Phoenixes and ashes: A close reading of selected work from *Stairways and Ruins*

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ABSTRACT

In his curatorial statement for the exhibition *Stairways and Ruins* (2023), Andrew Lamprecht (2023:4) observes how the artworks in this exhibition emerged from a particular set of dire global circumstances, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the increasing threat of global conflict. Lamprecht (2023:4) suggests that the artworks in this exhibition, made in response to prompts that evoke themes of hope and disillusionment, 'provided a moment of pause, of reflection and of introspection'. The idea that art reflects a particular historical moment is similarly suggested by the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1996:23), who argues that art embodies the style of a cultural era and reveals the historical being-in-the-world of human beings. He points to art's ability to *manifest*, *articulate* or *illuminate* cultural and temporal concerns from within the world and time of that culture (Heidegger 1996; Dreyfus 2005). Heidegger also suggests that art *reconfigures* the traces of the past (Dreyfus 2005:416), a theme observed in several works in the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition. Through a close reading of work by Kiveshan Thumbiran, Nicola Grobler, Corné Venter, Louisemarié Combrink, Lesego Motsiri and Pieter Odendaal, Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, and Héniel Fourie (in collaboration with Armand Aucamp and Paula Kruger), I consider how these artists reconfigure history as part of a contemporary moment that can be read through the cyclic, allegorical narrative of the myth of the phoenix. While the works thus reflect a particular moment in history, I consider how these artists grapple with what is ultimately part of a life cycle: catching a phoenix on a burning day.

Keywords: contemporary South African art, curated exhibition review, Heidegger, myth of the Phoenix, *Stairways and Ruins*.

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Introduction

The myth of the phoenix is an ancient one. Joseph Niggs (2016:xvi), author of multiple books on the history of mythical bestiaries, suggests that the myth was already about a thousand years old when the Latin poet Claudian wrote about it circa 400 CE. Although the origin of the phoenix (a bird whose life cycle includes death by fire and a subsequent resurrection from the ashes) is unclear; it has remained in popular imagination, perhaps more as a metaphor or symbol for triumph over adversity than as a story in itself (Niggs 2016:xv-xvi). The narrative of the phoenix is, however, a cyclical one: there can be no resurrection without destruction, no ashes from which to arise without a conflagration.

The phoenix myth, as an allegory for the cyclical nature of society throughout history, is a valuable lens for examining the artworks presented in the exhibition *Stairways and Ruins* (2023).[1] The exhibition invited artists to produce original artworks that responded to two quotes as prompts. The first, 'I am building a stairway to the stars. I have the authority to take the whole of humanity with me. That is why I write', by Bessie Head (cited by ViNCO, 2023), observes the possibility of transcendence and the potential for world-building through the creative act. The second, '[t]here is always a return to the ruins, only to the womb we cannot return' by Sol Plaatje (cited by ViNCO, 2023), emphasises the impossibility of rebirth or a return to some imagined wholeness. The desire for this may, nevertheless, drive one to return to the wreckage of history and, in sifting through these ashes, find an impetus for creative expression. Both quotes by these authors could well be narrative-based, and indeed, the works that best reflect these prompts in this exhibition are ones that imply a narrative broader than a moment distilled in a singular artwork. Where any of these works may be best situated in the cycle of the myth of the phoenix – a decline, death, burning, or renewal – varies, however, curator Andrew Lamprecht (2023:4) expresses a particular temporal frame from which the works arise in his curatorial statement:

> This exhibition emerges from the chaotic and tragic reality of Covid-19 and lockdown; additionally, we face the looming climatic crisis that engulfs our news every day, not to mention a possibility of global war we have not witnessed since the late 1980s. This moment, one seared into the hearts of all of us, provided a moment of pause, of reflection and of introspection.

What Lamprecht describes as a contemporary moment is hardly the triumphal moment of rebirth in which a newly formed phoenix emerges, fully rejuvenated, but rather something else along the timeline of this narrative cycle.

In reflecting on how the artworks in *Stairways and Ruins* articulate contemporary concerns, we might observe what philosopher Martin Heidegger (cited by Dreyfus 2005:409) considers the special function of art: its ability to reflect the style and expression of a particular epoch in culture and create a shared understanding of humanity in *a* specific historical moment. Heidegger (1996:23) describes this as:

> The way in which art thoroughly spans the being-in-the-world of human beings as historical, the way in which it illuminates the world for them and indeed illuminates human beings themselves, putting in place the way in which art is art – all this receives its law and structural articulation from the manner in which the world as a whole is opened up to human beings in general.

