yobuqu ngokunxulumanisa la mava nemeko ebanzi.

ngeendlela ezininzi, kunye neethiyori zokudibana kweengcamango neenkqubo⁴. Olu phando lubonisa indlela imisebenzi yobugcisa ekhethiweyo yala magcisa edibana ngayo nomsebenzi wam wobugcisa njengendlela ebonakalisa ngokwasemzimbeni ukulila nokuba nentlungu. Umsebenzi wam wokwenza ubugcisa wafikelela kwinqanaba eliphezulu ngomboniso wobugcisa i*Disquiet* (2024), onika impendulo yengxoxo malunga nokungaqiniseki neemvakalelo eziphikisanayo, kwakunye nokomelela okufunekayo ukuze umntu aphile ubomi obungazinzanga.

ULUHLU LWAMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO:

Ixhala, iipatheni zentlandlolo, ulawulo, isayanotayiphi⁵, uloyiko, intlungu, ukuba kwinkqubo yenguqu eqhubekayo, iposthuman, ulwazi olungachazwanga ngokucacileyo.

⁴ Kubhekiswa kwiithiyori ezichaza indlela iingcamango, iinkqubo, okanye iinkalo ezahlukeneyo ezisondelelana ngayo, zidibane zize zisebenzisana ekuveliseni ulwazi okanye ukuqonda okutsha.

⁵ Yindlela yokuprinta imifanekiso esebenzisa ukukhanya kwelanga okanye ukukhanya kweUV, kunye nemichiza yokuvelisa imifanekiso enemibala eluhlaza okwesibhakabhaka

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My sincere thanks to friends and family who have assisted in so many ways.

PREFACE

From a young age, I struggled with anxiety, worrying about all sorts of things that may well have seemed ridiculous to others, and often did. Not medically diagnosed, it was an insidiously quiet, overwhelming shadow that left me feeling vulnerable, fearful and diminished. The severity of the anxiety fluctuated throughout different periods of my life. I was called 'sensitive', or a 'worry wart' at school, and reprimanded for my overly frequent apologies.

In my thirties I was diagnosed with stage four endometriosis. This was both a concern and a huge relief. I finally knew the cause of the severe pain I had experienced for decades, brushed aside and negated by others as 'normal'. The diagnosis proved that I was not just weak and unable to handle everyday life.

Endometriosis and the resultant infertility created a distrust in my own body and its signals. The subsequent breakdown of my marriage compounded the grief of my lifepath, one that seemed incapable of following the natural course of things. Although my depression diminished over time, the anxiety remained. Internally, I grieved my loss and yet I functioned well by masking the pain in my day-to-day interactions.

My master's degree has enabled an intensive, intimate examination of my anxiety from an academic perspective. I delight in studio practice, creating artworks that visually communicate my experiences, simultaneously learning how to cope with my anxiety. As a visual artist, I reveal this frequently debilitating anxiety with the quiet intention and hope that someone else may relate to my work in this fast changing, unpredictable world.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND

The purpose of this study is to investigate a deep personal need for control amidst the chaos of the contemporary world: a lament to be expressed through theoretical research and visual language. Furthermore, it concerns the need to confront and understand the anxiety that emerges from actual and perceived lack of control in the realm of the ordinary through artmaking. The title “lamenting chaos” suggests a state of being which ranges from vulnerability to incapacitating fear. This research is a contemplation of the grief I experience due to my anxiety and is informed by research and reflexive writing expressed through material actions and tacit knowledge.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The challenge of this study is the nature of disorder. Feminist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti writes that we are confronted by collective anxiety where “the complex, ambivalent emotions of alternating suffering and hope, resilience, boredom, all merging into vulnerability have been labelled as posthuman convergence” (Braidotti 2020). The paradoxical challenges of this emotionally heightened state form the foundation of new insights into themes of fear and anxiety within art discourse⁶. I investigate how selected contemporary artists, Mehretu (1970 -), Farber (1969 -), Choumali (1974 -) and I make connections with chaos and vulnerability through our work, problematising the fetishised notion and personal demand for control. The complexities of creating my own visual language evolved as I examined the selected artists’ lexicons to use these experimentally in my own art making.

The problem is that of the anxious intellect trying to develop ‘protective’ predictions based on prior experience. Author Yuval Harari (2015:267) references history as being chaotic, in that there is an inability to predict what will come to pass. Researchers may question why something was not evident when an event occurred: the nature of the unpredictable is the core to dynamic life, growth and transformation. This is

⁶ A wide range of academic and also popular authors (Harari 2015, De Botton 2013, Brown 2018) were consulted to indicate diverse thinking across both scholarly and popular debates.

problematic for an anxiety-ridden individual. Harari (2015:267) states that “History cannot be explained deterministically, and it cannot be predicted because it is chaotic. So many forces are at work, and their interactions are so complex that extremely small variations in the strength of the forces and the way they interact produce huge differences in outcomes”.

Reading and refreshing screens to discover what is happening in the world sucks one into a figurative vortex of global violence and disruption. This is not an exaggeration or imagined situation. Global weather patterns are changing; political⁷ and social instability is thoroughly documented through horrors reported daily in news bulletins. In essence, local and global issues make life uncertain⁸, although it feels particularly perilous at present. Several research questions arise from the context of these problems.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Research question 1: Outlined through the theoretical lens of posthumanism, to what extent can chaos be defined as fear and despair?
- Research question 2: Within the process of ‘becoming’, how can one identify, define and apply multidirectional states of ‘being’?
- Research question 3: In selected contemporary artworks, which visual strategies allude to control and a loss of control?
- Research question 4: Which theoretical and practical tools can be developed as navigational devices to be applied in visual art?

⁷ United Nations General Assembly 2025: French President Emmanuel Macron speaking about fear in the face of feeling one has no control, cautions against defeat, fatigue and cynicism (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsMnFJtBBP0>. 27:49).

⁸ A core issue in making sense of one’s existence is personal uncertainty (Van den Bos 2009:212). According to Van Den Bos (2009:198) there are two kinds of uncertainties: when we do not have all the information necessary to confidently form a social judgement, and personal uncertainty which may be more intuitive and visceral, relating to “self-regulation, existential sense-making and world-view defence”.

1.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

From a theoretical perspective, the primary aim of this study is to understand why anxiety merges with fear, despite no specific cause for their manifestation. Author Alain de Botton (2013:24) writes of the importance of art in teaching us to suffer “with honour”, while transforming vulnerabilities into something fine (de Botton 2013:25). My study focuses on confronting and understanding vulnerable states of uncertainty through the need for control versus embracing the sublime. Braidotti’s (2013, 2019, 2020) posthuman stance⁹ provides a contemporary framework within which to situate the study. I apply an autoethnographic methodology to document my experiences, explorations and the erudition gained from theories and analytical understandings of other artist’s specific works.

My objective was to transform academically gained knowledge into an art output through practice-led research, particularly via tacit learning. At its core, my objective is to develop navigational tools and a visual language that express my personal vulnerability, and to contribute to anxiety discourse from a female perspective.

1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While my life experience was the original point of departure, this research revolves around chaos theory and how it interrelates with Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987) rhizomic thinking, Henry Jenkins’s (2006) convergence culture and Jane Bennett’s perspectives on new materialism (2010). This study is inter-disciplinary¹⁰, centred on art research and sources selected from philosophy and psychology. I use specific concepts within these theories, applying them to my art practice. A comparative literary study and textual analysis of selected artworks by Julie Mehretu (1970-) (see figure 1 in chapter 3.2.1), Leora Farber (1969-) (see figure 6 in chapter

⁹ Braidotti (2019:6) states that the posthuman stance is one that embraces complexities, subjectivity and specifically situated nuances. For Braidotti (2019:35), posthumanism is defined as the time when European “Man” is decentered and there is acknowledgement of humans being *part* of life; as well as the ambivalence around new technologies.

¹⁰ Braidotti draws on Deleuze (1987:97); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KMtuf0NNwM>; Braidotti (2018:3), stating the need to consult an array of disciplines in order to create cartographies of our current state. In line with this, mathematical theorists, philosophers, medical doctors, poets, writers and artists have theories and knowledge that as visualisations, become convergently and collectively interesting in developing potential cartographies.

3.2.2) and Joana Choumali (1974-) (see figures 8,9 & 10 in chapter 3.2.3) are studied from these perspectives.

The theoretical framework is based on Braidotti's (2013, 2019, 2020) posthumanist theory identifying a heightened state of vulnerability, and the trauma research of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk (2014). The articulation of anxiety and fearfulness, grieving and the quest for control are accompanied by a search for the redemptive resilience required to mitigate anxiety. A posthuman lens supports a chronically anxious feminist voice to be heard in that it advances the ability to accept contradictions and multidirectional states of being (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KMtuf0NNwM>). Braidotti draws on Deleuze (1987:97) who writes of assemblages, or the consultation of an array of disciplines¹¹ and sources¹² to create cartographies of our current state (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KMtuf0NNwM>).

Artworks from Mehretu, Farber and Choumali have been selected through personal preference and significantly, how they inform and transform my own artmaking. Mehretu (Ethiopian American), Farber (South African) and Choumali (Ivorian) have African roots albeit that their work is contextually different.¹³ It may be argued that their work engages with vulnerabilities linked to lamentation and grief. To paraphrase art critic de Botton (2013:25) "art is an emptying of the self in order to make new discoveries". I purport that it is necessary to study anxiety from a specifically female perspective and consequently, my personal experiences of anxiety inform interpretations of my findings.

¹¹ Braidotti (2018:3) states that "knowledge production [...] is always multiple and collective". I substantiate this with Anna Tsing's (2015:159) point that all learning practices should be included in "telling stories of landscape", meaning that different types of knowledge enrich understanding and learning. In contrast to posthumanism, a humanist perspective extending into pan-humanism, focuses on a strong reaction against change, particularly a shift in the hierarchy of 'man'. Braidotti (2019:36) suggests that this could appear as right-aligned conservative Catholic discourse or left aligned anxiety that develops into political rage.

¹² The opinions of mathematical theorists, philosophers, medical practitioners, poets, authors and artists have been consulted for this study.

¹³ Mehretu is Ethiopian born, although she considers herself American (<https://www.moma.org/artists/25414-julie-mehretu>); Farber is a Jewish South African with Lithuanian heritage (https://theartistsbook.org.za/view.asp?pg=exhibitions&ex=ex3_001&pgsub=leora) and Choumali is Ivorian (<https://mocada.org/haabre-the-last-generation/>).

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Buddhist author Pema Chödrön (2016:149) writes that, even though the world's happenings are a result of collective human actions, we can individually take responsibility for our own state of mind as we move forward into the future. Using this approach as a foundation, I explore my own art making practice, incorporating ambivalent expressions of grief that are sometimes difficult to articulate as I attempt to find a balance between order and chaos.

Several theoretical sources influence my realisations. To understand the anxious individual's need for control, I explore different views on chaos and chaos theory. In contrast to determinism, chaos theory¹⁴ engages with the infinite complexities of life's possibilities. Determinism¹⁵, in terms of predictability (Hoefer 2023), was advanced by early thinking around causality, by René Descartes (1596-1650) who said that "every effect has a cause" (cited in Oestreicher 2007:281). Cause and effect processes include nonlinear cascades of events and unpredictable factors that 'chaotically' diverge (Ayers 1997:374). Allied with the vulnerabilities of severe mental anxiety is the requirement that the sufferer accepts what is: understanding precarity and acknowledging it. Rebecca Solnit's *A field guide to getting lost* (2005) and Tsing's *The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* (2015) are constructive in engaging with and embracing precarity as a fact of life. Both authors respond to these contemporary complexities albeit from different angles. Solnit explores the physical and psychological aspects of being lost and the need to do so; and Tsing writes of the Matsutake mushrooms that only flourish where land chaos has eschewed.

Precarity and unpredictability led to Deleuze (1925-1995) and Guattari's (1939-1992) book *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (1987) which engages with that which seems uncontrolled. The authors introduce the idea of "rhizome" non-

¹⁴ Edward Lorenz's early work with mathematics and weather predictions in the 1960s developed into an understanding of chaos theory in 1972 (Oestreicher 2007:283).

¹⁵ Simply put, determinism is the logical consequence of events fixed as a matter of natural law (Hoefer 2023). Or, as he explains, determinism can be loosely defined as "The *world is governed by* (or *is under the sway of*) determinism if and only if, given a specified *way things are at a time*, the way things go *thereafter* is fixed as a matter of *natural law*" (Hoefer 2023). [His italics highlight phrases requiring further clarification].

hierarchical thinking, with offshoots of ideas and tangential directions of growth, much like a rhizome plant's root system which seems chaotic. Rhizomic thinking becomes a systematic model to understand the ambivalences of emotion. Tangled strands and threads form a literal process within my practice. This philosophical theory, defining a linear logic incorporating the unpredictable is applied to readings of Mehretu, Farber and Choumali's¹⁶ work, albeit in different ways. New understandings of multiplicities and the complex chaotic evolve within my art practice. Deleuze likens multiplicities within rhizome thinking to a pack of wolves, an analogy of the individual participating in a collective (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:10). This dovetails with the motif of wolves in my artwork, although they metaphorically differ, alluding to my thought patterns.

Bessel van der Kolk's *The body keeps the score* (2014) is a seminal source on anxiety and trauma. Despite its psychological foundation, it is widely accepted that the relationship between trauma¹⁷ and anxiety manifests somatically. Russell Kennedy (2020) writes about his anxiety, drawing extensively on van der Kolk's research. Although Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) offers a noteworthy background¹⁸, Carl Jung (1875-1961) famously disagreed¹⁹ with him. Jung's *Liber Novus* (2009), also called the Red Book, attempted to understand his own thinking, including the significance of symbols and madness, divine madness and the collective psyche (Jung 2009). Kennedy and Jung provide alternative viewpoints on their personal anxiety, defining the extent to which chaos can be termed as fear.

Their assertion supports the notion that anxiety and fear are an engagement with the void and the terror of that confrontation. Emil Cioran (1911-1995) theorised about the void, stating that the core of our fear is the fundamental drive for existence (Cioran 1970:37). Martin Heidegger's (1889-1972) existentialism²⁰ confronts the idea of the infinite and the sublime (Heidegger 1962; Wolin 2024). Heidegger's *Dasein*, or the

¹⁶ All three artists have links with Africa since they were born on the continent.

¹⁷ Anxiety disorders are a result of "multiple, complex interactions between genes and environmental influences" (Norrholm & Ressler 2009:283).

¹⁸ From initially stating that anxiety was caused by the inability to process overstimulation to repressed libido, failure and finally as a sign of helplessness transmitted from one's ego in the face of imminent danger (Ally & Aloka 2024:35-37).

¹⁹ Simply put, Jung's stance is that "human life [takes] place against free-floating anxiety" whereas Freud's proposed that anxiety manifested through guilt (Doran 2017:12).

²⁰ Heidegger questions why anything exists at all and what 'being' means (Wolin 2024).

human experience of 'being in the world' alludes to authentic experience (Wolin 2024). An awareness and anticipation of death is compounded by the realisation that life is finite: an active focus on the present becomes important. I draw on Cioran, and Gwenneth Miller's *The sublime in visual art: from the romantic to the postmodern sublime* (1997). Miller's dissertation offers an in-depth engagement with the sublime, including Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) formulation of the sublime²¹. As pertains to Farber's artworks, I consulted her exhibition catalogue (2020) and Ashraf Jamal's recorded conversation with her (2021) to unpack how Farber, using contemporary media, engages with the void through the sublime.

To situate anxiety as a contemporary vulnerability, I probe Braidotti's book, *The posthuman* (2013), journal articles (2019, 2020) and online recordings of her lectures (2020). Braidotti's writing is seminal to the climate of fear and anxiety prevalent in today's world, and from a personal perspective, it situates and legitimises my mental anguish. Her strong criticism of humanism articulates the need for alternative, more inclusive viewpoints (Braidotti 2019:31), specifically those transcending the white, male, European perspective (Braidotti 2020:50-51). Braidotti (2019:32) proposes interconnected "cartographies" of forces at play, to make sense of and navigate these times. This notion led to an exploration of mapping, instrumental in engaging with Mehretu and Choumali's works, and further contributing to the search for a solution-driven resilience.

Investigating resilience in the face of despair is a strategy for moving forward. Viktor Frankl's *Man's search for meaning* (1959), Thich Nhat Hanh's *Fear: Essential wisdom for getting through the storm* (2012) and Chödrön's *When things fall apart* (2016) were key as I navigated my own anxiety through reflexive thinking and artmaking. I engage with these texts philosophically, rather than from a religious perspective. This is the framework for the interconnected 'process of becoming,' proposed by Braidotti (2019:38).

²¹ Burke, E. 1990. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Edited by Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford Press.

Both Chödrön and Hanh write about fear and anxiety from a Buddhist perspective. Buddhism is considered a religion by some, whereas others regard it as a philosophy, generating considerable disagreement (Qiu & Xu 2025:3). According to Buddhist teachings, all beings are a continuation of life and inevitable death (Qiu & Xu 2025:2). This philosophy offers psychological cues that promote the acceptance of that inevitability (Qiu & Xu 2025:3). Buddhism²² is inherently anti-nihilistic, since when life ends it leaves imprints. Consequently, death does not render the present meaningless, rather that there is a continuation of value and meaning (Qui & Xu 2025:2). This provides a framework from which to answer the second question pertaining to multidirectional states of being.

Resilience is engendered through phenomenology²³ the philosophy describing conscious, lived experience from an individual perspective, free from assumptions concerning peripheral veracity. Similar to Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness or being-in-the-present, it is valued as a method of disengaging from anxious thinking (Abrams 1996:35). Contemporary phenomenologist, David Abram's *Spell of the sensuous* (1996) and *Becoming animal* (2010) advance views on being as rewilding²⁴. This is supported by Melanie Challenger, who interrogates the human condition of separation in *How to be animal. A new history of what it means to be human* (2021). Her perception of humans as part of the animal world is a strategy to minimise anxiety, offering valuable insights on reclaiming one's animality and becoming reintegrated with the natural world. Anxiety is addressed here as both a personal and universal human concern (Braidotti 2019:31).

It is noteworthy how narrative significance differs between artists and theorists. Henry Jenkins's *Convergence culture: where the old and new media collide* (2006) unpacks how new media builds on traditional media, conveying increasingly complex stories. Jenkins terms the rapidly accelerating growth of new media as 'convergence culture,'

²² This had a particular impact on my state of mind for producing my practice, but for the sake of the scope of my study, Buddhism will not be unpacked in full in this theoretical dissertation.

²³ This philosophical movement was initiated by the Swiss German mathematician and philosopher, Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728-1777) who developed it to differentiate between truth and illusion (Spiegelberg 2025).

²⁴ My interpretation of rewilding is philosophical, not related to conservation as defined by nature restoration of ecosystems or extinction studies.

noting its critical impact on humans and their comprehension of complex interactions within environments (Jenkins 2006:3). This is foundational to Braidotti's theory of convergence (2019:36).

The underlying bias of the media through which the narrative is disseminated is important because, in the search for new understandings of anxiety in the contemporary world, the vitalism of media is significant. Reflections and comparisons between the artworks of Mehretu, Farber, Choumali and my own identify useful navigational tools, including vitalism, foundational to an understanding of new media within convergence culture.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant matter. A political ecology of things* (2010) suggests the participation of nonhuman forces in events. Bennett terms this 'new materialism' where not only humans, but every single organism in the world has a vitality intrinsic to it (Bennett 2010: xiii). This notion is essential to the critical aspect of reading meaning into an artist's material choices. The argument that matter has its own agency contributes to the significance of the media and the objects I select, which include inherited family fabrics. Bennett's theory of new materialism can be applied to Farber's use of colonial crockery and the bioart²⁵ process, speaking overwhelmingly about fragility while Choumali's stitched photographs reference trauma. An analysis of the artists' work establishes the extent to which our work is aligned with new materialism.

