Horror and beauty: Processing trauma through creative action in the work of Alexis Preller

Hazel Cuthbertson

Postdoctoral research fellow with the SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

hazel.cuthbertson@gmail.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3660-5311)

ABSTRACT

In a radio interview in 1964, South African artist Alexis Preller spoke about being able to visualise beauty while undergoing horrifying experiences. The examples that stimulated his imagination in this way were the volcanic eruption he witnessed in the Belgian Congo in 1939 and his experiences as an army medical orderly during WWII. Preller processed these unsettling, traumatic, and extreme experiences throughout his career as a professional artist using the creative action of painting to regain a state of personal emotional equilibrium.

In this article, I draw on underutilised sources that record Preller's recollections and those of his one-time partner, Christi Truter, which provide valuable psychological insights into the artist's work. I apply psychoanalyst Sophia Richman's theory of creative action as an instrument for confronting and transcending severe trauma to a discussion of some of Preller's paintings produced in the 1940s after his return to civilian life. In the safe space of his studio, his work facilitated a dissociated state of consciousness, or what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms a "flow" experience, which enabled him to witness, transform, externalise, and transcend trauma, promoting recovery, giving meaning to the past, and reconnecting his personal life narrative.

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Keywords: Alexis Preller, trauma and art, creative action, safe space, flow experience, recovery through art.

Original research

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2024/n38a5

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

In a radio interview with art historian Esmé Berman and gallerist Harold Jeppe in 1964, South African artist Alexis Preller (1911–1975) spoke about his surprising realisation that '[s]omething that in the essence is terrifying, brutal and horrifying, can also be something of very great beauty' (Preller 1964:249). The most vivid examples he provides are the massive ongoing volcanic eruption he witnessed while staying at Lake Kivu on a visit to the Belgian Congo, now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in 1939, and his experiences as an army medical orderly assisting in field-hospital procedures during WWII.[1] He acknowledges the difficulty of speaking about 'how one is affected by great afflictions like that'—and, especially, about his defence mechanism of finding beauty in such horror—because, as he reflects, it seems to come across as callous (Preller 1965:283). Instead, after being released from military duties, Preller processed these unsettling, traumatic, and extreme experiences over the course of his career as a professional artist through the creative action of painting, to regain a state of personal emotional equilibrium.[2]

In this article, I draw extensively on three significant primary sources that are undervalued or overlooked entirely in the literature on Preller. The first is an early monograph on the artist, published by Walter Battiss's Maroola Press in 1947,[3] containing self-reflexive essays by Preller himself and his one-time life partner, Christi (Christiaan) Truter.[4] The second is the essay entitled 'My Credo', which Preller composed in 1963 for a South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) radio programme, and the third is a short unpublished memoir written by Truter in 1984 and reproduced in Johan Deichmann's 1986 MA dissertation. As sources of information written in Preller and Truter's own words, these three documents provide valuable psychological insights into their life together and the artist's approach as a painter; yet, other scholars have made little, if any, use of them. I also apply theoretical frameworks from psychology and psychoanalysis to an analysis of specific works in the artist's oeuvre—a novel approach in scholarship on Preller.

In my discussion, I apply relational psychologist and psychoanalyst Sophia Richman's (2014; 2020) theory of creative transcendence to some of Preller's paintings produced in the 1940s after his return to civilian life. Richman (2014:3) focuses on the potential for creativity—such as in art, writing, music, or dance—to assist trauma survivors in moving from a state of confusion and dislocation to psychic reintegration and recovery. Richman is a holocaust survivor who uses writing and painting as a means of processing her own and her family's experiences of trauma. She also advocates creative action as an effective therapeutic tool for some of the patients with whom she engages in her professional practice. She argues that '[a]rt facilitates mourning; it restores continuity and connection, and helps to master the chaos that follows in the aftermath of tragedy' (Richman 2020:670). To develop her theory of creative

transcendence, she defines trauma as exposure to catastrophic events and extreme violence well beyond everyday human experience (Richman 2014; 2020). She considers that:

> [t]rauma, regardless of its specific nature, is defined by the experience of the survivor, whether consciously registered or not; it involves a highly stressful situation that leaves the person emotionally, cognitively, and physically overwhelmed and feeling helpless and vulnerable (Richman 2014:3).

Richman (2014; 2020) develops her theory through two complementary processes—'dissociation' and 'witnessing'—that she considers essential to the transcendence of trauma through creative action. She argues that the concept of dissociation should be regarded as essentially neutral, and differentiates between pathological dissociation and healthy dissociation. The former is a potentially permanent state resulting from the 'deadening effects of trauma' (Richman 2014:96). In contrast, the latter is a temporary state that, when harnessed as part of creative action, can counteract the adverse effects of trauma and produce a 'sense of vitality and aliveness' (Richman 2014:96). As her theory specifically relates to transcending trauma, she therefore limits her use of the term creativity to artistic self-expression that 'holds the potential to promote healing in the wake of traumatic experience' (Richman 2020:670).

Dissociation, flow, witness, and the importance of a safe space

Richman (2014) explains how, for many trauma survivors who are artists, the actual or imagined studio can function as a safe space, apart from ordinary life, where they feel comfortable enough to lose themselves in the creative process and engage with their traumatic experiences from a suitable distance (whether geographic or temporal). By entering an altered, dissociative state of consciousness, a trauma survivor can function in a transitional psychic space that facilitates the emergence of painful memories and associations in a way that is manageable and potentially reparative (Richman 2014:95). Here, agonising experiences and unarticulated affects can be externalised, given shape, worked through, communicated and, potentially, released (Richman 2014:5). Inner coherence and continuity of the personal 'life narrative', as psychiatrist Anna Ornstein (2007:9) terms it, can be reconstituted.