For Heidegger, human beings are thus a product of their temporal frame, and so, too, are the cultural artefacts they produce. As beings within a temporal frame or world, it can, however, be nearly impossible (in a contemporary moment) to stand outside of that world and objectively assess all the potential stylistics and meanings of that period and, in so doing, make some definition of that historical moment. Narrativising the critical points of a historical period is almost always done in retrospect when enough time has passed to distil what has come to be seen as a particular epoch's more lasting themes or struggles (Dreyfus 2005:409).

When attempting to uncover or *articulate* hidden aspects of a contemporary moment or current lived experience, it may be helpful to return to history (to ruins) in order to see the current unique moment as a part of a pattern or cycle: a full flight of stairs leading both up and down, and not merely only the current step on which we stand. Such retrospective analysis, however, is itself subject to a temporal frame, not one now embedded in the period under consideration, but resulting from the projections of some future point in how it remembers or reimagines the past. As philosopher Hubert Dreyfus (2005:409) describes this notion, '[w]e can't help reading our own style back into previous epochs'. Artworks (or any other form of cultural production), however, are not merely illustrations or "*proof*" of a particular societal condition or political consciousness at a specific historical point. We should, indeed, be wary of any artist statement or art criticism that makes these kinds of claims for an artwork, for such statements close the potential readings of the work rather than allow them to unfold in our own consciousness as an audience. This unfolding or revealing of a work produces cultural meaning as a shared activity between the maker, artwork and viewer or, as Heidegger (1996:23) puts it, 'the manner in which the world as a whole is opened up to human beings in general'.

Dreyfus (2005:407, emphasis in original) interprets Heidegger's vision of what makes an artwork successful in reflecting a particular historical ethos for culture in how it '*manifests, articulates*, or *reconfigures* the style of a culture from within the world of that culture'.

However, Heidegger suggests that this is achieved not by making grand claims that a cultural artefact exemplifies a cultural epoch, but that to produce meaning, 'the mode of revealing has to withdraw in order to do its job of revealing things' (Dreyfus 2005:409). To produce works that are reflective or revealing of a particular cultural moment, an examination of what might be unconscious, unspoken or hidden in society, Heidegger advocates for a kind of introspection: a withdrawal from explicit claims for the work of art so that it may reveal, implicitly, what might otherwise remain unconscious or hidden. Following this logic, Dreyfus (2005:409, emphasis in original) suggests that the work of art in withdrawing 'not only *manifests* the style of the culture; it *articulates* it ... Works of art, when performing this function, are not merely *representations* of a pre-existing state of affairs, but actually *produce* a shared understanding'. Dreyfus (2005:414) observes that in revealing hidden aspects of culture from within that culture, 'the work of art doesn't reflect the style of the culture or create it; it illuminates it'.

With this idea of introspection as a mode of revealing or illuminating contemporary subthemes in the creation of artworks, what are some of the undercurrents, shared themes, or modes of production that can be observed in the collective of work exhibited in the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition? As a reflection on the present historical moment, how do these works *manifest* or *illuminate* contemporary world experiences and how may these *articulate* a particular moment as part of a larger cycle of history? The themes of traces, archiving, war, and (family/cultural) history recur multiple times in the works in this exhibition. Given the exhibition theme of ruins (and stairways that might be built up out of a zone of destruction), this is perhaps unsurprising, particularly as society contemplates what has been lost or destroyed in recent world events: the Covid-19 pandemic, multiple conflicts, climate change.

Found objects, assemblage, and collage are media that predominate the exhibition.[2] This recurring use of found materials, recycled into new works, is of particular interest in how artists may view (and, as per Heidegger, *articulate*) the contemporary moment not as a new beginning, but a moment deeply inflected by the ruins of history. Utilising the myth of the phoenix as a metaphoric lens, I examine how works by Kiveshan Thumbiran, Nicola Grobler, Corné Venter, Louisemarié Combrink, Lesego Motsiri and Pieter Odendaal, and Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn *manifest* or *articulate* the cyclical nature of history.