Joan Young (2009), Brian Dillon (2009) and Sarah Lewis (2021) offer differing insights into Mehretu's seemingly chaotic methodical working process (Young 2009:33). I take heed of these viewpoints to establish how Mehretu's visual language contributes to the significance of her work. I explore her asemic writing in my communication of loss and desire for control in my own work, despite Mehretu's focus being geographical, rather than emotional.

Farber's exhibition, *Intimate presences, affective absences (or, the snake within)* (2020) includes a video walk-through and a panel discussion of the exhibition, both

²⁵ Artworks developed in the 1990s, specifically involving life sciences or biotechnologies (Farber 2022:182).

available online. Her catalogue essay, written by the art researcher and critic Ashraf Jamal, unpacks Farber's working process, exploring her themes of transience and fragility. This essay influenced my understanding of the layered meaning behind the literal and allusive significance of the exhibited objects. Jamal (2020) writes of the agency of the materials, affirming Bennett's texts on new materialism. Farber's work is a confrontation of the void, chaos, impermanence and fragility through carefully selected materials with their own imbedded conceptual references. The analysis of her work, the subsequent discussions and my observations contribute to an understanding of a creative language which answers the third research question.

The same analytic process employed in Farber and Mehretu's work is applied to Choumali's art to establish differences and similarities, whether thematic or creative. Choumali (2016) writes about her art on Instagram and on her website. Her process of creating the works for *Untitled/Ça va aller* (2018) engage with trauma and resilience. The digital iPhone photographic process is combined with the age old 'women's work' of embroidery. The juxtaposition of these processes, loaded with additional allusions to time, space, memory and honour, create further depth to the works. Reflexive writing around these themes and techniques significantly affects my own art practice.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research creates a dialogue between discursive theory, the selected artworks and art practice as theory. The literature study and comparison of relevant themes are applied to the artworks by Mehretu, Farber and Choumali.

Secondly, I explore the experimental and practical application of the themes into a personal body of work. A practice-led methodology is a complex and interactive system, around and through which different media, languages, cultural contexts and situations are interwoven (Sullivan 2009:114). The studio becomes a site for research that intertwines the making, reading and critique of art praxes (Sullivan 2009:102).

Taking time to practice, think and create becomes a type of visual equation, where, as one decision is made, another has to be adjusted for the whole to balance. Just as

posthuman theory is interwoven, so too is the artmaking practice. As art is created, so thinking and understandings are redirected, developing new understandings. According to Sullivan (2009:95), when we create and respond to art, there is a prospect of imaginative insight. This is what I hope to achieve through my work. At its heart, the practice must establish a fine balance between control and letting go.

1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research project has been conducted in accordance with Unisa's ethical requirements (ARTMDAL 2025:17) and values²⁶ which are aligned with a non-consequentialist approach. This approach argues for ethical decisions based on what is morally correct, irrespective of the consequences (Pauwels 2006:6). The research undertaken must have "respect for people's autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice" (Pauwels 2006:6). This study endeavours to benefit South African women, contributing to critical thought in the realm of female emotional and mental health. The research is aligned with Unisa's research conditions, hence ethical approval was granted²⁷. The literature review was conducted through published articles and websites, while the study of the selected artist's work relied on published articles, websites, artist statements and recorded online discussions, freely available to the public. I made use of several portrait images for the practical component of this study. These are my personal photographs, either depicting me or my deceased family members²⁸. No person is named nor do the images infringe on any copyright issues. All requirements concerning the ethical approach to this type of research have been met.

1.9 CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The first chapter provides a blueprint of the study.

Chapter two focuses on a literature review of posthumanism employing themes of chaos, fear, anxiety and despair, contrasting these by engaging with vulnerability and

²⁶ Unisa's values are listed on the student portal: Integrity, respect, discipline, honesty, commitment and humanity (www.unisa.ac.za/sites/myunisa/default/Study-@-Unisa/Student-values-and-rules).

²⁷ NHREC Registration number: Rec-240816-052; CREC reference: 4384-136-8_CREC_CHS_2022. Extension reference number: 5867.

²⁸ The family images can be seen in the catalogue (pages 27, 29, 31-32 and 61-62) and in figure 43.

the state of becoming. To answer my first research question, chaos is defined and explored in relation to posthumanism. I identify and explore conflicting and multidirectional states of being to understand the process of becoming within a contemporary convergence culture. This answers my second question.

Chapter three engages with themes of disorder, fear, fragility, trauma and redemption through selected works by Mehretu, Farber and Choumali. The artworks and their themes are analysed to determine the extent to which they align with posthumanist convergence culture²⁹, new materialism³⁰, trauma theory³¹ and rewilding³². The artworks are further analysed to understand how content, media and process are used as tools to convey meaning. I address my third research question, identifying visual strategies used by artists to evoke both control and loss of control.

Chapter four engages with my work presented in three spaces for my accompanying master's exhibition, *Disquiet* (2024). Each room is a cumulation of a practice-led approach where I define and develop navigational tools to speak about emotional and mental anguish. This chapter explicates my motifs, media choices and processes.

Chapter five offers a concise conclusion, addressing the degree to which the selected works of Mehretu, Farber and Choumali align with my own in relation to specific vulnerabilities. I focus on summarising the findings of the research problem, research questions and make recommendations for further research.

The exhibition catalogue for my praxis can be accessed as digital booklet at this link to [Disquiet](#).

²⁹ Braidotti (2011, 2013, 2019, 2020) and Jenkins (2006, 2024).

³⁰ Bennett (2010).

³¹ Van der Kolk (2014), Kennedy (2020).

³² Abrams (1996, 2010), Challenger (2021), Solnit (2005) and Tsing (2015).

CHAPTER 2: Posthuman convergence

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This section addresses my research concerns through an exploration of posthuman theory. I identify and define key concepts such as chaos and order; fear and anxiety; and despair and resilience through the lenses of posthumanism and behaviourist theories. These concepts convey the complexities of the present and are foundational to my response to the first research question, interrogating the relationship between chaos and despair. Deleuze and Guattari are primary voices: their theory of rhizome thinking illustrates the complexity of posthumanism 'chaos', providing a future cartographic model for an inevitable confrontation. Braidotti (2011, 2013, 2019, 2020) builds on rhizome thinking, expanding her writing on postmodern convergence, a situation where conflicts occur simultaneously. Jenkins's (2006, 2024) new media theory engages with convergence culture and the rise of rapidly evolving methods of communication.

I argue that the chaotic volume of information we are exposed induces stress. This inevitably leads to van der Kolk's trauma theory and Kennedy's views on anxiety. From a spiritual perspective, I examine vulnerability through the works of Chödrön (2016), Nhat Hanh (2012) and Frankl (1959). Using a rewilding perspective, I reflect on the writings of Tsing (2015), Challenger (2021) and Abram (1996, 2010) to advance convergence culture. As a posthuman concern, these multi-directional states of being align with my second research question.

2.2 KEY CONCEPTS

2.2.1 Chaos and order

World events feel chaotic, generating global stress about the unpredictability of situations (Harari 2018:44). Chaos can be defined as "disorder and confusion" (Chambers 1995), where outcomes are unpredictable and uncertain, although in some

situations a measure of predictability can be determined. Chaos³³ is the consequence of what transpires. Chaos theory³⁴ describes a behaviour of systems that are impossible to exactly predict or control (Boccaletti, Grebogi, Lai, Mancini & Maza 2000:106).

In other words, seemingly erratic, unrelated situations may well be linked to precise systems. Despite the formal definition, chaos is neither disordered, nor is it random (Ayers 2012: 343). According to Ayers (2012:373) chaos is a dynamic, complex mathematical concept that explains various natural phenomena, and is metaphorically applicable to psychology³⁵ (Ayers 2012:378, 379). Brain activity may be deemed 'chaotic', in that the firing of neurons arising from a from a thought result in an infinite variety of sequential electromagnetic transmission outcomes³⁶ due to the magnitude of neurons and synapses within the human brain and body (Boccaletti *et al.* 2000:106). In my work, I posit that the unpredictability of chaos is metaphorically aligned with wolves moving through a forest.

Mathematician and meteorologist, Edward Lorenz (1917-2008), wrote about this cause-and-effect system while studying predictions of weather systems. He concluded that the slightest differences in variables led to radically diverse outcomes. His findings led to the inclusion of unpredictability as a factor in calculations. This reveals the possibilities inherent in simple mathematics, simultaneously broader and more general than previously imagined (Ayers 1997:373). It is beyond the scope of this paper to unpack the mathematical side to chaos. It is noteworthy that, just as the natural world is profoundly unpredictable, that unpredictability further facilitates patterns and structures developing within (www.scripts.com).

³³ The term 'chaos' was only formally defined by the Royal Society in 1986 as "stochastic behaviour in a deterministic system" where underlying patterns are displayed in apparently random behaviours (Ayers 2012:375).

³⁴ Ayers (1997: 374) notes that chaos theory has other terms such as 'deterministic chaos', 'the chaos paradigm', 'chaotics', 'chaos science', 'dynamic systems theory', 'non-linear dynamics', or 'theories of complexity'.

³⁵ Ayres (1997:379) states that as a *metaphoric* application, chaos is not applied literally, but rather the concept of chaos can allow for new understanding of the psychological processes. Chaos can also be applied *analogically* where chaos is used to explain partial similarities; or *practically* to highlight indicators of chaotic behaviour.

³⁶ Due to the constraints of this study, free will and consciousness are not discussed.

This organisational principle is echoed by Deleuze and Guattari's (1987:9) notions of multiplicities, where they are likened to the human subconsciousness of desires and personality traits that simultaneously inhabit the mind, to a rhizome root system that branches out in many directions. Relating this to a wolf pack, individuals operate as a singular entity within the 'seemingly chaotic' mass of entities.³⁷ Order and chaos are profoundly connected.

More poetically, the author Rebecca Solnit (2005) writes about the need for getting lost, which I believe, is a way of embracing chaos. Solnit describes two meanings for being lost: one is the loss of the familiar, while the other describes the emergence of the unfamiliar (Solnit 2005:22). Either loss entails that control is relinquished. She questions how one should calculate the unforeseen, or "keep [...] one's balance amidst surprises", when there is a limit to what we can calculate and control (Solnit 2005:5-6). Similar to phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy below, she suggests that surrendering to the process of losing oneself is perhaps the goal of being fully present (Solnit 2005:6). In chapter three, I link various concepts of chaos to a discussion of selected artists, Mehretu and Choumali, specifically.

Chaos is a system of life and as such should be explored and embraced, similar to the creative process, where ambiguities need to be encompassed. Bennett (2007:120) writes of a practice-led research methodology as one that employs theory and knowledge, but incorporates experiential, emotional and subjective concerns despite being contextual and situated. This adds 'chaotic variables' to the conversation.

The contemporary poet, David Whyte writes about the illusion of control, saying: "To have temporary, isolated sense of power over all events and circumstances is a lovely, illusionary privilege, and perhaps the prime and most beautifully constructed conceit of being human" (Whyte 2014:171). A definition of fear and despair, a means to answering my first research question, continues the discussion on chaos.

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari state that a key element is for the self to move to the edge of the group or pack without leaving it (Faramelli, 2010).

2.2.2 Fear and anxiety

When we are born, the first operational part of the brain is known as the ‘primitive brain’ or the ‘reptilian brain’ because it is responsible for basic functions keeping us alive. These include breathing, sleeping, eating, crying, experiencing cold and heat, moisture and pain, and eliminating toxins from the body (Van der Kolk 2014:64). Fear is one such primitive emotion manifesting in various physical and emotional responses. Braidotti’s (2013:81) posthumanist view requires a restructured human-animal relationship, where the ‘becoming animal of man’ moves towards a ‘geo-centred perspective’. Like Challenger (2021:1), she affirms that humans are animal. Both human and animal brains have a reptilian aspect (Van der Kolk 2014:96). Trauma results in physiological alterations of the brain.

According to van der Kolk (2014:3), this includes a “recalibration of the brain’s alarm system”, an increase in stress hormone activity, and alterations in the system filtering relevant information from that which is irrelevant. The result is a hypervigilant brain that permanently focuses on potential threats (Van der Kolk 2014:3). I liken this hypervigilance to being aware of wolves moving in a forest.³⁸ Although the awareness of a threat is perceived, it cannot be precisely located. I use ‘forest’ and ‘wolves’ as motifs in my work: something that may be attributed to their archetypal symbolism as identified by Carl Jung and supported by Jungian scholars such as Marie Franz (1915-1998) and Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1945-). This symbolism will be fully explained in chapter four.

Fear is a useful emotion, warning of an impending threat, but can be caused by anxiety, becoming a byproduct when the mind overthinks, stressing about imaginary threats or past hazards. There is a constant struggle between conceptually embracing the immanence³⁹ of life and the somatic response to the threat of losing one’s life. Rather than sinking into the privilege of despair when contemplating the annihilated

³⁸ I make use of ‘forest’ and ‘wolf’ as symbolic motifs in my work because of their archetypal symbolism, proposed by Carl Jung and Jungian scholars such as Marie Franz and Clarissa Pinkola Estés. I will address this in my fourth chapter.

³⁹ Deleuze (1997: 3,4,5,) writes of immanence, describing it as pure life that exists, not just within us, but as a foundational “universal flow of consciousness”.

self, which Braidotti (2019:36) calls “the emergence of the endangered⁴⁰ human”, Christine Daigle (2023:7) proposes a need to find value in living constructively with vulnerabilities as a human condition. For Daigle (2023:7), the entanglement between materiality and subjectivity needs to be considered. I engage with entanglement in my practice through the use of selected heritage fabrics, family photographs and stitched threads as discussed in chapter 4 (see 4.5 and 4.8).

Anxiety is a learned pattern of perception, an adaptation to a stress and a repetitive thought process unable to regulate itself (Kennedy 2020:8, 46). Common physical symptoms include nausea, a rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, sweating and trembling, depending on the severity of the fear experienced. When there is a significant reaction, an individual may feel overwhelmed, out of control and have a sense of impending death (Fritscher 2008).

Adrenaline is an important hormone, helping the body respond to danger (Van der Kolk 2014:54). Traditionally it was believed that the body had either a flight or fight response, however the body can manifest a third response (Van der Kolk 2014:96). This occurs when the body registers the threat, but the conscious mind chooses to ignore it. This ‘freeze’ response may be attributed to the previously mentioned primitive brain (Van der Kolk 2014:97). The body registers the alarm signals, continuously releasing stress hormones into organs until illness manifests (Van der Kolk 2014:54). The prolonged, continuous release of stress hormones affects attention and memory span, irritability and sleep disorders. Various physical illnesses may manifest, depending on which part of the body is most vulnerable.

For the purposes of this study, I am interested in the emotional aspect of fear, where fear of a lack of control, lack of relevance and the fear of a fear-response becomes all-encompassing and overwhelming. Spiralling thoughts and a process of shutting down intensify, creating anxiety and a sense of despair⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Posthumanism highlights the privileged position of confliction, in striving to maintain a heady sense of self and privilege whilst fearing annihilation (Braidotti 2019:36).

⁴¹ Van der Kolk admires the writings of Pierre Janet (1859-1947) who first documented the difference between ‘narrative memory’ (stories one tells about trauma) and traumatic memory (repeated actions, emotions and sensations related to trauma) (Van der Kolk 2014:214). Janet was the first to study dissociation relating to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

An existential⁴² questioning is part of an emotional response to this fear. Fear and apprehension focus on the void of unknowing or death, linking directly with posthuman convergence, as discussed below. Questions run on a mental loop, whereby these thoughts spiral out of control⁴³. It feels as though one has no control over anything at all, neither one's mind nor the environmental events surrounding one. This body of work is not an examination of the void, but rather a contemplation of arrival at the edge of the infinite. In this, the 'sublime' is addressed as a contemplation of the vast⁴⁴ (Miller 1997:2) and immanence⁴⁵ (Heidegger 1926:85).

According to Gwenneth Miller (1997:8) the concept of the sublime spans centuries where meanings evolved through different contexts and eras (Miller 1997:107). Its initial translation from the writings of Longinus (213-273 AD) describing a sense of greatness and a transformative experience, it has evolved⁴⁶ into a term encompassing more emotionally driven feelings of love and hate, as proposed by Edmund Burke (1729-1797) (Burke 1960, cited in Miller 1997:8, 9). Burke claims that the feeling of the sublime can be brought about when an individual is overwhelmed. Not to the point of physical harm, but rather just enough to cause a perceived pain that can be described as the feeling of the sublime (Miller 1997:11).

When in the state of terror, the mind cannot act nor reason. According to Burke this is because the overriding concern is self-preservation in the face of fear (Miller 1997:11), linking with van der Kolk's view that the constant release of adrenaline results in physical stressors (Van der Kolk 2014:15). Just as adrenaline floods and saturates the body during these heightened states, I use intense, saturated blue cyanotype printing to allude to infinite space (Kandinsky 1946:64) which itself is linked to the void. The chemicals are used to 'hold on to', fix down or even 'control' the space surrounding

⁴² Existential terror can arise from awareness of death as a desire for self-preservation (Pyszczynski *et al.* 2021:174)

⁴³ As stated earlier, I liken this pattern of chaotic thinking with its internalised, instinctive running order to wolves running through forest.

⁴⁴ Miller (1997:2) states that there are other meanings to the sublime, ranging from "the ideal and the infinite" to "phenomena or beings that are [...] absolute or great".

⁴⁵ In contrast to the vast external, immanence looks inwards. Heidegger (1926:88[86]) suggests that knowing is a mode of being: his concept of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. Deleuze (1997:4) calls immanence pure life.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) suggests that people's different temperaments determine how they respond to the sublime. A melancholic person may have a greater capacity for responding to sublimity (Miller 1997:22).

shadows, rendering shadows visible and tangible. Saturation as a process and its conceptual significance in my work is explicated in chapter four.

Situations may be perceived in various ways, depending on one's mental state. Emotional fear is predominantly cerebral. Harari affirms this, stating: "I realized that the deepest source of my suffering is in the patterns of my own mind. [...] It is the mental reaction generated by my own mind" (Harari 2018:363).

Anxiety, a reaction to stress, seems to be becoming increasingly prevalent in today's world. "Change is always stressful, and the hectic world of the early twenty-first century has produced a global epidemic of stress"⁴⁷(Harari 2018:44). We collectively struggle to come to terms with these rapidly burgeoning, changes to our environment and the resultant emotional fallout. There is a limit to how much we can compete and participate in a growing technological world before we will need technological enhancement ourselves. "To have one story is the most reassuring of all. Everything is perfectly clear. To be suddenly left without any story is terrifying. Nothing makes any sense" (Harari 2018:14).

Several philosophers⁴⁸ address anxiety. German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) whose work on existentialism and phenomenology focuses on his understanding of what it even means to 'be' (Heidegger 1926:5). Heidegger's *Dasein*⁴⁹, or 'Being', or the human existence and associated experience aligns with his idea of 'temporality', where the 'interpretation of time' is a condition of possibility, in which *Dasein* can exist (Heidegger 1926:17). To overly distil his complex work, anxiety (or 'dread' as an alternative translation of the German word *angst*) is termed as a revealed caring at Being (Heidegger 1926:183). This is an awareness, acceptance and anticipation of death, the realisation that life is finite which engenders an active focus on the present (<https://eternalisedofficial.com/2021/01/28/dasein-being-in-the-world/>).

⁴⁷ Harari states that in 1939 people were offered three global stories (fascism, communism and liberalism). By 1969 there were two (communism and liberalism). In 1999 liberalism became the only story and, according to Harari, by 1999 there were no "stories left", leaving liberal elites are in a state of shock and disorientation (Harari 2018:14).