Such altered states of consciousness need not be induced by drugs or hypnosis but might arise naturally through intense concentration and singular focus. This

process of creative action occurring in a dissociated state of consciousness relates closely to what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014:137) terms a flow experience. However, his discussion is applied more broadly and not to trauma survivors specifically. He describes the 'narrowing of consciousness' that is frequently experienced during creative or physical activities—he references the experiences of composers, rock climbers, and chess players, for example—and considers how 'the merging of action and awareness is made possible by a centring of attention on a limited stimulus field' (Csikszentmihalyi 2014:139). Awareness of anything outside this field of attention recedes or disappears, including the 'self-construct', and the awareness of only a limited range of internal processes related to the activity at hand is intensified (Csikszentmihalyi 2014:141).

The flow experience is an altered state of consciousness that differs from the usual awareness of reality because it contains 'ordered rules which make action and the evaluation of action automatic and hence unproblematic' (Csikszentmihalyi 2014:142). Csikszentmihalyi points out that individuals in flow have a sense of well-being and are comfortable with the process, feeling a sense of being in control. This can potentially have a therapeutic benefit for trauma survivors whose traumatic experience is likely to have been characterised by a significant lack of control and extensive discomfort at the time it occurred and afterwards.

Csikszentmihalyi (2014:145) identifies the inherent 'autotelic' nature of the flow experience, where the activity appears to 'need no goals or rewards external to itself' since the value is in the process itself. To achieve a state of flow, the activity must be within the individual's level of skill so that it does not produce insecurity and anxiety, but must also be challenging. Otherwise, there would be no resulting sense of achievement, satisfaction, or growth.

Richman asserts, further, that for an individual to have a witness in the aftermath of suffering provides a 'holding environment that facilitates a fuller integration of the experience—both affective and cognitive' (Richman 2014:96). The witness might be a sympathetic person, or a larger audience, or it could also be the artist themself: in the middle ground between 'psychic reality and the outside world', it is possible for an individual to establish what Richman (2014:3,6) terms a 'relational presence', a dissociated self-state that bears witness to one's own traumatic experience and, functioning like a Muse, it mirrors, inspires, affirms, and validates. The resulting art product is a separate, self-sufficient physical presence that externalises and memorialises the artist's experience, also bearing witness and thereby playing a pivotal role in the transformational and restorative process of post-traumatic creative action (Richman 2020:671).

Preller's personal safe space

After Preller's return from art school in London in 1935, as he developed into an independent, professional painter, his work became increasingly autobiographical. In his essay in the first monograph, he describes how, as an artist, he is 'bound and held fast against an accumulation of formative experience', which, '[s]trung together … provide[s] the sure terrain on which he is able to work' (Preller 1947:7).[5] He describes how, in a moment of isolation and introspection while lying on a beach along the North African coast in 1940, when his military unit had a rare day of leisure, he had a sense of 'being enclosed by what he was. It was like a cage that confined him. He saw it as a studio, with white walls and floors' (Preller 1947:11). This "studio of the mind" was also occupied by special objects, inhabited by renowned artists he admired and people he loved, and suffused with his own formative experiences (Preller 1947:10,11). Truter (1947:3) recalls how the artist dreamed of his hypothetical studio while he was away during the war and 'wrote copiously of what he intended doing when he returned'.

Preller's 'first real artist's studio' was in Paris, according to Truter (1984:2), who was contracted from November 1936 to dance with René Blum's touring company, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.[6] Preller joined Christi in France in January 1937, and the two men rented a studio in Paris as a home base at 117 Rue Notre Dame des Champs, Montparnasse, until they returned to South Africa in July of that year. Lacking the funds to buy their own property, they rented living/studio space in Pretoria for the next few years. Only after his discharge from the army, with the assistance of a government grant to veterans, was Preller able to buy a smallholding in Brummeria on the outskirts of the city in 1944 (Truter 1984:3). He named it Ygdrasil after the gigantic sacred ash tree at the centre of the cosmos in Norse mythology. With the help of his architect friend, Norman Eaton, he converted a small barn on the property into a modest, minimalist living/studio space.

Following his wartime experience, Preller was 'ill and deeply disturbed by all he had been through' (Truter 1984:3). He had also always had 'a tendency for any emotional upset to boil up onto a canvas long after he [had] actually faced it' (Truter 1984:3), and it became necessary for him 'to live and work out his entire destiny in the confines of his studio' (Truter 1948:1). Years later, in 'My Credo', Preller speaks about the importance of his studio and his need for his own identity to 'remain intact' through his work as a painter:

> The images that I want to create … will only live if I find them, and their reality and presence, in turn, creates my identity and reality. They

> are the evidence of my personality and my imagination. My painting and I are involved together in life and it is in the studio where we both come alive ...
>
> The studio is the centre of my activity. It is not only the place where I work, but where I live. It contains my credo and my faith. I do not know of any day when I have entered my studio without having felt a sense of security, contentment, and urgency. This is a place of isolation where I am contained in my activity. It is the only place I claim for myself and which claims me. It belongs to me alone (Preller 1963).

His description of his absorption in his work relates to Csikszentmihalyi's theorisation of flow. When working up an idea in a painting, Preller says he feels 'isolated in his activity … He is able to exclude everything else about him. Every daily habit or event or activity outside his impulse is ignored' (Preller 1947:10). The work process is like an extended meditation:

> The preparation of my material for painting, stretching canvases, setting up the palet [sic], are always interesting to me and the patient hours involved condition the mood and desire to work. The painting I embark on usually derives from one or several that have gone before and in its turn, it will suggest paintings for the future. This interests me because there is a continuous flowing stream of thought and a consecutive narrative.
>
> I can accuse myself [of] overstressing this obsession. I retreat too often into the driving need to complete a painting without interruption and to start the next series suggested by the work I have already invoked while all other activity outside of this concentration is neglected. But I can see no way out of this compulsion and dilemma (Preller 1963:2).