Heidegger (cited by Dreyfus 2005:416) observes that when *manifesting* or *articulating* aspects of a cultural moment, such articulations are not in themselves necessarily novel each time. Rather, as a cyclic process, 'the marginal themes' of one epoch may become central in a subsequent revolution and so culture is *reconfigured*. '[W]henever art happens', suggests Heidegger (2002:49), 'that is, whenever there is a beginning – a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again'. Reconfiguration as cultural evolution

may, however, be less a beginning than a means of revealing the ways in which the culture of the past continues to haunt subsequent generations. This consideration of history as part of a life cycle, which resurrects the symbolism of the past (albeit in slightly altered form) is perhaps best exemplified in the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition by Héniel Fourie's work *Toekoms spoke / Future ghosts*, which is a principal focus in this article (the work and others are discussed in greater detail below) for considering the phoenix myth as a recurring theme on this exhibition. To reflect on how this myth functions as a metaphor, I first investigate some of the history of the phoenix story.

The myth of the phoenix

Herodotus is most commonly credited with introducing the myth of the phoenix to ancient Classical Greece in the fifth century BCE. However, as Joseph Nigg (1999:12) observes, the poet Hesiod referred to the bird's longevity nearly three centuries before and that 'scholars concur that [Herodotus] actually derived his tale from an earlier account by the historian and geographer Hecataeus'. In Herodotus's account, the phoenix is a bird the size of an eagle with red and gold plumage that flies every five hundred years from Arabia to Egypt where it 'brings the parent bird, all plastered over with myrrh, to the temple of the Sun, and there buries the body' (Nigg 1999:12). In this description, although the bird is distinctly long-lived, this is not yet a narrative of immortality or resurrection, but one of pilgrimage to a site of significance to honour the death of a previous generation. Lactantius, a Christian convert and advisor to the Roman emperor Constantine I, is credited with first introducing the element of fire to his phoenix myth as a form of Christian allegory on resurrection in his poem *De ave phoenice* (circa 244-320 CE) (Van den Broek 1972:7; Nigg 1999:12-13). However, fire, as an element of the myth, may have entered the narrative from multiple sources, including the phoenix's association with the sun and various regional funerary rites that include building a pyre and cremation.

Religious scholar Roelof van den Broek, in his book *The myth of the phoenix: According to Classical and Early Christian traditions* (1972), observes how the reoccurrence of the myth of the phoenix in both Classical literature and Early Christian theology, although very occasionally mentioned as a study in speculative natural history, is primarily a metaphor for human existence. Indeed, Van den Broek (1972:9) notes that the phoenix:

> … was primarily a symbol indicative of a reality beyond that of the individual but including him and forming the true basis of his existence … [it] could symbolise renewal in general as well as the sun, Time, the Empire, metempsychosis, consecration, resurrection, life in the heavenly Paradise, Christ, Mary, virginity, the exceptional man, and certain aspects of Christian life.

Van den Broek (1972:10), whilst acknowledging the Classical Greek and Roman influence on the myth, suggests that narratives similar to the myth of the phoenix 'derive from the cultural complex of Western Asia, which was dominated by Mesopotamia'.

Even earlier corollaries can be drawn between the phoenix and the Egyptian mythical bird the *benu* (Van den Broek 1972:14-16; Nigg 1999:24-26). The *benu*, a name derived from a word meaning 'to rise radiantly' or 'to shine', is depicted in hieroglyphics as a heron, and is associated with the worship of the sun god Atum/Re (later Osiris) (Van den Broek 1972:16). The *benu* forms part of a creation myth which includes the *khepri*, a scarab or dung beetle, as symbols of the eternal life cycle of death and resurrection of the sun god (Van den Broek 1972:14). Multiple references to the *benu* are made in *The book of the dead* (also known as *Spells of coming forth by day*) which is a set of hymns, prayers, and spells used in multiple forms as funerary texts to guide Egyptian dead into the afterlife for roughly a thousand-five-hundred years (2700-1200 BCE) (Nigg 1999:24). In these texts, the *benu* is identified both with eternal gods in the Egyptian afterlife, and as a metamorphic state in which the dead become *benu* as a process of 'transfiguration of the deceased into the immortal form' (Nigg 1999:24).

Moving into the nineteenth century, and perhaps most pertinent as a metaphor for this paper, the author Thomas Carlyle uses the metaphor of the phoenix in his 1831 book *Sartor resartus* to describe the cycle of society, which in history may occasionally require an utter destruction in order to make way for a new order. 'Society,' remarks the principal character Herr Teufelsdrockh, 'is not dead: that Carcass, which you call dead Society, is but her mortal coil which she has shuffled off, to assume a nobler; she herself, through perpetual metamorphoses, in fairer and fairer development, has to live till Time also merge in Eternity' (Carlyle 1896:214). Teufelsdrockh also notes the contemporary catastrophes of his time, including the Napoleonic wars, observing that:

> [w]hen the Phoenix is fanning her funeral pyre, will there not be sparks flying! … In what year of grace such Phoenix-cremation will be completed, you need not ask. The law of Perseverance is among the deepest in man: by nature he hates change; seldom will he quit his old house till it has actually fallen about his ears (Carlyle 1896:215).