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud is one notable example.

⁴⁹ Heidegger suggests that *Dasein* or Being is not a separate 'entity' in itself, but indefinable despite it being self-evident (Heidegger 1926:4).

In the vastness of overpopulated globalism, does the individual actually matter? What is the value of the one in the masses? The repetitive questioning and worry about the future can build levels of anxiety that result in absolute despair. There are several avenues to explore regarding anxiety.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) a foundational psychologist, held several beliefs about anxiety which mutated over time⁵⁰ Carl Jung (1875-1961) famously disagreed⁵¹ with Freud. Jung's *Liber Novus (The Red Book)*, attempted to understand the significance of his own thinking, symbols and madness, divine madness and the collective psyche (Jung 2009). I could explore anxiety in personal terms, ranging from the serious to the flippant.⁵² Every individual has subjective contexts and reactions to anxiety.

Although anxiety and trauma differ, there is a link between the two.⁵³ Van der Kolk (2014:243) determines that "[t]rauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself". In regular conditions, the rational and emotional memory systems collaborate to produce an integrated response. High arousal not only changes the balance between the rational and emotional but disconnects other brain areas, including the hippocampus and the thalamus, necessary for the proper storage and integration of incoming information. As a result, the imprints of traumatic experiences are organised not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations (Van der Kolk 2014:211). Van der Kolk states that "the mind works according to schemes and maps, and incidents that fall out of the established pattern are most likely to capture our attention" (Van der Kolk, 2014:211). If we feel strongly about an event, we tend to remember it better (Van der Kolk 2014:210). Conversely, if similar triggers are experienced, the brain remembers

⁵⁰ From initially stating that anxiety was caused by overstimulation and the inability to process this (Ally & Aloka 2024:35) to repressed libido, failure (Ally & Aloka 2024:36) and finally, in the face of imminent danger, manifests as a sign of helplessness originating from one's ego (Ally & Aloka 2024:37).

⁵¹ Jung disagreed with Freud's viewpoint on anxiety being associated with guilt (Doran 2017:12). Instead, Jung's stance was that "human life took place against free-floating anxiety" (Doran 2017:12).

⁵² Menopause (Alblooshi *et al.* 2023), awareness of death (Pyszczyński *et al.* 2020) epigenetics (Norrholm *et al.* 2009), endocrine imbalances due to endometriosis as a disease of inflammation (Kupec *et al.* 2024), while Instagram users suggest that the personality traits of being a 'water ox' or of being on the astrological cusp of Cancer/Leo heighten anxiety.

⁵³ Anxiety disorders are a result of "multiple, complex interactions between genes and environmental influences" (Norrholm & Ressler 2009:283).

the first experience and reacts as if the same danger were present. There is a dual reality where we live with “the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present that lives side by side with a ruinous, ever-present past” (Van der Kolk 2014:235).

Kennedy borrows extensively from van der Kolk’s views, focusing on his own lived experiences of anxiety. He writes that when stressed, the body regresses into old patterns (Kennedy 2020:209). Anxious thinking is more likely to be believed over alarm registering in the body (Kennedy 2020:117). He suggests that alarm, and the resultant anxiety, is almost always a by-product of a break in the childhood perception of safety (Kennedy 2020:119). Kennedy argues that constant worry distracts from the background alarm stored in our bodies (Kennedy 2020:124). I understand this as something subsumed beneath layers of emotions, a quality I observe in the works of Mehretu and Choumali, where mark making is layered over images. Their artworks are discussed in chapter three.

The nervous energy⁵⁴ evident in Mehretu’s work with obscured architectural images. This is comparable to a type of anxiety. By contrast, Choumali’s quietly stitched work covers empty townscapes without concealing what lies beneath. Both artists’ works express an unmistakable energy although they read very differently. I employ strategies of concealment and exposure through layered, knotted, stitched pieces. The are arranged formally and haphazardly to articulate the heightened sensations of fear and anxiety.

2.2.3 Despair and resilience

Despair is the sense of giving up hope or an inability to recover (*Merriam-Webster*). It ranges from distress that results in a ‘giving up’ but can extend to a primitive anxiety simmering beneath the surface, a place of existential contemplation and suicidal ideation (Emanuel 2001:1071). At its extreme, this is a deliberation of the ‘void’ or the ultimate nothingness. To the Romanian philosopher and author, Emil Cioran (1911-

⁵⁴ From a posthuman perspective, Braidotti (2020:1) notes that the anxiety or nervous energy generated by ambivalently celebrating contemporary achievements and decrying disasters are a coming to terms with the complexities of what our world is becoming.

1995), dismissing the void as merely 'nothing' is incorrect⁵⁵ since it is an acknowledgement of nothingness, free of negative attributes (Cioran 1970:43). Fundamentally, we have a drive for existence (Cioran 1970:37) and by contrast, the understanding that one will cease to exist engenders abject horror⁵⁶. Trying to explain or understand this dread is difficult to articulate (Emanuel 2001:1080). The more one thinks about this void, the more one fearfully shies away. Feeling completely without hope is frightening, and so the loop of fear - anxiety - despair perpetuates within. Although despair is emotionally draining, Whyte posits that "[d]espair is a necessary and seasonal state of repair, a temporary healing absence, and internal and psychological winter when our previous forms of participation in the world take a rest" (Whyte 2014:41).

Despair can be an immediate and all-encompassing state where everything feels hopeless⁵⁷. Despair is a state to guard against; however, combatting it is no easy task. Social media touts a myriad of suggestions and strategies, all supposedly the ultimate remedy. Resilience, or the capacity to recover or adjust, in the face of despair is not a quick fix, but rather a mindset and an ability to maintain mental well-being through difficult times.

Buddhists suggest mindfulness, where one develops a capacity to live in the moment (Emanuel 1970:1082). Nhat Hanh writes of this as a way to be in the present rather than reminiscing about our past suffering or worrying about the future (Nhat Hahn 2014:16-17). Chödrön (1997:37) proposes that one needs to "give up hope", meaning that holding out for something better robs us of the present moment (Chödrön 1997:40). I understand this as living in a state of acceptance for what is, rather than living in a state of denial, with the expectation of something different.

By contrast, Frankl writes of the danger of giving up hope, stating that one must find something to live for (Frankl 2008:142, 147). I disagree, regarding this as a 'despair -

⁵⁵ According to Cioran (1970:43), "[...] the last-ditch effort at lucidity mustered by creatures unequipped for deliverance" (Cioran 1970: 43).

⁵⁶ The sublime can be re-addressed here, as a term describing the terror felt in contemplating what Burke calls a "terrible uncertainty" (Burke 1960, also cited in Miller 1997:14).

⁵⁷ This can extend to panic attacks or anxiety that feels physically life-threatening.

anxiety - fear' loop. If all hope has been lost and meaning is absent, one may feel like giving up entirely (Frankl 2008:141). I believe that this kind of hopelessness is a nihilism⁵⁸ which is not the same as the 'losing hope' espoused by Chödrön or Nhat Hahn. Building resilience in the face of despair, confronting fears while navigating chaos is complex and convoluted.

I experienced an aspect of anxiety leading to despair during perimenopause and menopause. Although these states are perceived as a normal part of aging, menopause leaves one feeling helpless and misunderstood. The rapid fluctuations of oestradiol levels when hormones change and readjust⁵⁹ exacerbates anxiety and depression (Soares 2023:1,3). Alblooshi, Taylor and Gill (2023:173) term menopausal transition a 'window of vulnerability' which includes a myriad of physical and emotional symptoms that range from the mild to severe⁶⁰, frequently attributed to mental disorders rather than fluctuating hormones. These result in incorrect diagnoses and treatments (O'Reilly, McDermid, McInnes & Peters 2023:2).

I noted decreased anxiety levels when I received hormone replacement treatment, questioning how long I had been in a state of perimenopause. Scholars including Alblooshi *et al.* (2023), Dominus (2023), Glynne *et al.* (2025), Madaan *et al.*, (2021), O'Reilly *et al.* (2023:2) and Soares (2023) propose that there is inadequate research in women's health concerning perimenopause and menopause. I believe that social media is drawing increasing attention to this problem through the positive role played by new media convergences. A new understanding of hormonal health resulted in an important shift in my artmaking.

I engage with resilience as a concept in chapter three, using the artworks of Choumali and Farber. Although they engage with resilience in vastly different ways, I find

⁵⁸ Nihilism is a belief in nothing, or an extreme skepticism (Chambers 1995:sv "nihilism")

⁵⁹ Women experience three major hormonal transitions in their lifetime: adolescence, pregnancy and menopause.

⁶⁰ According to O'Reilly *et al.*, increased anxiety and depression, a negative impact on emotions and on female self-worth are recorded (2023:4). Women feel tense, wound up, jittery, tired; feel a disconnect from the person they were previously (2023:6). They feel miserable and sad, less confident, less valued and lose interest in leisure pursuits (2023:7). This may manifest as irritability, nervousness, tension, fearfulness and anxiety (Soares 2023:3)

suggestions of hope in their work. Farber uses light in the dark while Choumali uses meditative stitching over extended timeframes. Linear thinking, using a simple cause-and-effect interpretation is inadequate, as I explain below, since these involve multi-directional states of conflict. This is where rhizome thinking can be useful to nurture resilience.

2.3 RHIZOME THINKING

Deleuze (1925-1995) and Guattari's (1939-1992) book *A thousand plateaus* is a seminal work on the topic of rhizome thinking. In contrast to a linear taproot structure, a rhizome is a far more complex root system (Deleuze 1987:6), with only middles, and multiple in-between places (Deleuze 1987:25). Rhizome thinking is likened to this system; an acentered, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying system without a main point, an organising memory or central automaton (Deleuze 1987:25). Plateaus are any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial stems that extend underground in such a way as to form a rhizome (Deleuze 1987:21). Multiplicities connected to other multiplicities by superficial stems or connections that extend between each other, create multiple plateaus, and, in so doing, form a rhizome.

A rhizome assumes very diverse forms, from the best to the worst and everything in between (Deleuze 1987:7). Any point can be connected to anything other and must be. This system of connections ceaselessly establishes links between organisations of power, linking various methods of communication.⁶¹ It includes all differences and circumstances related to the arts, sciences and social struggles (Deleuze 1987:7). This becomes a map rather than a tracing, certainly not a replication of anything that has occurred previously (Deleuze 1987:12). Multiple parts combine into new assemblages.

Rhizome theory connects any point to any other point, not necessarily to traits of the same nature since it is composed of dimensions rather than units from which it grows and overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities that can change dimension, and when these do, its nature changes, undergoing metamorphosis (Deleuze 1987:21). Attempting to understand the multidirectional states of anxiety can be as complex as

⁶¹ This includes how we perceive things, imitate, use body language or gesture, and connect through cultural practices and beliefs (Deleuze 1987:7).

attempting to comprehend such a rhizomic way of reasoning using linear thought strategies. It is useful to approach it as a concept of assemblage.

Assemblages are created from multiplicities (Deleuze 1987:4) with layers of causes, both real and imaginary. The effects of each layer on the others contributes towards a slippery emotional landscape that eludes simple explication. I suggest that, through assemblage, my art practice reorganises, recontextualises and reworks, making new connections in an attempt to understand personal anxiety through multiple lenses.

2.4 CONVERGENCE CULTURE AND NEW MATERIALISM

As stated earlier, Braidotti (2020:1) writes of overwhelmingly threatening contemporary stressors. She writes of this era as 'posthuman', where the focal point is to decentre 'man' as the former measure of all things. Posthumanism interrogates the hierarchies demanded by Eurocentrism, masculinism and anthropocentrism, since there are different humanisms that cannot be limited to a single linear narrative (Braidotti 2020:50, 51). The confusion of emotions experienced by individuals and the collective are called the posthuman convergence since they are complex, contradictory at times, and ambivalent. One could describe this as a fear of the loss of relevance and mastery, with an intense sense of anxiety alternating with hope, fear unfolding alongside resilience, boredom merging into vulnerability (Braidotti 2020:1).

Posthuman convergence is a complicated time where a 'new ecological posthumanism' becomes a stance, interrogating issues of power and entitlement in the age of globalisation (Braidotti 2020:2). One is encouraged to be self-reflective and highly critical both of the past and of our contemporary present. Braidotti (2013:49) defines the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity. The subject works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable (Braidotti 2013:49). Embracing difference and the individual experience is vital, although Braidotti's view of critical posthumanism rejects individualism, nihilism or defeatism. Braidotti (2013:49-50) proposes a strong sense of interconnectedness between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth', by removing self-centred individualism.

Osborne and Rose (2004:3) accept the general claims of Braidotti's posthumanism, but disagree with certain aspects, arguing for a more "ethically appropriate 'vitalist'⁶² response". They propose that the argument against humanism should preferably revolve around a vitalist 'personhood'. They argue that we are still very human, and that social sciences should be studied with naturalistic humanism, if injustices and inequalities are to be addressed. They propose that too many people are constrained by material inequalities and limited access to infrastructure (Osborne & Rose 2024:5). For these authors, vitalism expands the definition of what it means to be a fully human person⁶³. They argue that the conditions of being 'human', usually defined by language and self-autonomy, excludes a large number of human beings, inhibited by their social and physical contexts (Osborne & Rose 2024:16). Osborne and Rose propose that vitalism transcends human rights, including all the limitations and tragedies that life consists of (Osborne & Rose: 2024:17). My view in this regard is aligned with Braidotti's because despite the seemingly general stance, as suggested by Osborne and Rose, I think this allows for a greater scope of nuance within.

Vitalism links with Burke's concept of sublime horror: overwhelming and terrifying (Miller 1997:11). Braidotti (2020:1) discussion of 'transversal convergences' embraces this complexity and pertains to new ways of knowing. Farber's artwork (see figures 6 and 7) engages with the contemplation of the sublime and the terror of fragility and forgetting through her use of delicate impressions, suggestive of crockery. In the installation of her work, Farber's emphasis on light and dark is a brutal reminder of the pressing nature of the infinite. This is expanded on in chapter three.

Researcher Gabriel Apata (2021:5) writes on the vastness of the information theorised by Braidotti. As a criticism, he suggests distilling all the world's woes to a single cause: western reason-based humanism, which he argues is too simplistic. He suggests that complex ideologies, including various religious beliefs, could be a factor exacerbating

⁶² Vitalism refers to the doctrine that living organisms are distinct from physicochemical forces and that the processes of life are self-determining rather than explained by the laws of physics and chemistry alone (Mirriam-Webster [online]).

⁶³ Human responsiveness is wider than language possession and autonomy in decision making. (Osborne & Rose 2024:13) This may include "culture, language, consciousness, self-awareness, selfhood, personhood, identity, subjectivity, agency, morality, aesthetic judgement, and reason – to mention only a few" (Susen 2022:76).

some of these problems (Apata 2021:5). Apata argues that the critique of western humanism is in itself western, derived from and embedded in western ideas. As an alternative to Braidotti's theory, he proposes a common posthumanist voice resulting in important differences within diverse disciplines, including postcolonialism, anti-racism, feminist, queer and earth, since these are currently glossed over. Before we can look beyond the world of the human, we need to observe how the human looks at the world of which we are part, since this is ultimately pro-human (Apata 2021:6).

Braidotti (2013:9) criticises the posthuman predicament, stating that it can be inhumane, unfair, unjust, brutal, consuming and fear-inducing. She cites the radical disruption between human-animal interaction (Braidotti 2013:7), a key point in the rewilding process, hinting at a liminal state of being, which links with becoming. A further key methodological and tactical measure supporting this process is to practice the politics of location or situated and accountable knowledge practices. The end of humanism is not a crisis but has positive consequences (Braidotti 2013:51). We live in times that demand elaborate critical tools aligned with the complexities and contra-indications of our times (Braidotti 2013:52).

Being purely analytical is not enough. Braidotti (2013:52) writes of the need to take creativity and imagination, desires and hopes into account. She states that a primary task for posthuman critical theory is precise cartographies for different subject positions; a solid springboard for moving forward (Braidotti 2013:53). Posthumanism requires that we think differently, critically and creatively about who and what we are in the process of becoming⁵¹ (Braidotti 2013:10). Deleuze and Guattari's theory on rhizome thinking becomes an apt strategy for mapping the complexities of this 'becoming' process.

We must be cognisant of the complexities of the subjective and specifically situated new human condition (Braidotti 2019:6). The posthuman requires a cartography enabling us to plot and think about what we cease to be and what we (and who 'we' are) are in the process of becoming. This critical thinking is about creating new concepts and navigational tools to help us through the complexities of the present (Braidotti 2020:39). From an art perspective, Mehretu's work engages with navigational

change through the seemingly chaotic mark making in her work, as further explicated in chapter three. My own explorations of mapping anxiety, documenting ambivalent emotions and arriving at new insights are addressed in chapter four.

Despite criticism of Braidotti, she lays out a valuable framework against which contemporary theorists can argue.⁶⁴ My interpretation of posthumanism is that small voices such as my own, matter in building a better understanding of the interconnectedness of all life. Dealing with one's physical and emotional locations and contexts help to navigate and map a direction for the future. This concept influences how I unpack the anxiety and fear I experience and how I express it. The exhibited works reveal my subject position in a world of differing cartographies, acknowledging specific, nuanced voices and perspectives, working with a tacit methodology to make art that interrogates contemporary anxieties.

Braidotti (2020:30) promotes the notion of a new language for posthumanist endeavours. For me, this includes the language of visual art. Posthumanism takes the idea of power and real-life events seriously - offering alternative views of the humanist self, knowledge and society. My work is about finding the visual expression of emotions and mental conditions.

New materialism is a culture theory⁶⁵ shifting the humanist stance of dualism (Dolfijn & Van der Tuin 2012:48). New materialism questions the separation and prioritisation of mind over matter, soul over body, and culture over nature (Dolfijn & Van der Tuin 2012:119). Instead of regarding these as discrete entities, the authors regard them as 'entangled' with each other (Dolfijn & Van der Tuin 2012:50). Donna Haraway named this entanglement 'diffraction' (Dolfijn and Van der Tuin 2012:51) explaining it as how different meanings and understandings are observed through patterns and how these patterns interact with each other over time (Dolfijn & Van der Tuin 2012:52). As the subject and object become entwined, this results in a 'phenomenon' (Dolfijn & Van der

⁶⁴ Braidotti (2020:4) states that "the praxis of forging communal solutions through confrontation of uncomfortable truths is central to the ethics of affirmative ethics". Her critical insights regarding inherent inequalities within society (2020:4) and affirmative strategy for forward-moving understandings are discordant with traditional western government modes of thinking (2020:3).

⁶⁵ The term was coined by Manuel DeLanda (1953-) and Braidotti.

Tuin 2012:52). These entanglements, or phenomena, become new patterns themselves. Taking this further, Jenkins focuses on the convergences made by new media.

Similar to Braidotti, Jenkins (2006:2) writes of a 'convergence culture' focusing specifically on media⁶⁶ convergences and how information is altered through various interactions. Although my work is predominantly analogue with its hand drawing and stitching, several media techniques are used, including Polaroid and digital photography, giclée, photocopy printing and acetate laser prints in preparation for cyanotype printing. Chapter four involves a discussion of how the narrative and meaning change when I translate images from one medium to another.

The dynamic relationship between media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence combine, enriching contemporary experience. This convergence can be described as a flow of content over multiple media platforms. It is also something that occurs in the minds of individual consumers through their social interactions with others (Jenkins 2006:3). It revolves around how ordinary people participate in the production of everyday culture (Jie 2024:11). Similar to the layered works by Mehretu, Choumali and me, new technologies overlay old ones in an ongoing process. Rather than replacing meaning, they add layers of information, creating new understandings (Jenkins 2006:14).