Preller's live-in partner, Truter (1947:1), emphasises the two elements most important to the artist's life in the studio: to have a like-minded soulmate to turn to after a long day's work and a gatekeeper to keep the outside world at bay. Truter acted as a sounding board, a witness, a protector, a supporter, and a foil. Their 'caring partnership' afforded the freedom necessary for Preller's creative expression (Truter 1984:1) and the isolation to facilitate his desired 'strict, monastic daily [work] routine'. This physical and psychological space enabled the artist to work through intensely traumatic emotional experiences and integrate destabilising affects and memory fragments, transforming them into visual testimonies and personal constructions of meaning.

Fleurs du Mal

Preller (1947:7,8) writes about how, although he begins a painting with a specific idea,

> somewhere along the way to expression, the idea becomes transmuted … [I]mportant things happen to it [and it emerges eventually] quite different from its original state. … There will be a growth and a flowering, but neither the idea nor its mentor is capable of knowing what shape or form that will be.

He explains how the process of making artworks is 'almost like firing enamels', where 'known elements' such as purpose and design fuse with 'unknown elements', and 'the miracle only appears when it is released from the fire' (Preller 1947:8). The most easily recognisable of these visual transformations of an idea and an actual memory in Preller's oeuvre is *Fleurs du Mal* (see Figure 1), widely lauded as one of the artist's most significant works (Nel 2017; Strauss & Co 2017).

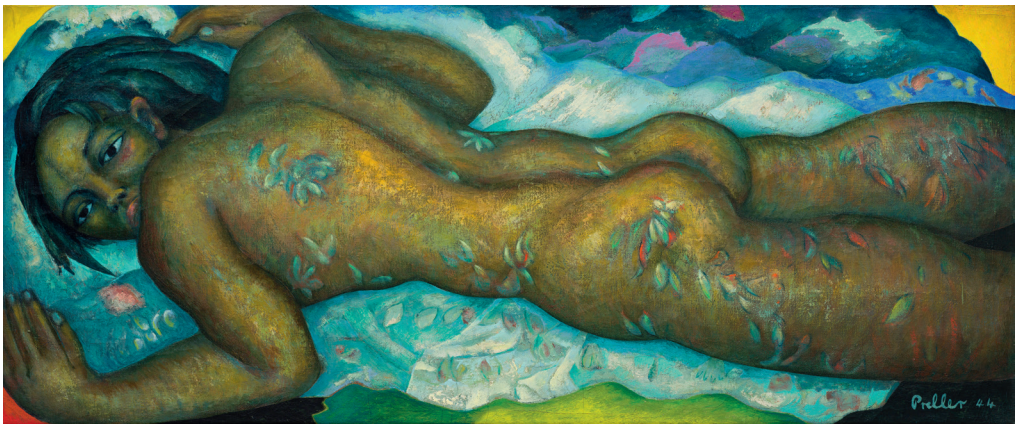


FIGURE **Nº 1**

Alexis Preller, *Fleurs du Mal*, 1944, oil on canvas, 48 x 116.5 cm. Private collection, image courtesy of Strauss & Co.

The pose of the androgynous naked figure lying prone on a crumpled white sheet in Preller's painting clearly draws inspiration from a female nude positioned similarly in Paul Gauguin's *Manaò Tupapaú* (*Spirit of the Dead Watching*) (1892), now in the AKG Art Museum, Buffalo.[7] Yet it is also a visualisation of a specific event when Preller was assisting in a battlefield hospital during WWII and medical staff were treating a patient with shrapnel wounds all over his body:

> I, in an operating theatre, saw so much beauty behind some things which obviously were horrifying. [It] was almost as if it [was] in a studio,

> with a classic nude placed behind a great light, with a group of people working very directly and urgently on a particular figure and by the time he had been cleaned up, I would see a stained body, stained with aquaflavine [sic] and iodine, and gauze swabs which had been placed into wounds suddenly became transformed into butterflies and I saw something infinitely beautiful and it had no horror for me at all (Preller 1964:248).[8]

Preller (1965:284) recounts another similar experience when an operation on a young German soldier undergoing an arm amputation reminded him of paintings of Christ's descent from the cross, a canonical subject in Western European religious art. He dealt with the horror of such lived experience by processing it years later in his studio through a series of visceral drawings and paintings of battered, slumped male figures, such as in *Slumped Figure* (see Figure 2), where the pose of the soldier is very close to the figure of Christ brought down from the cross in Rogier van der Weyden's well-known, *The Descent from the Cross* (c. 1435), now in the Museo del Prado, Madrid.[9]



FIGURE **Nº 2**

Alexis Preller, *Slumped Figure*, c.1943/44, mixed media on paper, 22.5 x 30 cm. Private collection, image courtesy of Strauss & Co.

In *Fleurs du Mal*, Preller transforms the antiseptic-soaked hospital swabs applied to the shrapnel wounds into flowers that seem to hover over the figure's skin and float onto the sheet below and into the surreal landscape beyond. The figure does not make eye contact but looks past the viewer with a disassociated thousand-yard stare,[10] which reinforces the emotionally detached mode of representation despite being an ostensibly sensual depiction of a nude for which Truter, Preller's then lover, acknowledged he had posed (Truter 1988:1).

The folds of the sheet give way beyond the figure to a range of snow-capped peaks, reminiscent of the mountains in North Africa where Preller was stationed while in the military.[11] One has a pink lava stream that I suggest references the volcanic eruption that he had witnessed at Lake Kivu in 1939 since similar forms that can be identified unequivocally appear in other paintings from the 1940s that conflate Preller's Congo and WWII experiences, discussed in more detail below.