Despite the long-reaching destructive nature of historical catastrophes, despotic rulers, and war, which may lead to a kind of societal self-combustion, Teufelsdrockh suggests that such conflagrations are necessary for change to occur. Although Carlyle's novel is something of a parody of German philosophy, the historic moment described and mused upon by his principal character cannot fail to draw parallels with our own contemporary moment as described by Lamprecht in his curatorial statement. Far from being the apocalyptic signifiers of the end of days, the confluence of global catastrophes both

Teufelsdrockh and Lamprecht describe – war, death, pestilence, pollution – may simply be a moment, not for grandiose manifestos on what art can do to change society, but a pause, while the sun traverses the underworld, for reflection and introspection. What, then, do the works in *Stairways and Ruins* suggest as reflections of the current epoch, and how could their introspection *manifest, articulate* or *reconfigure* the cyclic nature of history as imagined in the myth of the phoenix?

Withdrawing, revealing, articulating: Undercurrents in *Stairways and Ruins*

As noted above, found objects, assemblage, and collage as mediums recur in multiple works in the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition. The symbolic resonance of these materials evokes the cyclic nature of history, whereby a prior existence or use has now been appropriated but is not wholly eradicated in the representation. As a curated collection, the nature of these recycled and archival materials creates various conversations between installations and artefacts that operate much like a collective view of any moment in cultural history preserved in a museum exhibit. Although this is a contemporary exhibition, one might reflect that these choices of mediums and the curatorial museum sensibility illuminate a moment in which the past features predominantly. Yet, the reconfiguring of found materials is not a preservation of the past, but rather a remodelling, appropriating, or a sifting through of ashes to find what might be reimagined about the historical cycle that has led to this particular moment.

Upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer first encounters Kiveshan Thumbiran's triptych of digitally collaged immortals based on Hindu mythology: *Parshuram, Hanuman,* and *Ashwatthama*.

Far from being traditional or reverend depictions of these deities, Thumbiran's immortals are an eclectic pop-art take on these ancient personas, incorporating contemporary and South African imagery and symbols. As immortals (and archetypes of ancient human mythology), these characters are decidedly imperfect, being subject to their own foibles and experiences through time, surviving in the current moment as 'living ruins' (Thumbiran 2023:44). Thumbiran thus suggests that even the gods can become worn down by an endless cycle of life. Yet, their very survival as part of a belief system (particularly for faith in diaspora) depends on the ability of such mythologies to incorporate signifiers of a more individuated or regional nature. In so doing, they might experience some kind of reincarnation, albeit one that carries the traces of past wreckage. This metamorphosis

might be contrasted to the experience of ancient Egyptian deities who become *benu* in the underworld in order to be reborn. Rather than reemerging as newly remade, however, the effects of entropy on immortality, or ruination as imagined by Thumbiran, may serve to make these deities all the more relatable as archetypes of human experience.



FIGURE **Nº 1**

Kiveshan Thumbiran, *Parshuram*, 2023. Digital prints on Epson advanced archival paper, 59.4 cm x 84 cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.



FIGURE **Nº 2**

Nicola Grobler, *Multispecies records: Leafcutter*, 2023. Mixed media collage, 51 cm x 65 cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.

Across the entrance from Thumbiran's work are two pieces by Nicola Grobler, *Multispecies records: Leafcutter* and *Multispecies records: Cut through chronicles*. In this series of collages, Grobler layers photographs, notes, manuscript pages, and other forms of record-keeping over one another to create semi-abstract typographies. In each layer are different incisions, tears and holes that expose what the upper layers occlude of the layers beneath. The titling implies an intervention by species other than the original human record keepers. Silverfish, moths, bacteria, fungi and worms are also citizens of the complete biome in which we live and, over time, create their own territories of the archives we produce. Whilst we might misguidedly imagine human history as a central point to the process of archiving, the ways in which natural forces and species other than our own intersect and cut through these recorded strata provide an alternate map of lived experience – life cycles much smaller and much vaster than our own.