This convergence of information through media fully depends on consumer participation and, if one allows it to be, becomes an overload of messages all jostling to be noticed (Jenkins 2006:3). According to Jie (2004:13), people want to 'speak' and be heard and form meaningful connections, contributing to participatory culture but simultaneously, promoting an exhausting media overload. As artists reveal their perspectives through their work, this leads to further conversations, creating connections and discussions for new thinking.

⁶⁶ Media convergence refers to the "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries" and the corresponding behaviour of audiences using them (Jenkins 2006:2).

Unlike older, traditional media dissemination, convergence culture is replete with tactical decisions, unintended consequences, mixed signals and competing interests, unclear directions and unpredictable outcomes (Jenkins 2006:11). Traditional media was predominately managed by a few gatekeepers who would disseminate information by means of newspapers or news broadcasts in political systems that contributed to the type of information broadcasted. As more media systems evolved, and financial outcomes were entwined with the results of broadcasts, systems became more convoluted. Fast paced changes add to a sense of chaos and information overload (Jenkins 2006:13). This leads to consumers fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture (Jenkins 2006:18).

I propose that convergence culture intensifies the stress of contemporary society, both on an individual and a collective level. So many ambivalences need to be navigated in contemporary societies, intensifying stress levels. Private, personal experience and opinions are seen as valid points of expression, while new media technologies seem to demand this expression. This information becomes so layered that sifting through it is an arduous task, as one tries to uncover kernels of real information. Introductions of deep fake and artificial intelligence technologies confirm a deeper divide between 'truth' and misinformation. This echoes Braidotti's notion of posthuman convergences: an ambivalence between the rapid growth and development of new media, and a deepening dissatisfaction and fear of it.

This research amplifies my experiences of anxiety, fear and vulnerability through artmaking as my lived expression. This is presented as a volume of layered works emphasising how overwhelmed I feel, visually (large cloth) and conceptually (tablescape). As I actively engage in a public art exhibition, I attempt to amplify and showcase the complex emotions I have, and continue to, experience. The multiple layered artworks address different aspects of a personally experienced emotional state. The visual glut of information, for example in the tablescape, and the overload of fabric stitching and prints in the cyanotype cloths align with the idea of convergence culture.

The demands of contemporary culture to expose personal minutiae is an unmasking that amplifies vulnerabilities and simultaneously creates connections in that we are able to identify ourselves in another's vulnerability. The ambivalence of privacy versus creating awareness is difficult to navigate. Both Braidotti and Jenkins expound on the multi-layered ambivalences of the posthuman world. The following section engages with authors who articulate the vulnerabilities required to face this situation, and, in so doing, direct the process of 'becoming'.

2.5 VULNERABILITIES, REORIENTATION AND RESILIENCE

Living in stressful times requires that we embrace our vulnerability. The American writer Brené Brown defines vulnerability as the emotion we experience during times of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure (Brown 2018:23). She comments that we (a general term) have been taught that acknowledging pain is perceived as a weakness (Brown 2016:67). Like the Buddhist author Pema Chödrön, she writes of the need to embrace our weakness, or fear, in order to live. Chödrön states that "giving up completely" is essential to realising that you can feel fearless in acknowledging impermanence and change (Chödrön 1997:37). According to Brown, this is essential to the acknowledgement that there is nowhere nor is there anyone better to be than ourselves as we are. This can be described as mindfulness, but it is significantly more than that.

The understanding is that seeking lasting security is futile in a world where everything changes (Chödrön 1997:38). Chödrön suggests that we experience hope and fear due to the perception that we lack something and ultimately, all anxiety and dissatisfaction is rooted in our fear of death. This connects with Heidegger's temporality, as discussed previously. She states that this fear is at the heart of everything (Chödrön 1997:41). We do not suffer as a consequence of a poor choice but rather because its inherent impermanence is a normal part of life (Chödrön 1997:39). This sentiment is echoed by Challenger (2021) and Tsing (2015), whose notions of precarity are unpacked in the following section.

Having a relationship with death means that we can relax with insecurities, panic, embarrassment and things that do not work out (Chödrön 1997:42). The reminders of

death make us panic but if we are not resistant to the fact that all things die, that nothing has lasting presence and that everything changes all the time (Chödrön 1997:41), then we face the fact that there is no escape. For Chödrön (1997:43), it is an encouragement to engage in the present with kindness to oneself while facing a joyful relationship with our lives (Chödrön 1997:43). Dovetailing with Farber's fragile works embracing impermanence and acknowledging it, means to let go of the fear of losing life and thereby being appreciative of what 'it' is in the moment - before it vanishes.

Although Chödrön writes of the impermanence of life and of the necessity to embrace it (Chödrön 1997:38), this echoes, albeit from a different angle, Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, in relation to death as one of an unfolding, ripening process that inevitably concludes in death (Heidegger 1926:244). To confront this requires authentic living, where this 'being-in-the-world' is acknowledged (Heidegger 1926:254). Frankl (2008:148) argues that meaning is always present, even though suffering. He writes that suffering is relative, and whether great or minor, it fills the conscious mind completely (Frankl 2008:55). He proposes a search for meaning in life, saying: "For as soon as we have used an opportunity and have actualized a potential meaning, we have done so for once and for all. We have rescued it into the past wherein it has been safely delivered and deposited" (Frankl 2008:151). Frankl argues that having a reason for living or having a good conception of meaningfulness is essential (Frankl 2008:142). This stoic standpoint has engendered criticism due to its simplicity and possibly authoritarianism⁶⁷.

Psychologist Kees van den Bos (2009:197) advises that one either moves from the perception that life is inherently meaningless, to choosing to live in the here-and-now. Alternatively, one may find life absurd and then try to find sense in it to live a meaningful life. Van den Bos proposes that people need to feel certainty in their place in their world, and that uncertainty about this⁶⁸ threatens their meaning of existence (Van den Bos 2009:200). An essential component is finding personal connecting within

⁶⁷ Psychologist Rollo May (1909-1994) critiqued Frankl's logotherapy stating that there seemed to be a proposed clear solution to all problems, failing to acknowledge the complexities of real life (Pytell 2016).

⁶⁸ Van den Bos (2009:207) refers to Terror Management Theory, or TMT, initially developed by Ernest Becker in his book, *The denial of death* (1973). This can be divided into two, namely 'proximal defense,' where we strive to ignore or physically avoid death, and 'distal defense' where we need to maintain meaning in life so that we feel like we are valuable contributors to it (Pyszczynski *et al.* 2021:182).

a group, usually cultural, to finding a sense of 'belonging', while navigating the line between inclusion and uniqueness (Van den Bos 2009:211). I argue that there are different angles and answers to the deep questions humans pose. I applied these to my own vulnerabilities, embracing the unexpected and uncontrollable and working with, rather than forcing, media inherent qualities such as with ink on wet paper.

Braidotti (2023:10) suggests that a shift in thinking is necessary to remove ourselves from the central focus, repositioning ourselves as one part of life rather than believing we are its primary focus. Abram (1996, 2010), Challenger (2021) and Tsing (2015) engage with reorientation as a concern. This reorienting of ourselves offers a redemptive stance to the harm we have done and continue to do, forming the basis for a necessary resilience in confronting a world of uncertainties.

Abram (1957-) is an American ecologist and phenomenologist⁶⁹ who documents his lived experiences (Abram 2010:10). Phenomenology is the mental focus of how we experience the world in its immediacy. This involves neither quantifiable science or mathematics to explicate the world, but rather to describe and feel the world as a direct sensual experience, evident through awareness. Abram states that research confirms that the human mind is dependent on and influenced by our relationship with the earth (Abram 1996:xi). Many humans avoid an engagement with their senses, finding it too painful. If one pays attention to the ebbs, flows and rhythms of experience, not to capture or control it but to become familiar with what is encountered in all its diversity, it becomes important to discovering our place and value within it (Abram 1996:35).

Abram writes that the 'lifeworld' has so many layers to it. Beneath our cultural acquisitions, there is an even deeper, more unitary lifeworld (Abram 1996:39, 41). He promotes the 'animalistic' where everything is animate, where everything moves albeit at very different rates, despite this being regarded as naïve or simplistic (Abrams 1996:37). To our animal bodies, all things have the capacity to communicate albeit mostly in nonverbal ways. Abram argues that the subjective realm must be expanded by incorporating multiple subjectivities, multiple perspectives and corporeal selves

⁶⁹ Phenomenology is the study of direct experience. Martin Heidegger's work on *Dasein* is foundational.

(Abrams 1996:37). For me, this perspective is aligned with Braidotti's call for a decentring of self, and acknowledging the complexities of layered life as proposed in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome thinking.

Challenger states "We don't know the right way to behave towards life. We act as if we don't know how much other life forms matter, or even if they do" (Challenger 2021:2). She dovetails with Braidotti's stance on a decentred human focus, reminding us that humans are animals even if we are reluctant to believe it (Challenger 2021:1). She states that we want to be a part of the animal world and to have connection, yet we still want to consider ourselves 'special' and different from the 'animalness of being' (Challenger 2021:5). Challenger (2021:6) suggests that this discord makes us anxious.

She says that most of our common beliefs arise from an underlying refusal to accept that we are organic beings, calling it 'the embarrassment' of being a part of the animal world (Challenger 2021:5, 6). We are not special beings or an apex species; rather we are a part of everything. She writes of the "exhilarating oddness of being something so obviously related to everything around us, and yet so convincingly different" (Challenger 2021:4). For the anxious thinker, her text offers a guide to resilience in the face of despair. Challenger (2021:173) references the philosopher Rollo May, who notes that all humans do mental battle with our animal beings. Beneath the surface, we have a fear of 'nothingness' aligning with Heidegger's temporality and Burke's sublime as previously discussed.

Despite the many worldviews that regard death as a transition, with many having spirit guides (Challenger 2021:175), we do not like to be reminded of our own mortality. We set up our lives to give us a sense of control. Similar to Chödrön, Challenger (2021:197) suggests we need to rethink death itself, reorienting it as a normal, necessary feature. Not something to be sought out but "neither is it to be feared as a strike against who we are. Like Frankl, she agrees that humans need to find meaning that reassures us in a world in which we have to die (Challenger 2021:217). To Challenger (2021:5), part of our stress is our refusal to be organic beings.

Challenger (2021:56) asks what it means to be human in an animal world. From her perspective, our inability or unwillingness to accept that we are 'animal' humans is why

we struggle to “appreciate our role in changing this planet” (Challenger 2021:56-57). Like Chödrön she talks of a kind of acceptance, saying that we need to rethink death itself. An inescapable fact of life within an ecosystem includes death as a normal, necessary feature. Not as something to be sought, but she says, “neither is it to be feared as a strike against who we are” (Challenger 2021:197). Like Frankl, she agrees that humans need to find meaning to reassure ourselves in a world in which we must die (Challenger 2021:217). To Challenger, (2021:5) part of our contemporary stress is in our refusal to be organic beings. Challenger’s perspective of the human place in the animal world encourages our rewilding and by implication the processual nature of our world.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (1952-) is a contemporary anthropologist who writes about environmental history, global production and science through the lens of the matsutake mushroom. Her book, *The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* ultimately explores and acknowledges precariousness, or life without the promise of stability (Tsing 2015:2). Dovetailing Challenger’s viewpoint, precarity is an exploration of what threat⁷⁰ means for humans as part of being animal (Tsing 2015:2). Like Chödrön the reminder is to dwell in the present rather than trying to stave off change.

Tsing (2015:21) writes that ‘precariousness’ threatens the everyday. Most of the time we imagine this to be an exception to the way the world functions, rather than the rule. She suggests it is the condition of all time (Tsing 2015:21). Tsing suggests that precarity is not about what is dropped from ecosystems, but rather that life, as the condition of our time, is precarious; the condition of being vulnerable to others. We are not in control and we never have been, not even of ourselves (Tsing 2015:20). This notion influences my artmaking, as is discussed in chapter four.

⁷⁰ Tsing writes of geologists referring to current times as ‘the Anthropocene,’ a time in which human disturbances outrank other geological forces (Tsing 2015:19).

Tsing (2015:22, 23) references the concept of assemblage⁷¹ stating the importance of noticing the interplay of temporal rhythms to observe unintentional co-ordinations. Her suggestion to find new patterns and connections aligns with Jenkins's articulation of the evolution of new means of communicating through layering (Jenkins 2006:14). It further overlaps with Deleuze and Guattari's plateau multiplicities (Deleuze 1987:7, 22). I argue that these ideas combine in a multi-directional map depicting a process of becoming. Tsing's (2015:159) idea of assemblage reinforces Braidotti's (2013:52) call for multiplicities when collecting information. This layering of information⁷² is a process of assemblage that I address in my art making, during the creation of my own visual language as a form of resilience.

Before I engage with my own art praxis in chapter four, I explore the three selected artists' works, exploring them according to my understanding of vulnerabilities.

⁷¹ Tsing references assemblage as a point for questioning how species and their communities influence and effect each other (Tsing 2015:22-23).

⁷² Tsing (2015:159) suggests that this requires using all one's learning practices, including mindfulness, myths, tales, livelihood practices, archives, scientific reports, and experiments.

CHAPTER THREE: **Visual strategies of this art study**

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter two proposes three essential focus points: chaos and order, fear and anxiety, and despair and resilience. This chapter concerns an investigation of specific artists' work as aligned with the abovementioned themes and their relation to vulnerability. In so doing, I address the third research question, namely, identifying various visual strategies alluding to control /loss of control and how these are employed by contemporary artists. I identify the artists' visual strategies in order to apply them to my praxis.

News feeds and social media disseminate information and misinformation at a rapid rate. The heightened sense of urgency and outrage is further fuelled by emotive sound and language, bringing connection and driving anxiety.⁷³ This ambivalence and overlapping concerns can be likened to a rhizome system of layers and contradictions as expressed in the previous chapter. Posthumanism, new materialism and convergence culture engage with the ambivalence of global happenings. I use aspects of these theories to link selected artists' work to my central concerns. It must be noted that this chapter is specifically aimed at my key concepts and the artists' influence on my work. It does not represent the broader aims of the artists.

Mehretu (1970-) explores changing systems that humans bring to environments. Her work illuminates posthuman conversions and congestions, revealing layers of accrued happenings over time (Bickis 2016:134). Farber (1969-) embraces working with organic species, and in so doing, works with precision and conversely relinquishes control of her artmaking. Her practice extends the conversation concerning new materialism and convergence culture as it confronts the sublime through aesthetically seductive traces. Choumali's (1974-) methodology allows her to insert herself into a recovering traumatic environment. Each artist works with different contexts, intentions, processes and

⁷³ As two anecdotal examples: local fires generate emotive videos that are shared extensively. Communities rally and the assistance provided through donations, ends up building feelings of connection, empathy and ultimately, wellbeing. One can say: 'I was there, I helped and I matter'. In contrast, violent political and social clashes occurring on other continents, also shared online, enrage and drive divisions between people. Anxiety is heightened through the updates and outrage, even though it is far-removed from the self.

techniques, which I argue relate to vulnerabilities. After researching the works, I drew on them in order to develop my own creative lexicon as discussed in chapter four.

3.2 THREE ARTISTS

3.2.1 Julie Mehretu: chaos and order

I selected Mehretu, an Ethiopian-born American artist, since for me, the dramatic, weighty chaos of her work suggests inner turmoil. Mehretu creates large-scale paintings, drawings and prints, usually combining architectural images with marks, gestures and contrasting geometric lines. These layered works result from multiple sources as diverse as historical photographs, urban-planning grids, sketches of façades, graffiti, comic books and social media imagery. Generally, her work focuses on power, history, globalism and the expansion of cities, to establish their impact on personal and communal identity (Mehretu, Young, Dillon & Balfour 2009:23).

For this study, I examined only one artwork to unpack visual chaos, namely her large-scale work entitled *Epigraph, Damascus* (figure 1). I scrutinised Mehretu's working process to understand how she suggests both order and chaos because I felt an instinctive emotional empathy with the spirit of the work, impacted by my own internal chaos. Her methodologies offered me a map of visual thinking. The insight I gained was subsequently applied to my own working processes.



Fig 1. Julie Mehretu, *Epigraph, Damascus* (2016).

Epigraph, Damascus (2016, figure 1), comprises six framed intaglio prints that are hung so closely as to lightly touch each other. At first glance, the overall image is a mess of darkness, but the framing suggests a lattice or architectural structure providing a window-like view into something else. The framing further alludes to a timeline, suggesting black and white documentary filmic sequences of something unknown. The prints were made using photogravure, sugar lift aquatint, spit bite aquatint and open bite (Kim 2018). The final framed intaglio print is 250 x 575 cm, visually overwhelming the viewer.

Mehretu initially created a large set of drawings referencing architectural elements from photographs of war-torn Damascus, Syria⁷⁴ (Borscheditions.com). The focus on columns, arches and porticoes suggest permanence and power. Since the drawings illustrate fragments, they rather signify impermanence and a broken power structure. She added a layer of drawn gestural marks (figures 2 & 3). The architectural and gestural drawings were combined with a heavily distorted, blurred photograph of Damascus. The subsequent photogravure plate for intaglio printing suggests destroyed power structures, buried over time. Mehretu worked on a second plate, adding a greater range of both fine marks as well as heavy gestural brush textures, using

⁷⁴ The city of Damascus, Syria, is the oldest inhabited capital in the world, and was a military stronghold during the Syrian Civil War. It was also a key site for government opposition. The uprising that took place from 2011 until 2024 resulted in deadly conflict that resulted in mass displacement both into and out of the city and destruction of life (Bakkour 2025).

aquatint and open bite processes. Both plates were printed in turn to create a highly complex image (Kim 2018). As can be seen in figure 3, parts of the drawing are masked by the frantic brushwork, highlighting a viscous energy that I interpret as visual anxiety.



Figs 2 & 3. Julie Mehretu, *Epigraph, Damascus* (detail) (2016).

In contrast to the fluid, almost frantic scribbling, the printing process used by Mehretu requires precise, ordered procedures. From the preparation of the matrix for etching, the timing of the process where it is soaked in acid baths, and finally the printing, requires precision and experience. The entire process is rigorously controlled. Despite the loose gestural marks, the procedure is reliant on patience, meticulousness and technical expertise.⁷⁵ When I reflected on the process, I realised that the same procedural steps are essential for reducing anxiety and chaos. These create a map of process, eliminating the tendency to overthink. One has to just move on to the next step. Later, these important tools were applied in my own work.

The final work is printed in greys and black on white 350gsm Hanhemühler paper, but fine areas of colour can only be discerned from close up (figure 4). The colour is

⁷⁵ Mehretu worked with master printer Niels Borsch Jensen from Borsch Editions in Copenhagen to create her photogravure plates and to print them (Kim 2018).

subsumed beneath the dominant black marks. The lines and textured marks dominate the overall space of the work, concealing the views of the damaged city beneath. These very specific lines and marks create a complex structure over the surface (Ljungberg 2009:308).

Fig 4. Julie Mehretu, *Epigraph, Damascus* (detail) (2016).



The word 'epigraph' is a word or phrase engraved on stone, often to be found on the exterior of buildings.⁷⁶ Used in the title, epigraph references something formal and enduring. By contrast, Damascus has experienced warfare and ongoing civil conflict (Kim 2018), so the allusion of permanence, grand stability and persistent power is destabilised by the enduring conflict and destruction. The title then becomes ambiguous: is the image suggesting a collapse of a power structure, or is the collapsed structure an epigraph to itself? Mehretu does not comment but I believe that this links

⁷⁶ The word 'epigraph' can also refer to the quotation placed at the beginning of a literary work or its divisions, relating to its theme (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epigraph>).

with a posthumanist stance referring to the hubris of humanity as we strive for permanence.