The yellow corners of *Fleurs du Mal* are a formal conceit that emphasises the flatness of the picture plane and the materiality of the painting *as a painting* rather than a filmic record of an actual event. However, they are also a recognisable quotation from Gauguin's iconic work *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897/98), now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.[12] Gauguin explained in an 1898 letter to his friend Georges-Daniel de Monfreid (1922:94) that the painted yellow corners make his painting appear 'like a fresco whose corners are spoiled with age, and which is appliquéd upon a golden wall'. Ancient Egyptian tomb paintings, which Preller visited while on leave from active duty in North Africa during the war, frequently have sections that are worn away or broken off, and his use of Gauguin's corner device suggests that his painting is a palimpsest, lodging the artist and his work in the trajectory of Western art history, with layers that reference his own contemporary personal life as much as the traumatic life event that was the work's original inspiration.[13] This use of sophisticated allusion and 'inter-art traffic' (Steinberg 1978:21,25) was a practice that became characteristic of Preller's oeuvre from the 1940s onwards and seems to have been both an intellectual exercise in its own right and an interpersonal game to delight the artist's equally well-informed friends and followers, especially Eaton.[14]

Preller's visit to Lake Kivu, Congo, 1939[15]

In his 1947 monograph essay, Preller (1947:9,10) writes about how a sense of 'balance' in a painting is not achieved by the juxtaposition of matching, or similar tensions, but by the presence of extreme opposites, in conflict. The extremes in

his work were informed by the perceived extremes in his personality and his life experience. His visit to Lake Kivu in the Congo in 1939, in search, like many other white Western artists of the time, of a supposedly, "wild", "unspoilt", and "authentic" Africa,[16] provided him with two vivid extremes: a lush paradise of verdant banana plantations and old forest growth with a dense understorey, as might have been expected, but also a surprisingly nightmarish landscape of "fire and brimstone", since a major eruption from the volcano Nyamlagira was in process at the time of Preller's visit.[17] It began in January 1938 and continued until June 1940 (Global Volcanism Program 2010:np), causing significant damage, killing plants and animals, and destroying property, including the settlement at Gahira Mission near the village of Sahe.

Coincidentally, at around the same time that Preller was in the area, a group of geology students from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, led by Professor TW (Traugott Wilhelm) Gevers, was on a field trip to observe the eruption. Gevers produced a detailed report and hand-drawn map (see Figure 3) for an article published by the Geological Society of South Africa, as well as a few newspaper articles about the events he witnessed, and his descriptions offer detailed insights into the alarming experiences that are valuable in supplementing Preller's recollections.

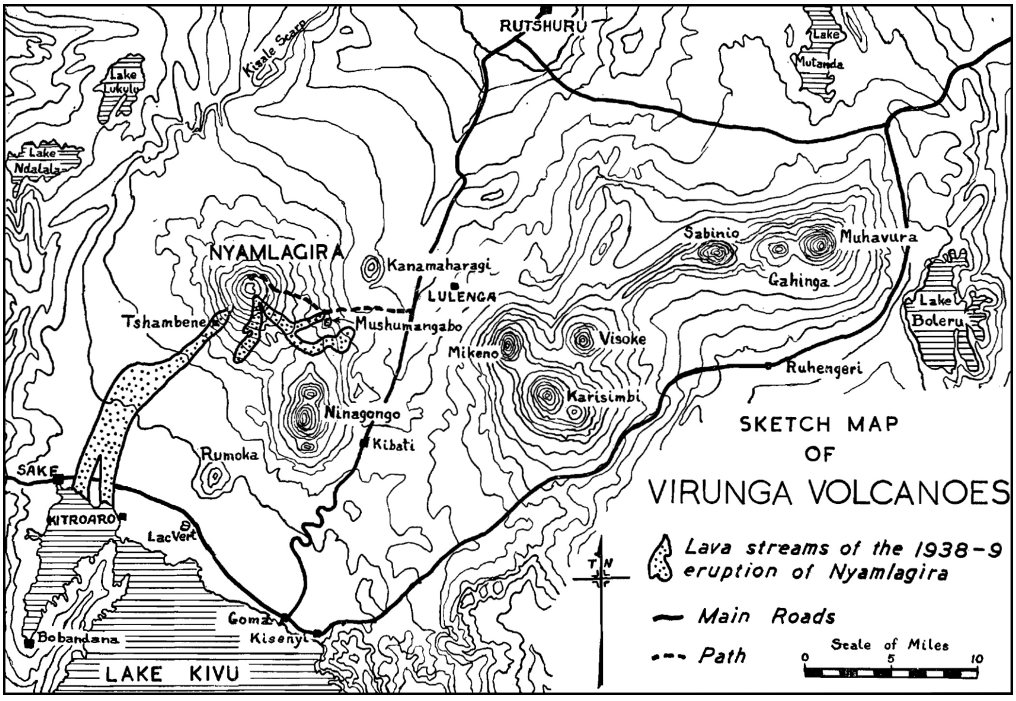


FIGURE **Nº 3**

'Map of Virunga Volcanos, Lava Streams of the 1938–9 Eruption of Nyamlagira' (Gevers 1940:110). Courtesy of the Geological Society of South Africa.

A fissure in the south-western flank of Nyamlagira had allowed the lava lake in the summit crater to erupt in a stream of lava 8 km wide and 22.5 km long, flowing over the road between Goma and Sake and into Lake Kivu below (Gevers 1940:104; 1948:np). Nyamlagira's sister volcano Nyiragongo was not erupting at that time, and the general view of it was obscured by 'dense clouds of steam and sulphurous fumes' (Gevers 1940:114), but 'in the evening and during the night the red glow from Nyiragongo spreads over the sky and shines through the trees'.