Moving into the exhibition space from these two works that centre mythology or nature rather than individual humanity as their premise, are several sculptural works that may be linked through ideas of totems, altars, signposts, and wayfaring. Corné Venter's *Benediction: Sticks and stones library* is a rather strange object consisting of a form of lectern draped with stained fabric on which the words 'Forget, Forgive, Forget' are stencilled. Atop is a construction made of a graffitied rock to which Jacaranda sticks (entwined with trailing red thread) are attached like a crown or television aerials. The work has an altar-like quality on which an invested, syncretic and deeply personal votive is offered. The exact purpose of this ritual is not entirely clear, yet perhaps through its closed symbolism, Venter suggests something about the nature of all rituals when the personal motivation or overarching belief structure has all but vanished in time.

What is left to us to decipher is the tension between materials used: the rock that will ultimately outlast the indecipherable graffiti scrawled on it, the sticks like divining rods appealing to some nature god – fishing or searching for something lost. The cloth is stained with potassium permanganate, an oxidising agent that has both antiseptic and corrosive properties: a substance that in metaphorically "forgiving" any impurities, may inevitably lead to a "forgetting" as it ultimately destroys all traces. The subtitle of the work: *Sticks and stones library*, alludes to weapons which (unlike words and insults according to the idiom) can wound. The construction contemplates the inevitability of entropy and the idea that, with a perspective of a much greater scale of time, these injuries, this offering, and its author are eventually all forgotten. The work reminds the viewer that whatever the issue, however deeply invested the concerns, all things must pass in the end.



FIGURE **Nº 3**

Corné Venter, *Benediction: Sticks and stones library,* 2023. Mixed media: Jacaranda twigs, sedimentary quartzite rock with enamel paint, cotton fabric dyed with potassium permanganate, 130 cm x 32 cm x 12 cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.

In conversation with Venter's altarpiece is Louisemarié Combrink's *War dreams*, a construction of blackened shoes, books and children's toys arranged in a cairn-like formation. These everyday items, so frequently found strewn in the rubble of bombed and worn-torn civilian landscapes, are composed into an almost anthropocentric form.

Piles of shoes, which the artist observes are reminiscent of 'Holocaust images … signifying horror and absence' (Combrink 2023:12), are clustered at the bottom of the work. The rising torso-like top section is composed of books, splayed open and cartwheeling in space, but their blackened pages are illegible. Maimed toy soldiers (perhaps symbolic of both the inevitable loss of innocence in war, and the combatants themselves) are affixed to the books. Here, they fruitlessly attempt to climb or hang on to the complex terrain of exploded books. The blackening of these objects evokes the burning and destruction of war, but also obscures all reference to any particular conflict. As a monument,

this sculpture makes no partisan judgement for or against any cause, but commemorates the universal loss of life and experiences of being in any conflict. The rising column of exploded books, whilst symbolic of the loss of material archives and human stories in times of war, is also potentially hopeful in how such moments of conflict can inspire the rise of various creative literary expressions or, to follow the prompt quote from Bessie Head, build a stairway. This message of what might arise like the phoenix from the ashes of conflict is echoed through an accompanying QR code that links to a reading of the poem *To my daughter* by Pavlo Vyshibaba, a front-line Ukrainian soldier. In this poem, Vyshibaba asks his daughter not to dwell on the atrocities of escape as a refugee, but to recount to him the new adventures of living far away, inviting those she meets for some future date when she might come home and host them in her turn.



FIGURE **Nº 4**

Louisemarié Combrink, *War dreams*, 2023. Shoes, books and toys covered with resin and paint, 60 cm x 60 cm x 180 cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.

This relationship between visual artworks, virtual links, and poetry is a methodology that is also central to Lesego Motsiri's prints *Earthly remembrance*. This series of five images was inspired by Pieter Odendaal's poem *Bainsvlei, Mangaung,* in which the poet contemplates a history of land appropriation, familial inheritance, and a cyclic connection to the soil. In the poem, the principal character pushes a wheelbarrow laden with earth through a parched landscape to deposit this load on his grandfather's grave. The contents of the barrow are a burden rather than a commemorative offering to an ancestor, which Odendaal (2023:42) compares to a shower of red lumps like the aftermath of a battle: 'hy kantel die kruiwa, stort rooi klonte soos ná 'n veldslag oor die graf'.[3] This protagonist's pilgrimage, with a loaded wheelbarrow to an ancestor's grave, all too clearly echoes Herodotus's account of the phoenix's journey with the body of its deceased parent to a sacred site. In addition to unloading his wheelbarrow, Odendaal's protagonist lies down to become one with the soil: a substrate from which small plants grow. Although there is an emergence of new life in plants growing, these are onion seeds planted by a father many years before, which now emerge from the protagonist's eyes. The association of onions and eyes suggests that this emergence of new life is essentially a tearful legacy.