Mehretu uses various maps⁷⁷ and images to create geometric drawings referencing sites of human activity as the foundation for her work (Bonham-Carter & Hodge 2009:152). She believes that architecture reflects social, economic and political activities. According to Mehretu *et al.* (2009:29), she uses architectural lines as metaphors for the political power and regions, where overlaid marks signify human activity in new hybridised landscapes (Ljungberg 2009:308). The energy of this human activity can be related to the nervous energy of ambivalences in convergence culture, as identified by Braidotti (2020:1). The energy reminds me of an adrenaline jolt due to the continuous search for permanence and self-preservation.

Mehretu (2009:30) interrogates how to represent social identities within her work, juxtaposing the marks which interact with each other and within a specific community. As much as her work is to be seen as a whole from a distance, Mehretu (2009:30) states that she tries to create small 'picture, stories and events' within, which are only visible through close scrutiny. The viewer has to walk across a large area to see the entire work. Just so, the work suggests the physicality of walking through a city's streets (Mehretu *et al.* 2009:30). For *Epigraph, Damascus*, she states "You have the skeleton of the ghosts of Damascus, and then you have the blur, the haze or breakdown of the ongoing civil war" (Kim 2018). Through its haunted and haunting aesthetic, the work reminds us of the precarity of life.

⁷⁷ Mehretu makes use of map character marks such as lines and dots, or crosses to suggest migration and movements of boundaries (Kim 2018)



Fig 5. Julie Mehretu, *Epigraph Damascus* (detail) (2016).

Mehretu's artwork references maps (figure 5), which are a way of setting down an environment in a precise, ordered recording of the world around us, aiding in spatial understandings of human environments (Ljungberg 2009:308). Maps can act as metaphors for a search for location, experiencing dislocation, bringing chaos to order, exploring ratios of scale and charting new terrains (Harmon 2009:10). Artists such as Mehretu use them to respond to globalisations, and to find orientations, while other artists [like me] map memories, mental states and futuristic visions (Harmon 2009:10). Geographers obey mapping conventions with a standardised visual language (Harmon 2009:10), but as artists, one can reject the sense that maps convey reality and acknowledge that they are distortions of spaces we inhabit. Artworks can embody the unpredictable individual lived experience (Harmon 2009:15). This is where Mehretu's work is positioned.

Mehretu refers to herself as a psychogeographer (English & Barat 2019) who creates works showing indeterminate spaces. Psychogeography explores relationships and systems rather than imagery, looking at patterns of behaviour in urban spaces over a period of time (Harmon 2009:15, 16). Hidden meaning is alluded to rather than directly stated, becoming a space of potential, a space of flux and a space of unknowing. Similar to Braidotti's (2020:39) description of posthuman convergences, as discussed in chapter two, the artwork suggests a congestion and confluence of clashing energies, describing ambivalences. Tsing's (2015:21) precarity is suggested in the burying of human evidence under the hand's gestures. The combining of gesture and drawing suggests a new phenomenon, where subject (energy) and object (structures) become entangled (Dolfijn & Van der Tuin 2012:15). Perhaps the drawing becomes more than a map to facing one's own hubris, terror and space within a location, but rather functions as a mirror.

There is criticism that Mehretu's work has become 'predictable' and 'undifferentiated maximalist' (Prince 2025). I find this an odd critique of a body of work that has evolved despite being distinctly hers. Mehretu's work has a recognizable visual concern where her abstracted mark-making dominates, so perhaps the criticism has some validity, however as an artist one needs to have some repetitive continuity as, in my experience, its bodily engagement becomes a healing mantra, a form of sublime ritual.

Despite the criticism, I enjoy the juxtaposition of the meticulous with the bolder, looser marks, reminding me of asemic text. Asemic text is a form of script that has no literal meaning but is a form of textual communication (Alsobrook 2017:5). It suggests the difference between hearing a voice but not understanding the language, however it carries visual meaning for attempted communicating in its direction, shape and structure. Mehretu's mark-making shouts of humanity, of life energy and perhaps layered ambiguities. She argues for the right of artists to be 'obscure' in their work, saying "I have insisted on abstraction. There's an opacity to my paintings that I hold on tight to." (Simmons 2016).

Initially, Mehretu's works seem a vortex of lines and marks, but there are layers of painted or drawn structures that contribute to the final image. As a visual example of

posthuman convergence, the work overlays a frantic and vigorous energy-filled mark making with staid grid of architectural geometric lines. Her work indicates the meeting of these two energies over a vast visual space. The print is situated in a posthuman world describing the pandemonium of civil war, including a view of the chaotic, overlapping systems of multidisciplinary convergence. As psychogeography, it reveals a type of shifted mapping in a world requiring expressions of new orientations (Ljungberg 2009:312). Mehretu's work includes predominantly scribbled marks over blurry shapes. Superficially, these might be regarded as chaotic, random and meaningless but that belies the discipline, timing and precision underpinning her work.

By contrast with Choumali's work, as is discussed below, Mehretu's work does not engage with people *per se*, but rather the evidence of people. I see this as more of a bird's-eye view of fear, anxiety and possibly despair, enabling one to engage without being too close to the horror.

Epigraph, Damascus (2016) becomes a stark reminder of the impermanence⁷⁸ of humanity⁷⁹, echoing poet Whyte's (2014:171) comment on our foolish pride in believing we have power over events. On close inspection, though the incoherence of the energetic marks, it is a relief to recognise lines as shapes depicting buildings, only to realise that they are mostly upside down, once again making a mockery of power structures. There is no resolution offered, just a glaring statement of the certainty of upheaval of civilisations through time. There is order within the chaotic, but to 'see' it, requires one to embrace the whole as it is, rather than only the parts one desires.

3.2.2 Leora Farber: Fear, anxiety and control

In my continued search for visual strategies depicting creative processes situated between control and the loss of it, I discuss the work of South African artist, Leora Farber (1969-). The two installations I refer to are entitled *Intimate presences/affective absences (or, the snake within)* (2020) (figure 6) and *Disquieting domesticities and vestiges of violence (or, the ghost within the house)* (2021). Both comprise fragile

⁷⁸ In juxtaposition, printing with permanent ink reinforces the notion of a desire for permanence.

⁷⁹ Burke's sublime terror of death can be linked here.

impressions of domestic crockery and cutlery made from bio culture skins. The second exhibition, *Disquieting domesticities* is an extension and variation of *Intimate presences*.

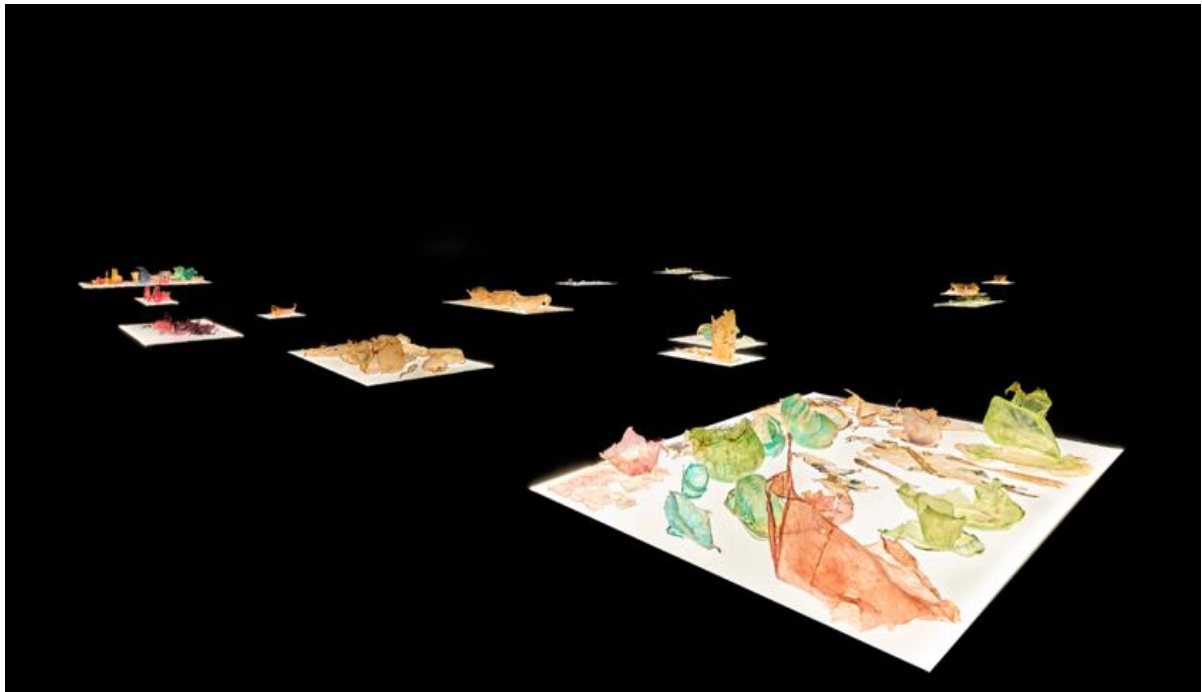


Fig 6. Leora Farber, *Intimate presences/affective absences (or, the snake within)* (2020).

Artistic expression engendered through the creation of a living organism aligns with Tsing's (2015:2) notion of precarity and engages with Deleuzian entanglements (Dolfijn & Van der Tuin 2012:15) as new assemblages. My research on Farber reveals the possibilities of the creation of new languages. Farber (2012:6) states that the action of gaze, pictorial unity and medium mastery is routed in patriarchal traditions in art. To subvert this, Farber comments on her use of 'feminist modes' of artmaking, including a tactile engagement with her materials, where she employs decoration and detail, layering, repetition, fragmentation and dispersal, as evidenced in a previous exhibition *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2006-2008). This engagement with new materialism in her current work is situated in a posthuman context where, as Braidotti advises (2020:30), there is the creation of a new language that addresses her concerns.

Farber's work is a result of years of experimentation and refinement of a very specific process in the realm of bioart. Bioart, is an artmaking practice that involves a fusion of life sciences and biotechnologies, often conducted in laboratories through scientific processes (Farber 2022:182). Bioart has grown globally from its inception in the 1990s and, because there is a vast range of what this process can encompass, the term is contentious. Farber (2022:183,190) states that she uses the term to refer to the use of 'wet-biology' and life sciences in an art-making context.

Farber (2022:185) states that she had to abandon preconceived ideas of what constitutes 'success' and embrace failure as part of the process. This acceptance of her vulnerability within a lack of control over the outcome helped her to work with the mutable qualities of the material (Farber 2022:185). Her work builds on her earlier work concerning the fragility of domestic spaces as sites of anguish, trauma and strain (Farber 2012:7). Solnit (2005:6) writes that one does not so much get lost, or lose control, but rather open up to an uncertainty where new discoveries can occur. Farber embraces this process, seeing the artworks as a collaboration between her and the microbial fibres (Friedman 2021).

She works with pathogenic bacteria, yeasts, mycelium and slime mould (*Physarum polycephalum*) (Farber 2022:184). Through trial and error, Farber grows biofilm of bacteria (*Gluconacetobacter xylinus*) and yeast which is fed a mixture of tea and sugar. From this, a pellicle, or skin, also called a scoby⁸⁰, grows onto the surface of the mixture, taking several weeks to reach the desired thickness. Farber then removes the skin-like cellulose fibre, cleans it and dehydrates it. In order to mould it, she rehydrates the skin and drapes it over carefully selected domestic objects. The skin is left to dehydrate again and once dry, is removed from the object. The desiccated skin retains the form of the object it covered. The scoby mixture and area conditions need to be closely monitored and controlled for the pellicle to be grown to Farber's specific requirements. As much as she controls the environmental conditions and mixtures, she needs to relinquish control since the scoby grows in its own time. She is able to

⁸⁰ Symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast, shortened to scoby.

monitor and adjust variables for the growing conditions, but she has no control over the growing process itself (Friedman 2021).



Fig 7. Leora Farber, *Intimate presences/affective absences (or the snake within)* (detail) (2020).

The art pieces themselves are extremely fragile. Farber prefers to work with skins that are less than 1mm thick in order to convey a sense of “weightlessness, immateriality and translucency” (Farber 2022:185). These rehydrated skins are draped over selected objects⁸¹ where they take on their impressions alluding to a history of past traumas⁸². The use of objects as memory is further discussed in chapter four.

Once the pellicle skins are dried, they take on the impressions of the crockery and cutlery, but even when taking great care to remove the skins from the objects, they easily tear or pull apart. This fragility emphasises the care and control required for the

⁸¹ The chosen items of crockery reflect colonial and apartheid legacies that form part of South African history (Farber 2022:185).

⁸² For Farber (2022:185), the items become suggestive of dispossession, exploitation, displacement and precarity from a colonial time, something that still inhabits domestic spaces today.

process to work. It affirms that complete control is impossible to expect and futile to hope for. The desire to hold on to objects and memory are flawed. The final pieces do not mimic crockery as copies but only suggest traces that they were once there. Farber deliberately calls them impressions rather than casts (Farber 2021). She speaks of coaxing the skin off, reinforcing the idea of the negotiated partnership required to make the works, over an enforced control of the process (Farber 2021).

Farber makes use of light and dark contrasts to manipulate how the objects are seen. The exhibition room is completely dark. Ashraf Jamal (2020) proposes that the black box suggests the “fundaments and roots of memory” or “the last and first of source”. A soft, bright light is emitted from the top of the display boxes on which the objects rest. The light makes the objects almost glow in their translucency, giving them a precious, jewel-like quality. The works become descriptively sublime in their beauty, presented in darkness, a dreamlike transformation of the gallery space into an unknown, slightly unsettling environment. Miller (1997:13,14) refers to “uncertainty through obscurity or suggestiveness,” as a pleasurable, sublime characteristic inducing a sense of invigoration.

When one walks into this unknowable space, the absolute darkness is immersive and disquieting, creating an element of fear. The installation reminds one of our vulnerability in the dark. This further engages with a consideration of the vastness of space where we cannot perceive edges, becoming a reminder of one’s mortality. The exhibition is an unnerving, yet aesthetically beautiful space to navigate. Just as objects are viewed and recognised as domestic items, there is a stark reminder of one’s own limited time and the fragility of all matter. The pieces are so familiar, although one knows that the ghostly objects are not there.

Ismail (2021) states that the exhibition is a painful reminder that the things we believe will endure forever will not, referring to an inherent vulnerability. In a discussion of her bioart practice, Farber (2022:187) says that her casts⁸³, “[t]hrough these precarious ‘things’ that are barely things, one is invited to try and grasp the ungraspable - fugitive,

⁸³ Farber (2012:6) states that she has a continuous preference to touch over visual imagery in her work, where the materiality is used as a “feminine mode of production”.

fragmented remembrances of familiarity, strangeness, comfort, dis-ease, intimacy, distance, vulnerability, trauma, complicity and loss.” Each item, like ourselves, is transitory and temporal. Immortality belongs only to the darkness and nothingness. We come and we leave with nothing (Ismail 2021). This existentialist temporality echoes Challenger’s (2021:5) view confronting our refusal to be ‘organic beings’, and Tsing’s (2015:20) discussion of our denial of precarity.

To paraphrase the art critic Jamal in his conversation with Farber: life is defined by the void, subject to the void and there is no being without the non-being. The void is the primary condition (Farber 2020b; Farber 2021). Farber’s skins and impressions become a veil concealing the void that we all must engage with at some point. Fear of the void can result in people taking “refuge inside objects, or a state of mind” (Emanuel 2001:17073). Collections of stuff and holding on to objects creates a sense of being ‘cocooned’ against the vastness of the infinite (Emanuel 2001:1073).

Relinquishing the object or the known, so as to face the unknown can lead to severe anxiety of falling into the chasm. There is a threat of complete disintegration or of falling into the void and formless infinite (Emanuel 2001:1072). Farber’s work becomes an expression of the desperate futility of grasping objects that represent the self. A glowing, light-filled decay acts as a buffer against time, simultaneously embodying change.

Both Mehretu and Farber address humanity’s impermanence, however Farber’s forms resonate with me, since these objects can be found in my home too. With a focus on corporeal engagement, the following section investigates Choumali’s work.

3.2.3 Joana Choumali: Despair and resilience

On 13 March 2016, terrorists attacked the coastal resort town of Grand-Bassam in the Ivory Coast⁸⁴ in which 16 people were murdered and many others injured (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35798502>).

⁸⁴ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/03/14/horror-at-the-beach-22-dead-in-terrorist-attack-on-ivory-coast-resorts/>

Ivorian artist, Choumali (1974-) writes of this tranquil town being her refuge where she would go to relax (Choumali 2018). Although she was not there during the attack, she frequently visited there. She arrived three weeks after the attack, observing the palpably altered atmosphere, noting that mental wounds from the electoral war in 2011 were reopened (Parrish [sa]). Choumali states that Ivorians do not commonly talk⁸⁵ about trauma (Brewer 2018). Discussing psychological issues or feelings is perceived as a weakness or even a 'mental disease' (Choumali 2018). The phrase "*ça va aller*" (it will be okay) is often used to shorten conversations, reinforcing the notion that trauma is not to be discussed.

Photographer Choumali typically works in her controlled photography studio, where she takes time to get to know her subjects before photographing them. In the aftermath of the terror attack, Choumali approached this body of work differently. She discreetly used her smartphone to photograph spaces and people in the city (see figures 8, 9, 10), noting how the communal atmosphere had changed. Choumali said she "noticed solitude, melancholy and empty spaces" (Brewer 2018). None of the subjects were aware of being photographed.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/14/al-qaeda-claims-deadly-ivory-coast-attack-on-resort>

⁸⁵ Free counselling was offered, but Choumali reiterates that after the first week, people hardly spoke of the trauma (Parrish [sa]).



Fig 8. Joana Choumali, *Untitled (Ça va aller / It will be okay)* (2016).

To reiterate Solnit's (2005:6) position concerning the 'voluptuous' surrender, to be completely immersed in the moment, to be present. Unlike a freeze response, this state is an active choice of being in uncertainty, a different psychic state. Solnit suggests that this assists in developing resilience.

In an emergency situation, people are willing to help. Afterwards, there is a sense of withdrawal where emotions are externally masked while the individual internally processes the event. The stressed body regresses into old patterns, layered emotions mask bodily alarms and death may be viscerally contemplated (Kennedy 2020:117,

124). Heidegger's (1926:186) view that anxiety and fear are linked as a 'fleeing or turning-away' is relevant to Choumali's work as a response to a traumatic event. I regard the process of photographing random strangers as a symptom of this distancing. A confrontation with one's own death is, for Heidegger (1926:277), an intuitive awareness of the fragility of life.

Journalists recorded the drama and horror of the terrorist attack. Choumali's approach was to examine the quiet aftermath, the people impacted by the violence as they privately engaged with their own vulnerabilities, reorientating themselves in spaces altered by grievous loss. Choumali did not experience the event directly but was still deeply affected by it. This is evidenced by the random figures, mostly turned away from the viewer in her photographs (figures 8 and 9) or the silhouettes (figure 10). As a photographer, Choumali is not engaging with the gaze, identity or even the lived experience of the unknown subjects. The figure shapes become receptacles of a contained trauma that is not shared with the viewer. Instead of confrontation, the work seems to withdraw into a private mourning. I engage with this aspect of isolation in my work, using large negative spaces in my drawings to suggest vulnerability.

The use of smartphones to document miniscule details of our lives contributes to the glut of visual information and salacious texts, sensationalised news, opinion and gossip we are relentlessly exposed to. This notion is supported by Jenkins (2006:3) who writes about information overload and the fast-paced changes that occur (2006:13). As a result, individuals fight for the right to participate in their own culture (Jenkins 2006:18). As an artist, Choumali's work is a far deeper act of mourning than a reflex. She extends the impact of her photographs using feminine stitches to create new meaning through her practice. Choumali printed the images on to small squares of canvas (24 cm²), spending hours poring over them, making repetitive stitches on the surface over a two-week period.