Preller, the artist, and Gevers, the scientist, each described their close encounters with the lava flow, but although the experience was clearly an assault on the senses for both men, the language they used is noticeably different. Preller recounted his experience in emotional terms in a later radio interview:

> I was in the Belgian Congo seeing the volcano [Nyamlagira][18] with the lava pouring down into the lake. I happened to see it at night and our boat was drifting along the edge of the lake and it was like looking into the heart of an inferno. It was absolutely terrifying, and as our boat drifted a little way from it, we could see quite enormous lumps of lava falling into the lake and there would be an explosion and you would see great plumes of steam in the night. Here was something that terrified me, yet was so beautiful (Preller 1964:249).

The Wits group also explored the edge of the lake in dugout canoes, as Gevers reported matter-of-factly in his journal article:

> we paddled close up to an area along the lava front where evidently the main body of the subcrustal lava enters the lake. Judging from the vast volume of steam generated this must be considerable. Violent explosions throwing up columns of water were quite frequent at one stage, during which liquid lava was plainly visible and bombs were also thrown into the air. The water, which was already quite hot in this vicinity, during this stage began to boil and sizzle around the canoes (Gevers 1940:125).

Because the eruption was emanating from the mountain's western flank, it was possible to hike up on the eastern side. Gevers (1940:114) writes about the giant lobelia plants and dense jungle they struggled through to the summit, where the surface was strewn with lava-boulders in a matrix of fine ash. The crater 'was full of innumerable steam jets and one very large solfatara [vent] actively depositing sulphur' (Gevers 1948:np). He describes the plain between Sake and Goma as being littered with 'numerous minor crater-cones and crater-lakes' (1948:np), and overall, the view from the rim of the volcano into the valley below showed 'a scene of utter desolation':

> Away to the south, the great lava stream could be seen extending for fourteen miles [22.5 km] down towards Sake on Lake Kivu. Though solidified at the surface, liquid lava still flowed beneath the crust and at numerous points columns of steam indicated the localities where subterranean streams of liquid lava entered Sake Bay. Everywhere in the vicinity of the flow the forest was charred and blackened. On the higher slopes in between and along the individual lava streams, large patches of giant heath stood brown and lifeless (Gevers 1940:122).

On the plain, cracks in the crust made it possible 'to get a glimpse of the lava stream flowing at an amazing speed, as fast as a swift mountain brook' (Gevers 1940:122). The geologist estimated its temperature at 1,160°C, 'nearly twelve times as hot as boiling water' (Gevers 1948:np). Around the stream, the volcano's surface was rough, broken, and 'most difficult to walk on' (Gevers 1940:122) because earlier flows had left layers of black, glassy sediment. Bright yellow sulphur encrusted the fissures in the volcano's flanks, and steam and pungent fumes poured through. At the erupting vent, a lava pool 25 m in diameter had formed:

> For most of the time the lava in the pool was motionless and covered with a thin crust … At irregular intervals, though frequently, the crust would be rent apart and partly or completely removed. The eruptive cycle always begins with the hissing noise of escaping gases and red lava would well up over the edge of the crust amid much hissing and spluttering until the crust finally broke (Gevers 1940:124).

The spectacle was evidently extremely emotive, and for Preller, with his in-depth knowledge of Renaissance art and history, it must have brought to mind the inferno in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1308–1321), as well as the visions of Hell in the right-hand panels of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1510) and *The Haywain Triptych* (c.1516), both now in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, with which he was well acquainted.[19]

In his map of the volcanic landscape, Gevers (1940:124) also shows the 'deep and beautiful' oval-shaped crater lake, Lac Vert (green lake), located close to the road between Sake and Goma. The opaque green of the lake's calm surface and its verdant surroundings, untouched by the eruption, must have appeared Edenic compared to Lake Kivu's hellish hot, bubbling depths (see Figure 4).

While, to my knowledge, Preller never mentions Lac Vert, the correspondence between the lake's appearance and the *crater heads*, or *urn heads* as Preller termed them,[20] in two paintings by the artist from 1946 is striking and unlikely to be a coincidence. Both these works, painted after Preller's return to South Africa following his military service, show urn heads containing still pools in a mountain landscape,



FIGURE Nº 4

Lac Vert, Goma, DRC. Photograph by Dieula Isevambesa, available at Wikimedia Commons.

and I contend that both the form of these heads and the titles of the works suggest that Lac Vert and its surrounds were an inspiration. In *Head* (*First Mountain Pool*) (see Figure 5), a disembodied open head, rent all around with fissures, contains a stagnant green pool remarkably like Lac Vert in shape and colour. In the background are suggestions of a dark mountain on the left and clouds of water vapour or steam, seemingly referencing the volcanic eruption Preller witnessed at Lake Kivu. The eyes of the face depicted on the vessel are closed, perhaps indicating a dream state or sense of dissociation.

In *The Mountain Pool* (see Figure 6), possibly a subsequent development in the same series of works, the pool is the characteristic shade of turquoise blue that Preller became most known for, and seems fresher and purer than in the first painting. The face has more life-like colour tones, and the strip around the open head suggests a bandage, possibly an attempt at containment or healing. The links to the artist's experience of the volcanic eruption are more explicit in this work than the one mentioned above—craggy grey mountain peaks form a backdrop, and a red stream of lava flows down from the mountain and around the head, which seems to be positioned in a larger pool of water or a lake.



FIGURE **Nº 5**

Alexis Preller, *Head (First Mountain Pool)*, 1946, oil on canvas, 14.5 x 12 cm. Private collection, image courtesy of the Norval Foundation.