FIGURE **Nº 5**

Lesego Motsiri, *Earthly remembrance III*, 2023. Digital prints: digital drawing on aluminium dibond, 50 cm x 50 cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.



FIGURE Nº 6

Lesego Motsiri, *Earthly remembrance IV*, 2023. Digital prints: digital drawing on aluminium dibond, 50 cm x 50cm. Courtesy of ViNCO.

Motsiri's prints, as a response to the poem, are digitally manipulated photographs taken at various graveyards in Mangaung and arranged in concentric circles. Motsiri's distorted images, taken through a fish-eyed lens filter, render these graveyard landscapes into floating orbs, abstracted irises, in which the landscape appears as a miniature world cycling around itself. In each print, a kind of explosion or growing cloud of ash rises until the dust takes over the picture frame in the final image of the series. Each image has been animated through the augmented reality (AR) app Artivive, and the images act as virtual triggers that link to video versions in which the rising smoke, perhaps from a cremation pyre, moves and swells until the smoke obliterates the image.

In Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn's *The nest: An installation series* the bird (as architect) is used as a metaphor for reflecting on changing patterns and stages of human identity. Here, it is the nest (the pyre) rather than the bird itself (the phoenix) which is used as trace evidence of a life cycle of identity construction. The five works in the series (*The core, Masks, The conflict, Abandoned*, and *The confrontation*) present different constructions of nests with accompanying sound pieces. These range from the more naturalistic weaver bird houses (with restful birdsong and domestic sounds) and reconstructed mud-covered swallows' nests (accompanied by echoing wind) to the more



FIGURE Nº 7

Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, *The nest: An installation series,* 2023. Mixed-media installation with sound, dimensions variable. Courtesy of ViNCO.

abstracted science-fiction pods in *The conflict* and ultimately a kind of hive-constructed dome in which the viewer is surrounded by a cacophony of angry bird sounds, and can see themselves projected via webcam on the ceiling of this hive-like construction. The artists suggest that the metaphor of the nest, something deconstructed and reconstructed in a life cycle, offers a reflective point for episodes of human identity in which 'phases of plunder, reconstruction, re-evaluation, and adaptations of our identity … attempt to find a sense of belonging and security' (Heenop & Steyn 2023:28). *The nest*, in culminating with a consideration of how digital technologies inform our sense of collective identity, articulates how these technologies can both seem comforting in a larger scale interconnectedness of community and threatening in how there is no retreat from the collective hive. Rather than an endpoint, it may be inferred that whilst our current environment may be the collective of networked technologies, other life cycles might present a return to any one of the reconfigured nest structures as a means of renegotiating identity and a sense of belonging.

Heidegger's contention that artworks *manifest, articulate* and *illuminate* contemporary cultural concerns can be read in how these artworks on *Stairways and Ruins* echo, but are not illustrative of (in a literal fashion), Lamprecht's curatorial views on the contemporary moment. Instead, they tease out the themes of destruction, disillusionment and loss, recurring cyclically – even if the promise of emerging from the ashes is, at this point, only a tentative hope. Heidegger's view on art's capacity to *reconfigure* culture is essentially a cyclical view of history where past marginal ideas become central again, reshaping history (Dreyfus 2005:416). To further consider this *reconfiguration* of past cultural references, which ultimately form part of an ongoing cycle of history, I will now examine symbols of cultural inheritance (an implied theme within the myth of the phoenix) as these are reimagined in a cyclical fashion by Héniel Fourie in his video *Toekoms spoke / Future ghosts.*