Fig 9. Joana Choumali, *Untitled (Ça va aller/It will be okay)* (2016).



Fig 10. Joana Choumali, *Untitled (Ça va aller/It will be okay)* (2016).

When emotions are raw, it is often difficult to verbally articulate the pain. Artists use needlework to visually 'speak' when voices are silenced (Hunter 2019:153). Hand stitching is a time-consuming, intimate process requiring concentration and care to create works to mourn and process the trauma (Hunter 2019:162). Each stitch becomes an articulation of remembrance in the loneliness and ambivalence of the time. As a restorative practice, repetitive mark-making becomes the ground that anchors the moment. Choumali states that, for her, stitching was therapeutic, as it was

“a way to express what I couldn’t do verbally” (Brewer 2018). The colourful threads contrast with the dark emotions of shock and grief, overlaying areas of the canvas, obscuring some parts while cushioning others.

In figure 8, the white thread creates a filter over the landscape, highlighting the figure walking out of the frame in the bottom left. I am reminded of precipitation that dampens down bright daylight, creating a veil of mist. A young man (figure 9) is surrounded by an aura of tiny crosses that seem to envelop and protect him. It seems as if he is walking into a swarm of particles, shielding him from his surroundings. The seated person in figure 10 is separated from the composition of blocked purple and green stitching, contrasting with the decayed yellow of the building. The choice of building and the thread remind one of the bruised aftermath of violence.

Stitching is a way of doing something productive and manageable when feelings of overwhelm threaten. It is an active, controlled movement that soothes chaotic thinking. Instead of denying the difficulty of a situation, encouraged by those who attempt to brush off trauma, Choumali suggests that recognising it, working on it, and taking a positive step forward is key (Parrish [sp]). This echoes Van der Kolk (2014:424, 426) and Kennedy (2020:224), who write of the link between resilience and agency, or knowing that what you do can make a difference. Taking time with stitching becomes a somatic action that, using art as social expression, allows one to find honour within our worst experiences (de Botton 2013:25).

Inspired by Choumali, I used stitching in my own work. She regards embroidery as an act of meditation, channelling hope and resilience into the works (Brewer 2018). The embellished, transformed photographs in this body of work are all untitled. I find this an interesting choice, because despite the sizeable amount of time spent in creating each intimate piece, they are unnamed. For me, this alludes to a certain distance between the photographer and the subject, becoming an act of control, albeit that the subject and space is unknowable. Where disturbing images of horror draw one in and can arouse intense emotion, Choumali denies the viewer access to this lived experience. The images encourage quiet contemplation of the images, and the underlying

traumatic event. Choumali creates a liminal space between those who have lived the experience and those that respond to it.

3.3 CONCLUSION

My third question involved exploring the visual strategies used by artists to imply control and loss of control, so as to gain insight that could be furthered in my own work. Each selected artist and her work expose a fragile vulnerability as she engages with temporal concerns. Mehretu's piece, a controlled structure is overlaid with almost random gestural marks. This juxtaposition suggests a continual search for order amidst chaos, but also a continual chaos despite the attempted order. For me, that search is a lamentation. The mapping of disintegration and collapse in order to localise structures and systems are linked to posthumanism and rhizome thinking strategies. The information is multi-directional, literally and figuratively, engaging with multiple histories and community movements on a single plane.

Farber's work confronts the impermanence of material objects, highlighting their fragility. In so doing, she forces a confrontation with the void of inevitable mortality and the associated attempt to grasp the intangible and the fleeting. Her bioart allows Farber to engage with new materialism, confronting viewers with their own existential vulnerabilities, the inevitability of time, uncertainty and death.

Choumali's work references the tragedy of a society in mourning, where a community tries to process the psychological impact of terror. Her stitches add a physical strength and order to the surface. They represent time spent grieving the once-lively communal tourist spaces. The meditative act of stitching embodies materialisation, bringing a degree of control during an anxious time. The artist keeps 'busy' and becomes productive in a space in which the artist feels defenceless.

In individual ways, each art piece confronts a different kind of chaos through the artists' strategies of engagement. These artworks were instrumental to the processes I selected in expressing lament in my own practice-led studio work and exhibition, as addressed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Disquiet*

4.1 INTRODUCTION

I focus on three aspects⁸⁶ in my exhibition *Disquiet* (2024) at the 6 Spin Street Gallery in Cape Town, while relating specific research questions and artist's working processes to my own work. The undertaking was a process of observing and exploring emotional experiences⁸⁷ in a posthuman context focused on material thinking⁸⁸ and practice-led research. It included several strategies, commencing with introspective visualisation. Secondly, a reviewed contemplation of the void and the fearful thoughts in response to this contemplation. Thirdly, how I employed the analogue bodily responses to those observations and explorations in developing my own story, against Harari's (2018:327) warnings not to fully believe them. To paraphrase Erica Berry (2023:244) it was an attempt to contextualise, metabolise, and learn from exploring the topographies of my vulnerabilities. My subsequent body of works became an expression of vulnerabilities, a lamentation and an enactment of agency.

4.2 LAMENTING

The creative challenge concerned finding ways to express grief or sorrow through meaningful use of materials, performatively and with consideration of specific emotions. For me, the lamentation is a fearful outcry of the unknown future, questioning my relevance and worth within it. This work straddles anxiety and grieving; reactive fear and despair. It questions the relevance of the individual in the overall: a convoluted entanglement of grief for the deceased, lost futures and a lost sense of self. The materials and rituals of artmaking have engendered a sense of exposure and vulnerability. When I questioned the intensity of my emotional responses, since these events form a normal, expected part of life, I felt compelled to compare the works discussed in chapter three to my own art practice.

⁸⁶ The three aspects are: order and control; fear and anxiety; despair and resilience.

⁸⁷ Knowledge that comes from artistic practice is materially situated, subjective and experiential (Barrett 2007:10).

⁸⁸ Whilst acknowledging rhizome thinking, new materialism and convergence theory.

Articulated by Braidotti (2020), contemporary times are rife with ambivalences which engender anxiety and grief over a variety of concerns. Lamentation is an active expression of grief and despite its hard definition, I find it a gentle word for an intense expression at a time of perceived helplessness. It encompasses an outward, expressive act, and yet includes the quiet, private times of introspection.⁸⁹ The author Katherine May (2020:9) writes about this dissociative space as a “wintering”, describing it as a fallow period one feels cut off from the world around one. For May (2020:8), this is a liminal space of transition between what was and what is to come: including recovery from an illness, a bereavement or from failure. May (2020:13) perceives this transformative period as a crucible rather than a death, stating that “it’s a time for reflection and recuperation, for slow replenishment, for putting your house in order”. Despite it being an out-of-time period, it is also a working time. Through my artwork, I attempted to ‘put my house in order’ to understand my own anxiety and fears that have dismissed as ‘overly emotional’ and ‘overly sensitive’.

My praxis began as an investigation of the obsessive need for control within perceived chaos. There was a desire to confront and understand the anxiety that comes from real and perceived lack of control in the realm of the ordinary day by making art. Material actions, tacit knowledge and reflexive writing facilitated a contemplation of grief over that which is chaotic. Braidotti writes of collective anxiety where “the complex, ambivalent emotions of alternating suffering and hope, resilience, boredom, all merging into vulnerability have been labelled as posthuman convergence” (Braidotti 2020). Haraway writes of Tsing’s work that “living and dying with response-ability in unexpected company” is the challenge of our time (Berry 2023:243). The Buddhist author Chödrön writes that even though the world’s happenings are a result of collective human actions, we can individually take responsibility for our own state of mind as we move forward into the future (Chödrön 2016:149). Within this approach, I explore my own art making, incorporating my emotional state of mind, something which is often difficult to articulate.

Grief is an intensely private affair. It is difficult to communicate the multilayered feelings, despite everyone experiencing grief at some point in their lives. The

⁸⁹ Lamentation: late 14th century from Old French *lamentacion* “lamentation, plaintive cry” and directly from Latin *lamentationem* “a wailing, moaning, a weeping” (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/lamentation>).

overwhelming feelings can become all-encompassing and isolating. Individual pain is often masked, while tears are regarded as a weakness, something shameful to be hidden. Attempting to hide, erase and 'move on' without processing trauma adds to suffering (Van der Kolk 2014:64, 247), albeit later on. Artmaking aids emotional processing, encouraging an emptying of self and a willingness to explore new understandings of anxiety and self-expression (de Botton 2013:25). Art becomes a way of honouring grief, as discussed during the analysis of Choumali's artworks previously. After many years of crying, there is a relief in understanding that some of my anxiety and fear is, perhaps, a grieving rather than weakness.

My practical exhibition showcased an exploration of processes relating to these emotions in three distinct spaces. The three spaces in turn reflected three aspects of my work: order and control; fear and anxiety; despair and resilience. This chapter includes a detailed discussion of these aspects. The walk through of the exhibition⁹⁰ became a visual journey of my discoveries as I read and created art in answer to the questions I posed. In the main gallery space⁹¹, I presented works that address an ordering of the chaotic through cyanotype and photographic processes, using significant objects, family and personal photographs. The linking corridor⁹² became a space of confrontation where fears were navigated. This corridor led to the back room, of larger 'shadow' drawings. This room⁹³, was a space devoted to despair and resilience. The inclination was to walk through in a figure of eight, circling through the whole interior. I address each space after contextualising my thought process.

4.3 DISQUIET

My family, a blend of a German and South African heritage, means I straddle both, not feeling quite 'enough' for either, yet claiming a kind of hybrid space. Raised on German fairy tales, their warnings and instructions prevailed into adulthood. I walked through indigenous forests in Cape Town's Silvermine and forests in the German Stuttgart

⁹⁰ Evidence of the entire exhibition space.

⁹¹ Main gallery footage.

⁹² Corridor footage.

⁹³ Back room footage.

region, photographing ancient trees in deep forests (figure 11). My heritage and forest-walking experiences impacted my work as discussed in section 4.5.



Fig 11. Heidi Mouret, *Memory archive* (detail) (2024).

Anxiety and its heightened emotional state whereby potential threats are perceived can be likened to the disquiet of moving through a darkening forest, knowing that wolves are on the hunt, lurking in the periphery, only sensed and glimpsed at through the foliage. The dis-ease provoked by these shadows makes one anticipate the confrontation and capture. Van der Kolk (2014:3) writes of the hypervigilant brain as one which is aware of threats at all times. The wolf shadow-shape became metaphor

and motif for anxious thought patterns, the archetypal narratives fabricated by the mind as discussed in chapter 2.2 and 4.4. See figures 12 and 13 as exemplars.



Fig 12. Heidi Mouret, *Disquiet* (corridor view) (2024).



Fig 13. Heidi Mouret, *Disquiet* (back gallery view) (2024).

4.4 SYMBOLS, ARCHETYPES AND METAPHORS

The archetypal forests and wolves evidence a fairytale-like quality in my work. Both Braidotti (2013:52) and Tsing (2015:159) promote posthuman assemblages that draw on multiple learning practices, including oral histories. Although my work is not specifically based on fairy tales, childhood motifs and symbols emerge. These in turn are aligned with Jungian archetypes and will be explicated below.

Fairytales express moral ideals and, as such, I argue that they can be considered a navigational strategy. The seminal writer on fairy tales, Marie-Louise von Franz⁹⁴ (1915-1998), developed archetypal⁹⁵ theories concerning fairy tales. Working closely with Jung,⁹⁶ he concluded that fairy tales act as stories of journey, maps revealing paths through one state to another, and remind us that our experiences are not solitary (Estés 1992:20). Von Franz states that there is written tradition of fairy tales dating back at least 3,000 years⁹⁷ and yet the basic motifs have remained constant (Von Franz 1971:3 [1:3]). Jung believed that motifs had a human foundation, so fairy tales are significant to the study of comparative anatomy of the psyche (Von Franz 1971:11 [1:11]), mirroring its innate structure (Von Franz 1971:2 [1:2]). Just so, anxious thoughts become a repetitive internal narrative, permeating the brain and the psyche (Van der Kolk 2014:210). It is seductively comforting to anticipate harm, and like an old fairy tale, it becomes a (mis)guide for the self. Walking through the three gallery spaces is a journey through my thought process.

4.5 MAIN GALLERY

This space was devoted to a predominantly blue collection (figure 14) as a material response to how chaos creates conditions that advance fear. The works were primarily

⁹⁴ Von Franz wrote about interpretations of fairy tales, especially through analysis of archetypes. She worked closely with Jung (<https://www.marie-louisevonfranz.com/en/home>).

⁹⁵ Archetypes are original patterns, or typical examples of something, and for Jung, this represented an original primitive mental image that is present in the collective unconscious (Von Franz 1971:7 [1:1])

⁹⁶ Freudian interpretations mainly support his Oedipus complex, which von Franz (1971:55[8:2]) deems as “superficial”. Von Franz writes of Hans Christian Anderson’s retelling of stories as ‘neurotic’ and “sentimental and morbid” (Von Franz 1971:158[8:1]).

⁹⁷ The story of Anup (Anubis) and Bata written on ancient Egyptian papyrus was very similar to the European stories of the two-brother type stories (Von Franz 1971:3, 1991:3).

influenced by chaos theory, the void and archetypes of the forest and its shadows. These were dovetailed with Mehretu's asemic depictions of chaos through layered mark making, Farber's fragile iterations confronting the void and Choumali's stitching as memory, recourse and repair. These artists inspired extensive experimentation, the result of which influenced the *Disquiet* exhibition (2024).



Fig 14. Heidi Mouret, *Disquiet* (main gallery view) (2024).

I used cyanotype and photography to control and record, albeit in different ways. Multidirectional states such as attempting to control while paradoxically relinquishing control; remembering through photographs; distorting these memories by rephotographing grainy, old film and photographs. These works relate to my second question, namely, how to work with multidirectional states in a process of becoming.

The walks through forests occurred during and after an intense period of mental anguish. I photographed trees⁹⁸ using these to claim this regenerative space and to retain the peace that I found there (figure 15). This locates my disquiet.

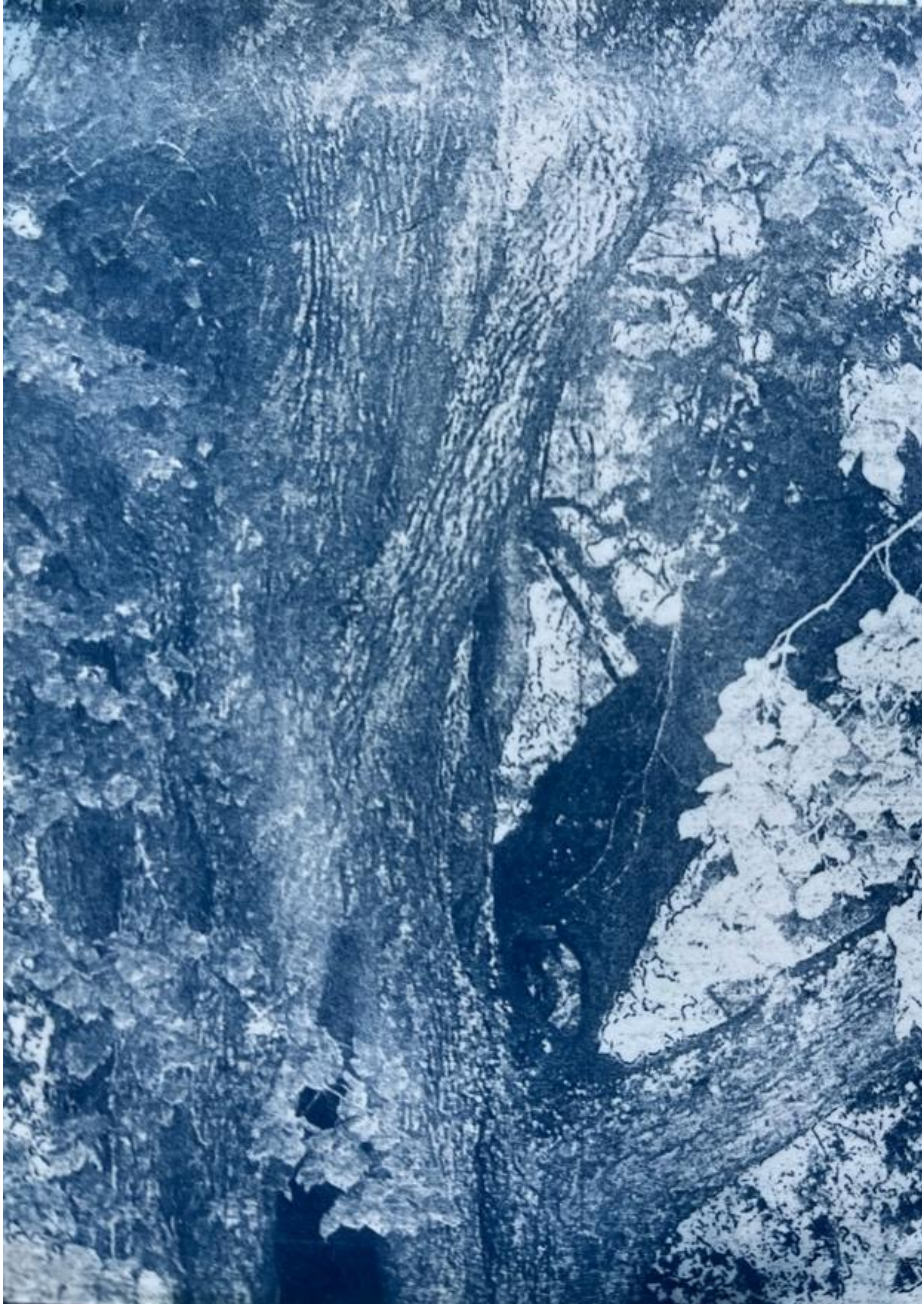


Fig 15. Heidi Mouret, *Old oak* (2024).

⁹⁸ I read trees as indicators of survivors of external stressors. Gnarled shapes develop in response to environmental factors creating interesting forms that suggest resilience.

For me, forests are the quiet equivalence of the interwoven systems found in nature. In acknowledgement, I have layered, drawn over and stitched into photographic prints on paper and fabric. According to Van Franz (1971:93[7:5]), forests symbolise the subconscious, while Jungian scholar Pinkola-Estés (1992:430) regards the tree as a classic symbol of immortal individuation, since its seeds live on while its roots revive and shelter life (Estés 1992:439). Translating this into the psyche, Estés (1992:482) suggests that a tree's nature is a pattern of death and regrowth (Estés 1992:459).

The wild forest is an archetypical sacred initiatory site, the location of growth and transformation. In fairytales and in reality, forests provide sites of reflection, retreat and healing (Estés 1992:430). She refers to the concealed, intense female knowledge as the "underground forest" or the wild world that exists under the one perceived by the ego (1992:420). For Estés (1992:427), loss and betrayal are the primary steps of an initiation into the underground forest. This notion preoccupied me during my walks.

I created acetate negatives of selected forest photographs, printing them through the cyanotype process. Initially I printed repetitive versions of the images, creating a body of straightforward prints as seen in figure 15. Over time, the structure of the applied cyanotype ink changed, creating various shapes and concentric patterns (figure 16). The organic circular shaped prints evolved into contained forests. These were printed in shapes resembling alchemical vessels confining a wild space (figure 17). I gently layered coloured pencil and watercolour into the cyanotypes. The cyanotypes were rephotographed and reprinted as giclée or fine art prints (figure 18). To enhance the wild, chaotic entanglement of the undergrowth, I drew marks resembling stitches over the surface.