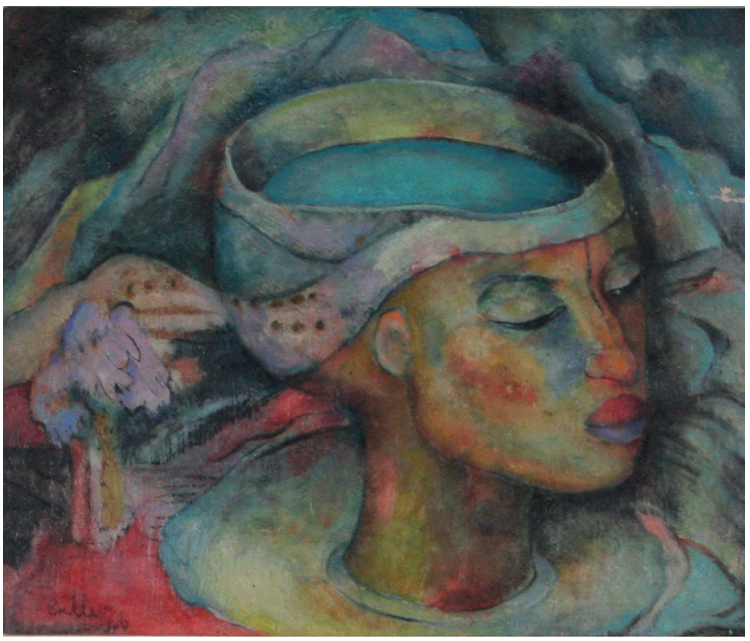


FIGURE **Nº 6**

Alexis Preller, *The Mountain Pool*, 1946, oil on cardboard, 40 x 48 cm. Private collection, image courtesy of the Norval Foundation.

In an interview with art historian Jaco Kemp-Bezuidenhout, Preller (1966:203) explained how, although he had always been interested in depicting heads and had painted numerous portraits early in his career, he eventually chose to avoid 'the cliché of posing a head in a canvas … with its shoulders', and he began to depict the head instead 'just as an object … on a table or in a landscape'. It then no longer references a particular person but can be a vehicle for expressing a general theme or accommodating a specific 'state of mind' (Preller 1966:203). Over 'many years', according to Truter (1947:4), the urn head form served as a vessel into which the artist poured his own 'mood'. In both the works discussed above, the head contains only water, but Preller also decided 'to find out what this obsessing form contained' (Truter 1947:4), and in *The Grotto* (see Figure 7), the red-hot "lava bombs" have become flowers in the water of the head, 'the flowers of his nostalgia', according to Truter (1947:4). An aperture in the pedestal, like the cracks in the lava crust provided a view of the lava flow below, provides a view of orange forms, presumably fish. The volcano appears again in the background of this painting, with fumes and clouds of steam, and the flows of lava and water stream around the central form into the foreground.



FIGURE **Nº 7**

Alexis Preller, *The Grotto*, 1946, oil on canvas, 61 x 43.2 cm. Rupert Art Museum, Stellenbosch, image courtesy of the Norval Foundation.

The progression of this series of urn head paintings suggests a working through of images, ideas, and memories, and a transformation of vivid and potentially life-threatening experiences into lyrical visual manifestations that nevertheless retain recognisable links between "life" and "art". In other works from the same era, motifs from the artist's experience of the volcanic eruption appear at the same time as motifs that reference his wartime experiences. For example, in *Revelation* (see Figure 8), the ash-covered slopes of the Congolese volcanos, the dark clouds hovering above like barrage balloons, and the lurid pink and red lava stream dominate the foreboding composition. Parachuting figures, like tiny toy soldiers, one of whom seems unlikely to have survived, are being dropped into a nightmarish post-apocalyptic landscape.



FIGURE **Nº 8**

Alexis Preller, *Revelation*, 1945, oil on canvas, 59.5 x 70 cm. Private collection, image courtesy of Strauss & Co.

In *Wounded Sculpture* (see Figure 9), the volcanos and flowing lava appear again, and fragmentary Ancient Greek sculptures that the artist had seen in the Louvre in Paris are metaphorical placeholders for actual casualties littering the writhing battlefield. These two paintings suggest a processing of multiple traumatic experiences at once and an engagement with various visualisations of trauma.



FIGURE **Nº 9**

Alexis Preller, *Wounded Sculpture*, 1947, oil on canvasboard, 71 x 92 cm. Private collection, image courtesy of the Norval Foundation.

The painting *Remembrance of Things Past* (see Figure 10), exhibited among works with explicitly wartime subjects and titles in the artist's 1944 Johannesburg exhibition, presents another disembodied head. There is no overt representation of the volcano—the mountain is absent, and the red-hot lava flow has been transformed into a draped shroud that reveals and frames the head as it encircles it. The flowers that in other paintings float inside the urn head here spill out, tattooing the skin and embellishing the textile and the plinth, imparting an apparently poetic rather than a threatening tone. However, there is the implication of fateful vulnerability nevertheless, since in the exhibition catalogue, an excerpt from a letter Preller wrote from North Africa during the war, most likely to Truter, sets out the transience of life and beauty and the inevitability of death and decay: 'I told you about the spring flowers in the desert. Since then, a devastating wind has come in sharp violent gusts and the flowers have withered and died' (Gainsborough Gallery 1944:np).

In this work, the transformation from horror to beauty seems, on the surface, to have been resolved, even though this work predates others discussed here. This suggests that the process of assimilating trauma was staggered, circuitous, and iterative, possibly prone to both progression and regression.



FIGURE **Nº 10**

Alexis Preller, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1946, oil on canvas, 14.5 x 14 cm. Private Collection, image courtesy of the Norval Foundation.