Regeneration, reconfiguration, resurrection: Rinse and repeat

In his short film *Toekoms spoke / Future ghosts*, Héniel Fourie makes use of the cinematic technique of montage to condense and contrast time, space, and symbols of Afrikaner cultural identity. Set in three chapters –"Die komkommerstol", "Volk en vaderland (fokken)", and "Die komkommerstol (met kersies en room)"[4] – Fourie juxtaposes original footage of a man on a train with twentieth-century South African archival footage of urban spaces, monuments, conscripts in training, politicians and news broadcasts about the Border War.[5] Interspersed are shots of a rapid succession of ceramic badges depicting an array of cultural motifs. The film also regularly returns to shots of a side table resembling a still life. This includes brass and ceramic ornaments, as well as food: in particular, the eponymous *komkommerstol* – a type of gelatinised salad made from cucumbers and mayonnaise that was very in vogue in women's housekeeping magazines of the 1970s. The theme of the Border War looms large, but it is perhaps the war with identity and a struggle for individualism – a coming of age as a (white Afrikaans) man over a particular period of history – that is the central theme of this work. Although the same man is in each sequence, the three chapters of the film suggest shifts in temporal frame through the choice of archival footage, iconography of the badges, and background music as if they are three different generations (or reincarnations) of young conscripts travelling on a train, off to fight a war of their lifetime.

Fourie (2023:23) notes in his artist's statement that the three chapters of the film represent three different time periods: past, present, and future, but there is still a bleed between the generations as they reflect, in a liminal moment, on memories of the past or anticipate

the future. This temporal bleed is implicit in the title, which plays with the idea of how the past and present can haunt the future. Nostalgia, most predominantly for the style of South Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s, the hottest period of the Border War, is a design element in this work that recycles what was once the lived experience and fashionable choices of one generation, into the kitsch or bad taste of another generation, only to recycle again as fashion, now embraced in a self-conscious and ironic manner. Although purportedly representing three different time periods, this design choice is suggestive of how a certain point in history can be foreshadowed in the past and continue to haunt the future. This is perhaps most evident in the iconography of the badges worn on the jackets of the characters in the film.



FIGURE Nº 8

Héniel Fourie (with Armand Aucamp and Paula Kruger), *Toekoms spoke / Future ghosts* 2023. Film Still. Courtesy of Héniel Fourie.

As a means of communicating identity, badges draw their history from banner standards carried by Roman armies, but in their contemporary form as insignia or blazer pins, they can denote many kinds of expressions of identity, demonstrate solidarity with a cause, religious or group membership, bestow honour or authority, or represent achievement and experience (Halavais 2011:357-361). The badges in the film are not, however, genuine artefacts of history – they are contemporary renderings of the symbolism of each time period made expressly for the work by Fourie in collaboration with art director Paula Kruger. There is, thus, a commonality of design in how all the badges are made, which links the three time periods, although their symbolism is different. That these are not actual relics of the past, but projections of what one may remember of the symbolism of

the past, says less about what the past communicates to the contemporary moment and more about how each epoch remembers the past in a kind of contemporary reframing: a haunting of the past and a ghosting of some aspects for the future.

In the first chapter of the film, these badges depict icons of traditional Afrikaans culture: a Voortrekker bonnet, an NG Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) songbook, an ox-wagon, a concertina – which is also the logo of the FAK (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations), the old South African flag and badges that might be more typical of a school blazer such as "hoofseun" (head boy). In the second chapter, these badges centre around political symbols (references to Prime Minister PW Botha, a National Party logo, slogans such as "rooi gevaar" and "swart gevaar")[6] and popular culture symbols that might have been sources of comfort to troops at war (a pack of Gunston cigarettes, a Scope magazine depicting a nude model – her more suggestive areas censored with stars). The head boy badge is now replaced with military insignia denoting an officer ranking. In the final chapter, the badges refer predominantly to popular culture: slang terms such as "awe", "zol jol", a flashy minibus taxi. The political references in this era are represented through the new South African flag, a church on fire, and a rainbow over the Voortrekker Monument. The badge of honour is now no longer the rank of head boy or that of army officer status, but is expressed in the term "moffie" (a pejorative term that can be translated as "faggot") bedecked with sparkles. The once derogatory term, used to describe homosexuals or men otherwise perceived as not entirely living up to societal expectations of heteronormative masculinity, is now reclaimed as a term of pride in queer identity by its association with these prior badges which denote roles of honour.

Although there is a form of evolution of each chapter into the one that follows, the film's narrative is not necessarily redemptive but instead emphasises the cyclic nature of history. Each man in the three chapters is depicted on his journey to war, leopard-crawling through the dust, taking cover from an unseen enemy in various army headgear borrowed from a mix match of historical conflicts. In each chapter, the film returns to shots of the side table with still-life and food. These shots could allude to the main character's own recollection of a formal family meal, a kind of "last hurrah" typical of community celebrations in honour of those departing for war. The scene also recalls the symbolism of Dutch vanitas paintings, still-lives depicting the lavish excess of material goods that operate as an allegory for the transience of life, the inevitability of death, and the futility of worldly ambition (Grootenboer 2005:138).