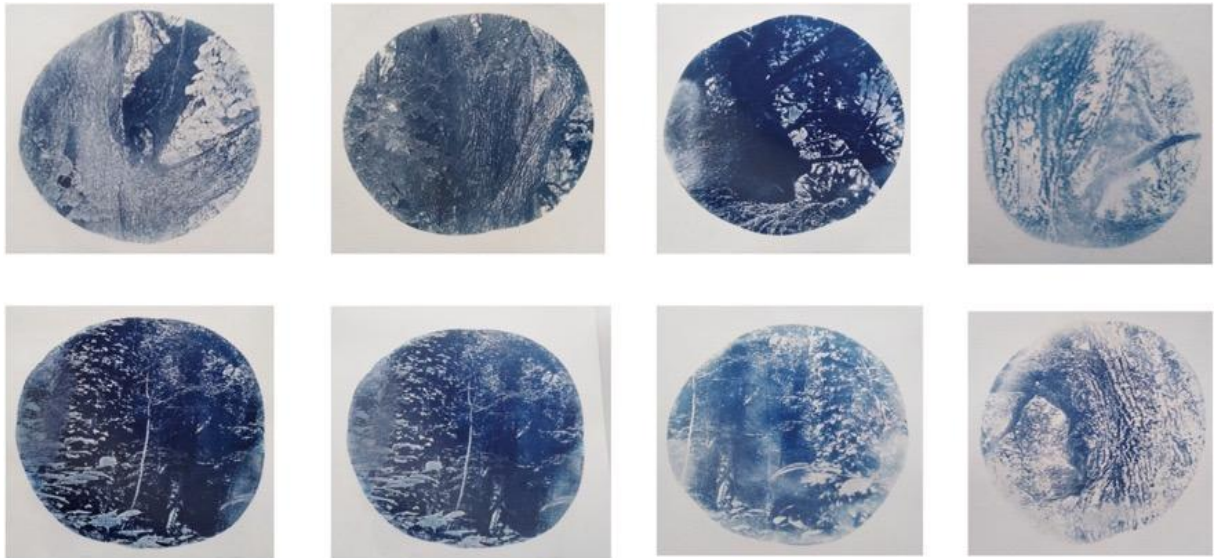


Fig 16. Heidi Mouret, *A glimpse of forest* (2024).

I digitally photographed a space, and using an iPhone application, printed the original image as a Polaroid film, creating a Polaroid lift.⁹⁹ The small, delicate image was rephotographed in order to print a large-scale giclée print (fig 19). All that was left of the experience is recorded as a fragile, sliver of memory. By rephotographing and reprinting the image, it suggests a desperate attempt to preserve what is past. Using carbon paper, I traced the edges and redrew these tracings over the image, searching for the lines that delineate and contain the forest. The thin blue lines are, in themselves, single carbon copies.

⁹⁹ This is created by separating the thin skin of the image on from the layers that make up a Polaroid by soaking it in warm water and cutting off the edges of the print. Paper is slid underneath the skin to 'tease' it on to the card. This is a fragile image that tears easily and if placed back into water, will separate from the card once again.



Fig 17. Heidi Mouret, *Forest preserved* (2024).



Fig 18. Heidi Mouret, *Lost in the forest* (2024).



Fig 19. Heidi Mouret, *The witness of trees* (2024).

Working with thread and stitching into fabric became an entanglement of 'undergrowth': holding on and mending but also loosening and unravelling. The thin threads become a 'forest' of fibres (fig 20) speaking of the fragility and interconnectedness of nature.

Influenced by Kandinsky (1911:64), I predominately use the colour blue as symbol of grief. Blue is a natural outcome of cyanotype printing, although I added tea tannins to add subtle colour shifts. Cyanotype is a two-dimensional printing process that records three-dimensional space. I propose that the resultant blueprints record spaces or objects that become forms of memory keeping. Shadows are documented as spaces once occupied. My cyanotypes enable me to retain the past, to remember things lost and to create cartographies which navigate vulnerability.



Fig 20. Heidi Mouret, *Loose threads* (2024).

Traditionally used to create copies of architectural drawing and technical plans, the cyanotype process¹⁰⁰ and resulting copies were called blueprints. Equal quantities of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide are dissolved and combined with water. This liquid is applied to whatever surface¹⁰¹ is to be used as the base for a print. The exposure of the dried treated surface to ultraviolet light creates ferric ferrocyanide, known as Prussian Blue. Areas that are masked from the ultraviolet light prevent the chemicals from being converted. These chemicals wash out in water, exposing a negative space. Reflecting on the relationship between artists and the colour blue, Solnit writes that artists attempt to capture distance through blue, but it is the colour one can never go to.¹⁰² She states that “this [blue] light that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us beauty of the world, so much of which is in the colour blue” (Solnit 2017:29).

Cyanotype printing can be used to keep a record of significant objects since one can print using either objects or transparencies to block or expose areas to ultraviolet rays. Since the object or its shadow blocks the light, it is printed as an empty space whereby the negative areas are transformed into blues. The act of creating a cyanotype is one where the negative space becomes a positive. Consequently, the invisible negative space around an object becomes more present in the print than the actual object. The three-dimensional space flattens, transforming as a two-dimensional recording and becoming a type of map. For me, this process is a way to make emptiness tangible and defined (figures 21 and 22).

¹⁰⁰ Cyanotypes were originally developed by Sir John Frederick William Herschel (1792-1871) in 1842 after many years of experimentation and testing photographic properties (Ware 2014:32).

¹⁰¹ Natural fibres such as cottons, linens or hems work well. Synthetic fabrics will not allow the chemicals to ‘bite’ and simply wash off completely. Different paper types react differently, giving a range of effects. My favourites are Rosaspina Fabriano cotton paper, and vintage (worn) cotton or translucent Indian cotton fabric which is woven from a tree cotton (*Gossypium arboreum*).

¹⁰² As a colour of atmospheric perspective, it shows distance, or a “longing for the distances you never arrive at” (Solnit 2017:30).



Fig 21. Heidi Mouret, *Mapped void* (2024).

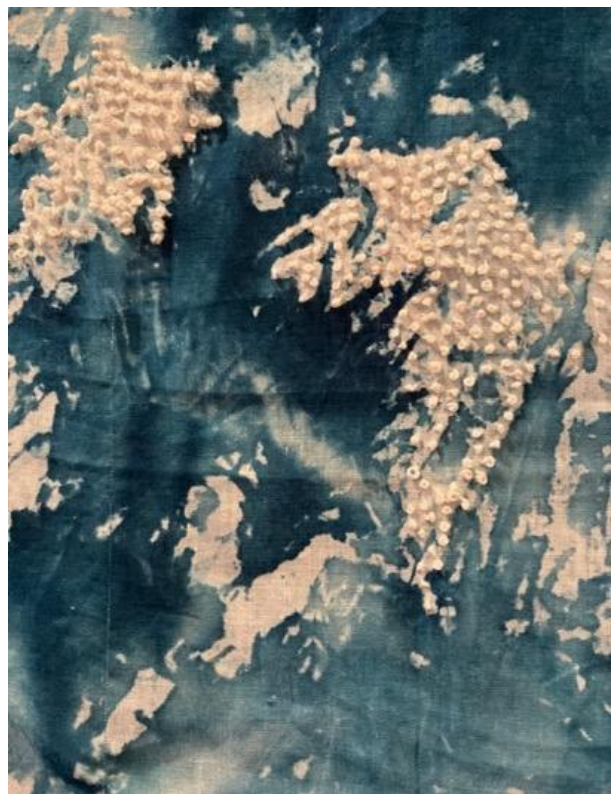


Fig 22. Heidi Mouret, *Mapped void* (detail) (2024).

Van der Kolk (2014:64) states that psychological problems occur when our mental signals fail to provide reliable information to our corporeal systems. Artist's mapped spaces, like Mehretu's *Epigraph, Damascus* (2016), and my cyanotypes visually depict distortions to reveal a different kind of truth, similar to the distortions of memory over time. The process records what is, but also what is lost. Kandinsky (1866-1944) refers to blue as a reminder of heaven and the sky. For him, dark blue heralds peace, yet a very dark blue, almost black, becomes one of "a grief that is hardly human" (Kandinsky 1911:64). This empty space suggests a lamentation, harbinger of the void.

Echoing Heidegger's (1926:244) existential questioning concerning existence and life's temporality, I printed cyanotypes on paper and fabrics, creating thin veils of images, some of which I stitched together. The translucency of these delicate cloths is reminiscent of Farber's thin crockery skins, despite their difference materially and conceptually.

Sewing provides a language of mark-making that communicates. The catalyst for this exhibition began during a period of isolation from my family and community. To while away time, I tried to mend a knitted mohair scarf inherited from my maternal great-grandmother (fig 23). Through the years, its fragile threads had worn and torn through in places. Each time I tried to mend an area, more holes gaped and finally, all I could do was stitch around the holes to emphasise the area of disrepair. The time spent mending provided the quiet time required to reflect and reminisce about my family and friends. Attempting to mend it and hold it together felt symbolic and significant.

According to Estés (1992:442), the palm of the hand is a kind of sensor. We take a 'reading' of the people we touch, and this creates connection both as a receiver and transmitter of information. Hands can soothe, bring comfort, remove pain and heal in what she calls "woman's knowledge" (Estés 1992:442). As with Choumali's art, hand stitching becomes a meaningful process that suggests attention, consideration and time.



Fig 23. Heidi Mouret, *Holding threads together* (installation view) (2024).

In Clare Hunter's book, *Threads of life* (2014) she writes that as a visual language, sewing has its own voice, speaking of the artist's background. Stitching is often used to convey what is important to the artist. Patterns and marks from stitches are the "syntax, symbols and motifs". The arrangement of these becomes a type of visual grammar (Hunter 2014:276). Stitching is a way of marking our existence and sharing something of ourselves (Hunter 2014:298). Echoing this, and in a similar vein to Choumali's

stitched process, I spent time stitching into fabrics that were of personal significance: a great-grandmother's scarf, my maternal grandmother's handmade household cloths and my father's handkerchiefs. My complicated, ambivalent feelings of grief were conveyed through overlaid, seemingly random marks as seen in the stitched silk handkerchief (fig 24).

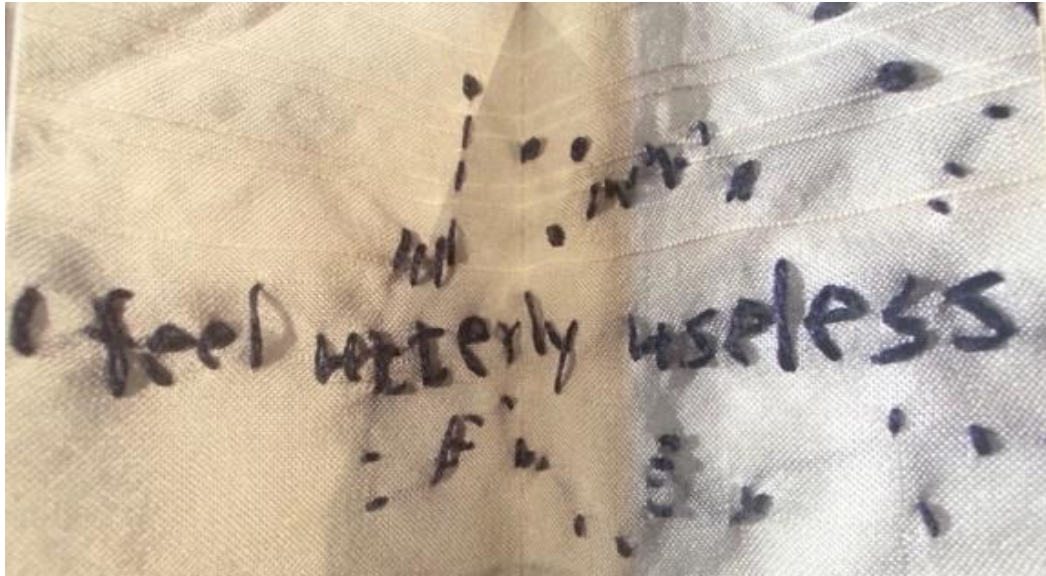


Fig 24. Heidi Mouret, *An Ending (ii)* (detail) (2024).



Fig 25. Heidi Mouret, *An ending (i), (ii), (iii)* (2024).

Stitched cloths were photographed and presented as images in accordion books that could be packed away (fig 25). Parts of *The disquieting thought* (figure 26), include more controlled fly stitching including asemic text and legible tags of embroidered script describing extreme anxiety. The rhythmic patterns mark out the pattern of meditative time during the making process.



Fig 26. Heidi Mouret, *The disquieting thought* (detail) (2024).

Sewing is used as a private mourning strategy (Hunter 2019:144). Women use cloth belonging to the deceased to keep them close symbolically (Hunter 2014:149). Worn fabric becomes an identity marker of its owner, since it absorbs the person's shape and smell (Hunter 2014:149). I struggled to work with some of the cloth I had inherited due to its personal significance. Repeatedly worn and washed fabric develops a softness and tactility different to new cloth. A needle glides through the fibres with a different kind of ease. Fabric and stitched works are often forgotten when folded and packed away. Despite needlework being a skilled craft, with embroidered or stitched pieces passed down through generations as treasured items, these are only precious to those who hold on to them. Once something is donated or passed on, removed from its social and emotional purpose, "it loses its voice" (Hunter 2014:292, 293). I unpacked fabrics, choosing what to repurpose, adding an entirely new layer of meaning. I printed and stitched over hand embroidered table napkins (figure 24) and printed directly on to the handkerchiefs (fig 27). Some emotions rendered me mute, so I stitched aseptic text on the fabric in a private strategy of mourning (fig 28).

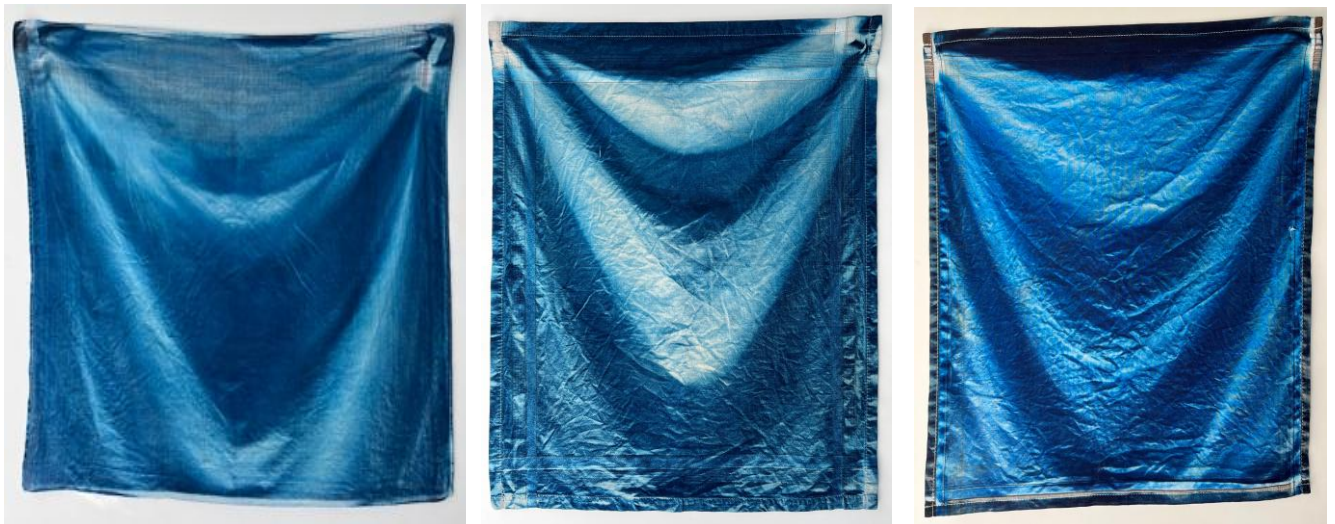


Fig 27. Heidi Mouret, *Airing the Laundry* (i), (ii), (iii) (2024).



Fig 28. Heidi Mouret, *Attempted speech* (2024).



Fig 29. Heidi Mouret, *The disquieting thought* (2024).

4.6 CORRIDOR

The corridor, a linking space between the main gallery and the backroom, displayed smaller works requiring close scrutiny (figure 30). The wolf and its burgeoning shadows became a motif for fear and anxiety.



Fig 30. Heidi Mouret, *Looming shadow (i-viii)* (installation view) (2024).

The anxious mind can create a sense of isolation from the collective 'pack', emphasising vulnerability and a prey-like quality. The wolf symbolises transition, the twilight hunter in the forest in the liminal space between dawn and dusk.¹⁰³ The wolf is equated with darkness and savagery¹⁰⁴ (Lopez 1978:209) and is a deep-rooted symbol for a range of shadowy things (Lopez 1978:226) including desperation, cunning and ferocity, so easily and often over-exaggerated. The real wolf¹⁰⁵ has little to do with the fictionalised character of fairytales.

Since humans desire the power of predators, there is a conflicting sense of self-preservation.¹⁰⁶ They remind us of the wild, the potential beyond our protective homes and of our frailties (May 2020:178). The wolf is a symbol reflecting two human alternatives at war with each other, representing our instinctual urges and our rational behaviour (Lopez 1978:226). This juxtaposition is one that Challenger (2021:5) and

¹⁰³ Twilight, or *Inter lupum et canem* (Latin) represents the contrast between the wild wolf and the tame dog. This also represents the time when the dog starts to look for rest and before the wolf starts hunting. (Lopez 1978:209).

¹⁰⁴ Compared to the 'dog' which represents civilisation, order and enlightenment (Lopez 1978:209).

¹⁰⁵ Although there is a lot written about wolves, much of it has focused on wolves in captivity rather than in the wild. This means that finding out about the wild wolf is difficult. New technologies are better able to track and collect data, but there is still ongoing research about the species, especially how they are in the wild (Lopez 1978:226 and Captain et al. 2025:6).

¹⁰⁶ This links to Challenger's (2021:5) comment about humans not acknowledging their animal selves.

Abrams (1996: xi) determine must be reconciled since it is linked to the archetypal situation of being at odds with one's concealed aspects.

In my lexicon, wolves represent a warning of the shadowy threats lurking on the edge of my peripheral vision. This is exactly the indirectly perceived anxiety and fear that Kennedy (2020:98) says always concerns a perceived threat. The animal is a symbolic image¹⁰⁷ that mirrors us as we might be if we did not have the safety and security of our 'civilisations' (May 2020:179).



Fig 31. Heidi Mouret, *Apparitions* (2024).

¹⁰⁷ "To the human imagination, the wolf has proved at various times the appropriate symbol for greed or savagery, a disguise for the devil, or as a patron of warrior clans" (Lopez 1978:204).

By focusing on the metaphoric, imaginative wolf rather than the real animal, it is potentially anthropomorphised. Bennett (2010:120) posits that anthropomorphising an entity is necessary since it eventually works against anthropomorphism because “a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’”. She maintains that too often the philosophical rejection of anthropomorphism is bound up with “a hubristic demand that only humans and God can bear any traces of creative agency” (Bennett 2010:120). As stated earlier, the wolf-shape-shadow is a metaphor for my anxious thought patterns (fig 31). Unlike the actual animal, this creature is based on folklore, the exaggerated fears of a stalking hunter that will catch, devour and kill. As an archetype, the bond between wolves refers to the life and death cycle, physically and psychologically (Estés 1992:137).



Fig 32. Heidi Mouret, *Collagraph (i)* (2024).