Conclusion

Ornstein (2007:12) notes that survivors of trauma frequently build defences to 'protect a vulnerable self until such time when one encounters an empathetic milieu, in which feeling can be *experienced* and *expressed* [italics in original] without fear of fragmentation or disorganization'. In this article, I have shown how Preller developed a personal defence mechanism that enabled him to re-visualise horrifying events—witnessing the dramatic eruption of Nyamlagira in the Congo in 1939, and assisting with distressing battlefield surgical procedures during WWII—as potentially beautiful. In his "studio of the mind" and, especially, in the physical studios he constructed after his return to Pretoria, Preller found the necessary safe space to grapple with the trauma and work through it.[21] Particularly traumatic formative experiences were processed through the creative action of painting. I have drawn on writings by Preller and Truter and applied theoretical frameworks developed by

Richman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Orenstein to show how the creative action of painting, in a dissociated state of consciousness, or flow, enabled Preller's confrontation with the extremes of his experience. I argued that by sedimenting new ideas over memories, imaginative "found" forms, and quotations from the art historical canon in various ongoing series of related artworks, Preller was able to witness, transform, externalise, and transcend trauma, thereby promoting healing, giving meaning to the past, and reconnecting with his personal life narrative.

Notes

1. Preller wanted to contribute to the war effort, but he was unwilling to serve in a combat capacity. Instead, he volunteered for the 14th Field Ambulance unit of the South African Union Army in June 1940 and was deployed in the North African campaign. He was captured by German and Italian forces at the battle of Tobruk (Libya) in June 1942 and incarcerated as a prisoner-of-war in camps in North Africa and Italy before being repatriated to South Africa by the Red Cross in August 1943 and demobilised.

2. Preller never refers in his own writing to Edmund Burke's treatise on 'the sublime' and 'the beautiful', originally published in 1757, but his personal experience of horror and beauty could also be interpreted productively as manifestations of Burke's aesthetic categories, especially since Burke's conception of the sublime has the ideas of "pain", "danger" and "terror" as its basis (Burke 1823:45).

3. The 1947 monograph is unpaginated. I numbered the pages from the first recto after the title page (page 1) for my own purposes and to facilitate cross-referencing by other scholars.

4. Preller and Truter met through a mutual friend in December 1935 and were engaged in a personal relationship until September 1946.

5. Preller's essay in the 1947 monograph is written in the third person. Although he uses the pronouns he/him/his, they refer to himself throughout.

6. Sergei Diaghilev's original company was named *Les Ballets Russes* (plural) and later *Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* but Blum and Massine's breakaway was known as *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo* (singular) at the time Truter was a member (https://michaelminn.net/andros/history/ballet_russe_de_monte_carlo/index.html).

7. For an image of Gauguin's painting, go to https://buffaloakg.org/artworks/19651-mana%C3%B2-tupapa%C3%BA-spirit-dead-watching. Gauguin was an acknowledged influence on Preller's early work (see Preller 1947:11; 1966:203).

8. See also a different narration by Preller of the same incident in the 1965 SABC radio production 'The World of Alexis Preller' (transcript in Deichmann 1986:283, Appendix 16:261-290).

9. For an image of Van der Weyden's painting, go to https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-descent-from-the-cross/856d822a-dd22-4425-bebd-920a1d416aa7

10. A thousand-yard stare is 'a vacant or unfocused gaze into the distance (frequently used with reference to war-weary or traumatized soldiers)' (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/thousand-yard-stare_n?tab= meaning_and_use).

11. Although the North African campaign during WWII is usually associated most strongly with the Western Desert in Egypt, there are significant mountain ranges and escarpments between the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea, most pertinently in the Libyan province of Cyrenaica, especially south of Tobruk, where Preller was captured in 1942.

12. For an image of Gauguin's painting, go to https://collections.mfa.org/objects/32558/where-do-we-come-from-what-are-we-where-are-we-going

13. Preller uses the same corner device again in some of his other works, including *The Hay Cart* (1952) (which was later cut up into separate paintings) and the *Discovery* mural, his so-called *magnum opus* (see Cuthbertson 2023:48,185).

14. See Cuthbertson (2023:198,199) for examples of Preller's use of motifs in *Discovery* that were effectively insider references for his like-minded intellectual friend, Eaton.

15. Lake Kivu is Africa's eighth largest Great Lake. It is approximately 42 km long, 50 km at its widest, and very deep, with a maximum depth of 475 m. It straddles the border between the DRC and Rwanda. Preller and Truter travelled by car through Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as far as Livingstone in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), where Truter turned back to return to his job in Pretoria (Berman & Nel 2009:50). Preller continued to the Congo, probably arriving in early August 1939 (see Cuthbertson 2023:120, note 165), and established a base in the environs of Costermansville (now Bukavu) on the southern shore of Lake Kivu. WWII formally began on 3 September when Britain and France declared war on Germany. When Preller received the news, he decided to cut short his trip and returned to South Africa by river boat and railway (Berman & Nel 2009:54).

16. Like Preller, the German South African artist Irma Stern travelled to Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal), Swaziland (now Eswatini), and later the Congo (in 1942, 1946, and 1955) in search of 'the real Africa' (Schoeman 1994:75). Stern also visited Lake Kivu and painted several landscapes and people studies there.

17. Nyamlagira (also Nyamulagira or Nyamuragira) (3 058 m), Africa's most active volcano, is a shield-shaped volcano 25 km north of Lake Kivu, in the Virunga Mountains. The range is part of the East African Rift System (Global Volcanism Program 2010:np). A neighbouring cone-shaped active volcano, Nyiragongo (3 470 m) is 13 km away from Nyamlagira.