As a central motif in a work about masculine identity, the phallic reference of the cucumber in the *Komkommerstol* cannot be ignored. This is not a cucumber in its original and natural form, but one chopped, ground down, and presented reconsolidated through the combination with gelatine, a substrate obtained from boiling cartilage and bones. So too,



FIGURE Nº 9

Figure 9: Héniel Fourie (with Armand Aucamp and Paula Kruger), *Toekoms spoke / Future ghosts*, 2023. Film Still. Courtesy of Héniel Fourie.

may be the inheritance of male identity passed down, reconfigured and recycled through generations: not something in its naturally occurring state or form, but deliberately broken down to be neatly re-presented, holding its form through the inclusion of residual connective tissue. In the final chapter, the *Komkommerstol* is depicted covered in cherries and cream ("kersies en room"). The decorative topping might seem to suggest a more celebratory or flamboyant mood, but the dish, in its essence, is the same as in the first chapter, albeit wearing a different "frock". In the final scenes, the young soldier is shown standing on the railway tracks, his uniform covered with badges from all the various periods. In a sped-up sequence, his hat, glasses and other accessories change: a time-lapse of trying on multiple identities. His feet are squashed into pink high heels several sizes too small. While the shift in fashion accessories might suggest a greater freedom to express various forms of identity, one cannot help thinking how hard it would be to walk the stony and uneven track stretching away to the future in such unsuitable footwear.

In three chapters, *Toekoms spoke / Future ghosts* presents us with a timeline in which the past, present and future blur. This is not a narrative of future progress and judgment of the past, but a recurring life cycle: an emergence, decline, societal conflagration and subsequent generational renewal, which often carries with it the symbols of the past. What the work may suggest to us, in terms of the battle for individual identity, is how, for each of the characters in time, wars may be different, but the struggle for becoming self as a rite of passage is timeless.

Conclusion

The principal arguments of this article – that art *manifests, illuminates*, and continuously *reconfigures* cultural memory and identity, often cyclically – are vividly evidenced in the diverse case studies of the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition. These artworks *articulate* (as Heidegger observes) the style, expression, and concerns of a contemporary moment expressed by Lamprecht in his curatorial statement. To do so, these works are not literal documentations of the factors influencing the time and conditions of their making, but metaphorical approaches to a return to the ruins of history and from these ashes configure stairways to a form of regeneration. In so doing, the works open up a reflective space in which both the artist and the viewer rediscover the traces of the past in the present and what they could mean moving forward.

In this article, I have considered how art functions through a process of unfolding and revealing contemporary sensibilities even while these may *reconfigure* aspects of the past to suggest a cyclic nature of history. This perspective is evidenced in the recurring and varying uses of found objects, assemblage, and collage that create a dynamic interplay between historical memory and contemporary cultural identity. While the global concerns of the contemporary moment from which these works emerged may have seemed particularly dire, it may be important to remember that, like the phoenix, decline and combustion are a part of the cycle towards regeneration and resurrection. In this process, we carry traces: ashes of the past from which new things might grow.

Notes

1. *Stairways and Ruins*, an initiative by North-West University's (NWU) research entity Visual Narratives and Creative Outputs (ViNCO) in association with NWU Gallery and Iziko Museums of South Africa was curated by Andrew Lamprecht and exhibited at NWU's Art Gallery in July and August 2023. See: https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/stairways-and-ruins-exhibition.

2. Of the twenty-three artworks on exhibition, eleven utilised found objects/assemblage, eight utilised mixed media, collage and/or archival material. Only three works utilised autographic or original generative imagery rendered as painting, drawing or digital illustration.

3. 'He tips the wheelbarrow, showering red clods like after a battle over the grave'.

4. The word *komkommerstol* does not translate neatly into English; it literally means "solidified cucumber". This refers to a particularly laboured form of gelatinised cucumber served as a salad dish; "Volk en vaderland (fokken)": Nation and fatherland (fucking – this word is a sound pun on the Afrikaans "Volk en vaderland"); "met kersies en room": with cherries and cream or, more metaphorically, to note a fancier version of something, "with cherries on top".

5. The Border War is the name given to a series of armed conflicts between South Africa and various of its neighbours in the 1970s and 1980s.

6. Directly translated as “red peril” and “black peril”: terms used to describe the perceived threat of communist (red) and black majority rule (black) to the apartheid government.

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