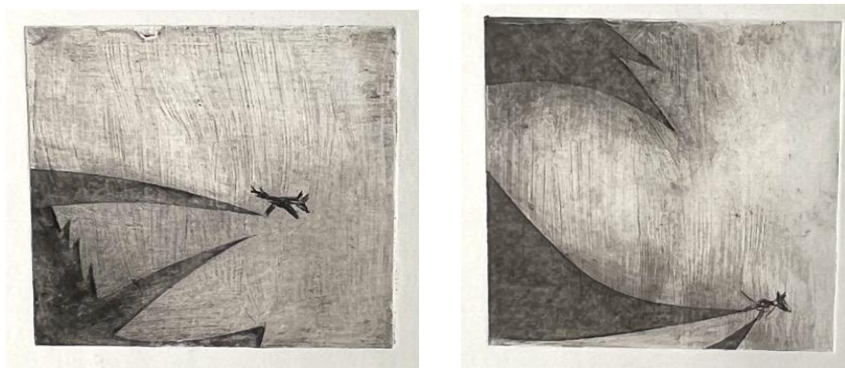


Fig 33 & 34. Heidi Mouret, *Looming shadows (i) & (ii)* (2024).

Initially, the collagraph prints emerged as shaped plates of individual animals (figure 32), transmuting into abstractions (figures 33 & 34) depicting tiny, scratchy animals with disproportionately enormous shadows. These small works invite viewers to step up close, suggesting an uncomfortable invasion of private space. The wolf-animal shape is merely suggested, while the shadow is created by peeling back a top layer of card to create a space for loading up the ink. Here, the shadow becomes dominant in the space. The process of preparing plates and inking up become meditations in doing rather than obsessive thinking.

The shadow is created by blocking the light, but metaphorically it suggests a darkness, or a hidden aspect of the self. Von Franz (1971:108 [7:20]) writes of the shadow archetype as evidence of the unacknowledged side of the self, a place where the difference between the divine and human aspects of the self can become confused with each other if not clearly distinguished: "When one is unaware of the shadow, it falsifies the personality". I employed shadow both as a medium, blocking light in the cyanotype printing process, and as content where it looms large and threateningly in the small collagraph prints (figures 33 & 34).



Fig 35. Heidi Mouret, *Contained journey (ii)* (2024).

As a navigational strategy, I presented several cartographies (2024, figure 35). I created map-like drawings with cyanotype and water drops or dead flowers, drawing contour lines, pathways and trails over them. The shape of an opened die cut box defined the parameters of the map.

4.7 BACK ROOM

In contrast to the small pieces of work in the corridor, the works exhibited in the back room are far larger. The initial drawings are more tightly controlled (figure 36). As I loosened up, so the ink drawings become more abstracted (figure 37). The ink flowed freely within wet areas. As the ink particles flood areas and dispersed in the water, different layers of ink alluded to a topography, becoming cartographies of warning (figure 38). Over time, these abstractions became more pronounced, finally resulting in large drawings of shapes which circle closer (figure 39). From initial drawings of doglike hybrid wolves, they became distorted gestures that focused on the hair, nose and ear directions to indicate 'wolfishness'. Through the drawing process, these icons became further abstracted, suggesting a feral animal quality, albeit anatomically incorrect (figure 39).



Fig 36. Heidi Mouret, *Reactionary (i)* (2024).



Fig 37. Heidi Mouret, *The hunt* (2024).

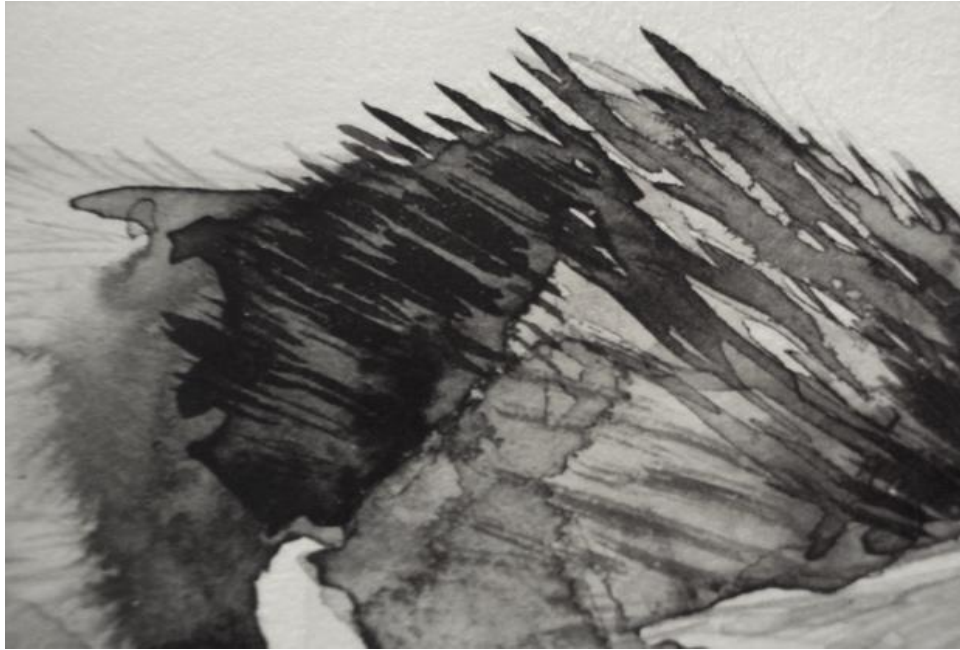


Fig 38. Heidi Mouret, *Reactionary (iii)* (detail) (2024).



Fig 39. Heidi Mouret, *Circling (iv)* (2024).

The black ink drawings engage with the fluid media, allowing it to run in wet areas with limited control. The wolf abstractions are large by contrast to the intimate collagraphs of wolf shadows. Figure 40 provides a visual scale of these works. The movement recalls the emersion discussed in in chapter three, where I referred to Choumali's work and Solnit's (2005:6) writing regarding the 'voluptuous' surrender, as in making these works, I became completely immersed in the act of making spontaneously.

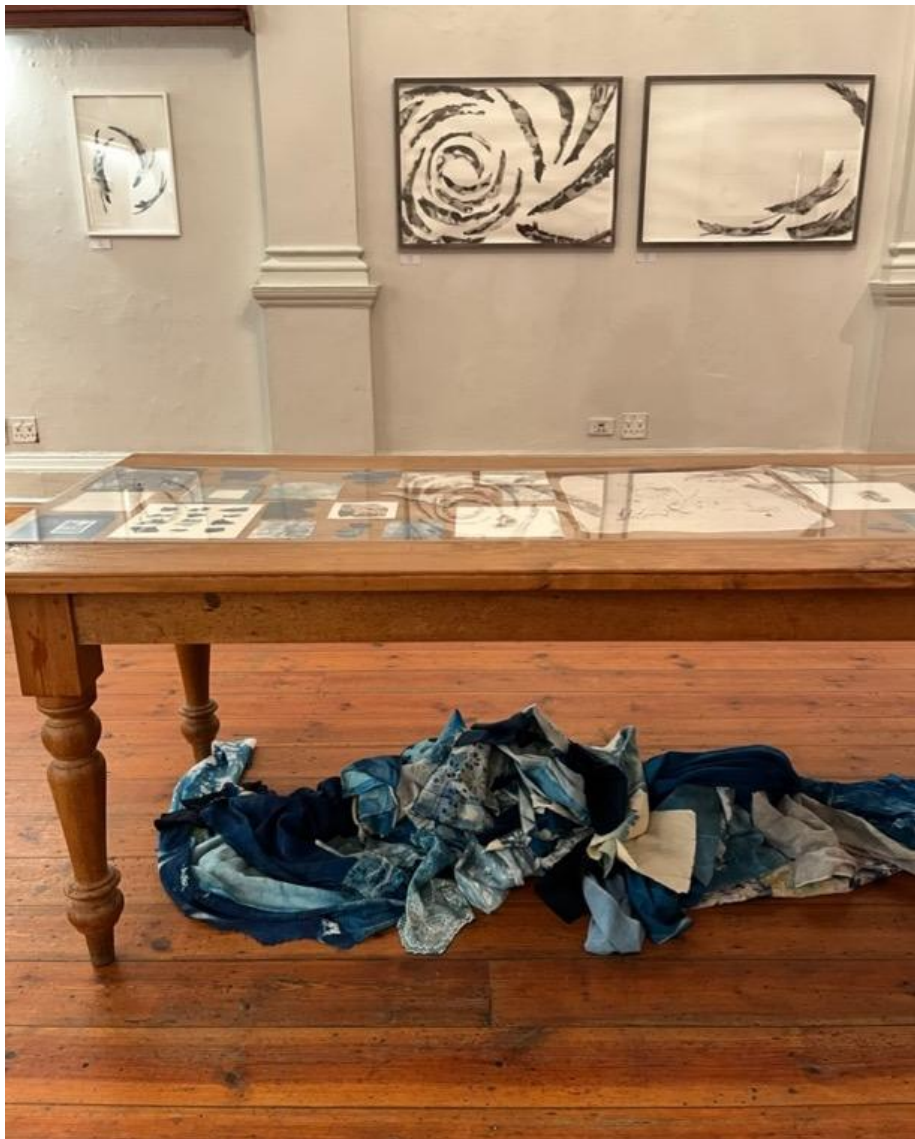


Fig 40. Heidi Mouret, back room (installation view) (2024).

These works explored resilience as a strategy for navigating chaos through gold-leaf shadow drawings of wolves and a tablescape installation. The sub-group of ink and pencil drawings depicting ravens with wolf shadows were installed beside the wolf abstractions. Here the black ravens with wolf-like shadows in gold allude to a shadow body of value, or of the value within the shadow self (figure 41). The birds become messengers bridging the conscious and subconscious worlds (Von Franz 1970:54, [4:16]). By acknowledging and embracing the shadow aspect of oneself, the shadow is transformed into the self, rather than functioning as a mask to conceal the self. Recognising and honouring one's vulnerabilities transforms despair into grief that becomes an act of hope.



Fig 41. Heidi Mouret, *Look both ways* (2024).

The tablescape was displayed in the middle of the space. Under a protective Perspex sheet, I carefully ordered and arranged evidence of memories (figure 42 & 43) incorporating cyanotypes of old family photographs, handkerchiefs, watercolour paintings, remnants of torn cyanotypes, Polaroid lift skins and collagraph plates. A tangle of entwined cyanotype printed cloths on the floor reference a churning disorder beneath a calm surface. In contrast to the work in the main gallery featuring neatly folded fabrics beneath the tangled cloth on display, here the order is inverted.

4.8 CONCLUSION

To address the fourth research question, namely which theoretical and practical tools can be developed as navigational devices for application in art, I drew on critical reading (Smith and Dean 2009; Ellis et al. 2010) and studio experimentation. The resulting exhibition evolved over time, developing a personal language that articulates vulnerability.

Posthumanism, with its convergences inviting contemplation of new becomings (Braidotti 2013:10) can be aligned with Mehretu's layered, meticulous mark making. Both approaches support the notion that gestural expression and controlled precision can be held in dynamic balance, or that contrasting views may be simultaneously held. This capacity became a necessary strategy for engaging with contemporary complexities. It became a strategic exploration of fluid inks, and, at times, the frustrations of cyanotype printing. Mehretu's hand-written marks suggest text and concealed expression, similar to Choumali's strategy in her stitched works. Just so, drawn, written and stitched marks became a new communicational device in several of my works.

An engagement with Farber's delicate sculptural installation engendered another type of ambivalence: the contemplation of an unknown future or void and yet refusing to relinquish the past. In contrast to Farber's bioart, my choice of media was grounded in a personal history. The fragile cloth pieces that were meditatively stitched and printed, and the fragile skins of the Polaroid inner layers can be likened to Farber's thin pellicle skins. Memories were controlled by photographing the thin fabric and the delicate film substance, creating a further series of documentation.

Choumali's stitched photographic prints evidence a process of recovery and inspired a strategy for finding solace within the unbearable. Time and care are evidenced in repetitive stitches. Choumali notes that trauma is often unvoiced (Brewer 2018), however the calm induced by hand stitching enables the overwhelmed mind to soothe itself.

Repurposing old fabrics brought them into the realm of new media, despite their origins. Shadows created distinct spaces within works, giving dimension to absence. Defining absence through demarcated shapes on maps offered a passage through vulnerability.

CHAPTER FIVE: **Conclusion**

To conclude, I reconsider the research problem that questions the nature of disorder and the fetishised notion of the personal necessity for control when confronted by real or perceived chaos. The connections between paradoxical challenges and convergent ambivalences were explored from a specifically female experience of embodiment, alternating suffering with attempts at resilience. These concerns were interrogated through a posthuman lens, examining how female artists Mehretu, Farber and Choumali developed their personal artistic lexicon. An engagement with their communication processes inspired my own creative language, specifically focused on the connections and interplay between chaos, control, and emotional complexity.

5.1 CORE DISCUSSIONS

Chapter two confirmed that heightened ambivalent emotions are prevalent in posthuman times (Braidotti 2020; Challenger 2021:2; Tsing 2015:2). Contextually, posthumanism explored contrasts, layered juxtapositions and their implications within materiality. This is aligned with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome thinking which, eschewing a linear process, allows for complexities, multiplicities and ambivalences to be held simultaneously (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:21). These multidirectional states can be likened to the artistic practice of assemblage (Tsing 2015:159), presenting a semblance of the chaotic.

A rhizome system can also be likened to chaotic thinking (anxiety and fear), that leads to panicked bodily responses (Kennedy 2020: 124) that are the residue of traumas (Van der Kolk 2014; Kennedy 2020). Anxiety and mourning converge with the realisation that life is precariously finite (Heidegger 1926:186; Tsing 2015:21). The discussion in chapter two addresses the first research question, namely, to what extent chaos could be defined as fear and despair, using posthumanist theory.

Chapter two further engaged with the second question: whether posthuman convergence culture as articulated by Braidotti (2020) could be identified as collective anxiety due to parallel contemporary ambivalences, such as suffering and resilience.

Jenkin's convergence culture addresses the rapid changes in emerging media that build on older communication methods, resulting in complex new interactions and evolving understandings of how humans interact with their environments (Jenkins 2006:3). New materialism contributes to the idea that all living matter has vitality and agency (Bennett 2010: xiii), adding a further aspect to a convergence culture.

A posthuman context calls for becoming something 'better' (Braidotti 2013:10; Abram 1996:35) while rejecting old patriarchal viewpoints and outdated views that vitality is limited to an elite few (Braidotti 2020:2). By applying multiple ambivalences to vulnerabilities, embracing precarity (Tsing 2015: 20), mindfulness and reclaiming human animality offer mitigation for suffering (Chödrön 2016:37; Challenger 2021:173, Abram 1996:3). Juxtaposed concepts such as looking backwards (memory) and forwards (confronting death), along with the notions of artistic control and lack thereof, address the third research question. It requires the identification, definition and application of multidirectional states within a process of becoming.

The third research question investigated visual strategies in selected contemporary artworks that suggest control and loss of control. This was addressed in chapters three and four. Selected works by Mehretu, Farber and Choumali were identified in relation to chaos, by engaging with the sublime and resilience. These works were scrutinised to analyse the strategies employed during their creation. Although the three chosen artists do not focus specifically on anxiety or grief, they offer alternative insights into confronting the chaotic, the overwhelming and the fragile. In so doing, they contributed to new understandings concerning media choices, technical resolutions and conceptual potential.

Mehretu's gesturally loose marks contrast strongly with her carefully controlled, precise drawing and printing processes. Her work depicts the linear control of architectural drawings, and by association, the stability and order within society. Mehretu inverts the blueprints, covering them with organic, scribbled marks that disrupt order with disordered chaos. Her choices in layered printing, colour palette and asemic text significantly influenced my work.

Farber's bioart installation of fragile pellicle casts involved a lengthy process of experimentation through trial and error. Her work using a yeast organism as medium resulted in art that engages with the vitality of a living organism but forces her to relinquish control in allowing its growth: the push and pull between control (carefully controlled living conditions for the yeast to grow healthily) and loss of control (natural growth that cannot be manipulated or predicted). Farber's work suggests control in that it embraces and critiques memories of significant objects and cultural institutions. It further references futility, due to the inherent fragility of the objects created from the yeast growth. Through her casts, Farber's seductive reminders of the delicate balance between life and death inspired a deeper engagement with endings and vacancy. I drew on her notion of the veil through her physical skins and the concept of the thin divide between life and death. In response, I used transparencies, diaphanous fabrics and translucent washes of inks. Her engagement with physical space made me rethink compositional drawing selections. These evolved into awkwardly positioned wolves with large negative spaces referencing emptiness and space in contrast to a perceived threat.

Choumali documents the aftermath of traumatic upheaval through her digital photography, focusing on the distance within and between community members who traditionally shy away from discussing such matters (Choumali 2018). Her control is evidenced through selected images that are printed and stitched to create an ordered surface texture. Choumali's stitched photography was influential since it represented a contrast between traumatic experience and the bright stitching which masked it.

Tacit knowledge was generated by theory and the study of selected artworks, media experimentation, various processes and art making. The first three research questions provided an essential basis for the fourth research question and significantly impacted on my praxis. My fourth research question concerned which navigational tools could be defined in theory, identified and applied in artmaking. My exhibition and catalogue became a dialogical response to the navigational strategies concerning the ambivalence of living a precarious life. Works included strategies of mapping, tracings, overlaid drawings and layered stitched fabrics. Photography and cyanotype printing suggest a grasp of the intangible using shadow and light. Collagraph printing and ink drawings were developed from the recognisably animal towards more abstracted

images. Stitching became a method of communicating the inarticulate ambivalences that were difficult to articulate out loud. Engagement with memory and absence and through specific media choices, photography and printing developed personal cartographies.

5.2 NEW INSIGHTS

The application of theory to practice and practice to theory resulted in several new insights identified during the course of this study. The relationship between anxiety, fear and grief was identified. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome thinking proposes multiplicities and non-linear cascades that can be similarly compared to aspects of chaos theory (Ayers 1997:374) and its unpredictability. The rhizome structure and chaos theory are applicable to van der Kolk's (2014:3) theory concerning how the stressed body on high alert can result in a hypervigilant brain. The learned pattern of perception (Kennedy 2020:8) manifests somatically (Frischer 2008), although it is not a linear structured unfolding, rather a consequence of multiple and complex interactions (Norrholm *et al.* 2009:283).

My research, reading as a journey of self-discovery that confronts the shame of grief through tactile media and developing art processes, may provide a unique map for other researchers experiencing similar lamentation. Contributions from my hybrid South-African / German roots, memories stitched into disintegrating textiles, archetypal wolf drawings and a personal narrative of entangled forests are agents for emotional reconciliation. This tensional cycle between vulnerability and resilience in creative research offered partial aesthetic closure, albeit that it will be an open-ended, enduring practice in the future.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

For the sake of brevity, this study was limited to selected works by three female artists. These choices allowed me to focus on the artists' methods and creative lexicons, building and expanding on these in my own work. Although each artist worked with a unique perspective of trauma, they generated insight and contributed to my creative experimentation. Despite their universality, the nature of context-based anxiety and grief deny a quick fix. Ongoing study into its nuances and contexts make it a pertinent

area for research. Although this study focused on a personal history and culture, other perspectives on anxiety would contribute to this growing contemporary concern.

5.4 POTENTIAL RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Artistic output regarding anxiety, mourning and trauma offers the opportunity for ongoing academic research abutted by tacit learning. I advocate for further research concerning hormones, the female body and their relationship to mental health, although this is beyond my field of expertise.

Alain de Botton (2013:230) writes: “Artists [are] invited to follow an unapologetic didactic mission: to assist mankind in its search for self-understanding, empathy, consolation, hope, self-acceptance and fulfilment”. My research of lamenting chaos and vulnerability expressed in art is an ongoing, dedicated journey, aligned with this perspective. As artist and art educator, this research is a sustained call to artists, students and cultural institutions to practice self-empathy within reflexive self-criticism.

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