18. In the transcript of the interview in Deichmann (1986:50), the volcano's name is recorded as 'Neho Regula', certainly a phonetic error in transcription, of which there are many. The artist's biography in the catalogue for the 1972 Preller retrospective exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum correctly lists 'Nyamlagira' (PAM 1972:6). Deichmann (1986:50) and Berman and Nel (2009:52) refer instead to 'Nyiragongo', but that did not erupt during Preller's visit (Global Volcanism Program 2010:np).

19. Bosch occupied a special place in the pantheon of artists Preller (1947:11) admired, and he later referred directly to these two major works in some of his paintings, including *Still-life with Eggs* (1949) and *The Hay Cart* (1952). For images of Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *The Haywain Triptych* go to https://www.museodelprado.es

20. The *urn head* form seems to encompass several different references, including the open-headed anthropomorphic and zoomorphic terracotta vessels Preller saw on his travels in Africa, such as the Barotse duck he bought in Livingstone *en route* to the Congo (Berman & Nel 2009:58), as well as the elongated heads (the result of the cultural practice of artificial cranial deformation) of some of the Mangbetu women and children he encountered at Lake Kivu.

21. Preller built studios on two properties, Ygdrasil in Brummeria in 1944, and later Dombeya after he moved to the Brits area near Hartbeespoort Dam from 1956.

Acknowledgement

This article draws, in part, on the contents of my PhD thesis, submitted to the University of Johannesburg in 2023.

References

Berman, E & Nel, K. 2009. *Alexis Preller: A visual biography, Africa, the sun and shadows* (vol 1), and *Collected images* (vol 2). Johannesburg: Shelf Publishing.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2014. *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology: The collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2014 [1975]. Play and intrinsic rewards, in *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology: The collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*. Dordrecht: Springer:134-153.

Cuthbertson, H. 2023. Ideas of Africanness in Alexis Preller's *The Discovery of the Sea Route Round Africa* mural (1959–1962). Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg.

Deichmann, J. 1986. Die werk van Alexis Preller, 1934–1948 en 'n catalogue raisonné. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

Gainsborough Gallery. 1944. *Alexis Preller*, exhibition brochure. Johannesburg: Gainsborough Gallery.

Gauguin, P. 1922. *The letters of Paul Gauguin to Georges Daniel de Monfreid*, trans. Ruth Pielkovo. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.

Gevers, TW. 1940. 'The 1938–39 eruption of Nyamlagira volcano in the Kivu district of the Belgian Congo'. *South African Journal of Geology* 43(1):109-126.

Gevers, TW. 1948. 'Giant "cooking pots" of Virunga: Volcanos of Nyaragongo [sic] and Nyamlagira'. *The Star* 17 March.

Global Volcanism Program. 2010. 'Report on Nyamulagira (DR Congo)', *Bulletin of the Global Volcanism Network* 3(8), edited by J Fela & R Wunderman, Smithsonian Institution. Online, available at https://doi.org/10.5479/si.GVP.BGVN201008-223020 Accessed 24 June 2023.

Nel, K. 2017. Prof Karel Nel on *Fleurs du Mal* by Alexis Preller, Strauss & Co. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf6zAWsDiQw

Ornstein, A. 2007. Roundtable conversation of child survivors of the holocaust. *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* 5(1):5-12.

PAM (Pretoria Art Museum). 1972. *Alexis Preller retrospective*. Exhibition catalogue. Pretoria: PAM.

Preller, A. 1939. Letter to Minnie Gillibrand (Preller's sister) from Costermansville, 2 September. Photocopy of a handwritten letter, Norval Foundation Archive, Cape Town (Alexis Preller Collection).

Preller, A. 1941. Letter to Christi Truter from Egypt, 26 May. Original handwritten letter, Norval Foundation Archive, Cape Town (Alexis Preller Collection).

Preller, A. 1947. Untitled essay, in *Alexis Preller*, edited by C Truter. Pretoria: The Maroola Press.

Preller, A. 1963. 'My Credo', interview recorded for SABC/SAUK radio, Johannesburg, 5 September, transcript in Esmé Berman private archive, Johannesburg. The Afrikaans translation, 'Artistieke Kredo', was likely the version the SABC/SAUK broadcast as part of the series *Lewende Kuns* on 2 March 1964, transcript in Deichmann:239-241.

Preller, A. 1964. Radio interview with Esmé Berman and Harold Jeppe for the SABC series *South African Artists No. 1*, recorded 1 July, broadcast 20 July, transcript in Deichmann, 1986, Appendix 16:242-259.

Preller, A. 1965. Interview in *The World of Alexis Preller*, SABC radio production, transcript in Deichmann 1986, Appendix 16:261-290.

Preller, A. 1966. Interview with Jaco-Kemp Bezuidenhout, April, transcript in Deichmann 1986, Appendix 15:201-206.

Richman, S. 2014. *Mended by the muse: Creative transformations of trauma*. New York: Routledge.

Richman, S. 2020. Trauma and creative transcendence, in *Encyclopedia of Creativity, vol 2* (3rd ed), edited by M Runco & S Pritzker, vol. II. Amsterdam: Elsevier:670-675.

Richman, S. 2022. Witness to war: Enlisting the creative process in working through trauma. *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* 20 (2):189-208. https://doi.org/10.1080/1551806X.2022.2136441

Runco, M & Pritzker, S (eds). 2002. *Encyclopedia of creativity, vol 2* (3rd ed). Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Schoeman, K. 1994. *Irma Stern: The early years, 1894–1933*. Cape Town: South African Library.

Steinberg, L. 1978. 'The glorious company', in J Lipman & R Marshall (eds), *Art about Art*. New York: Dutton in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art:8-28.

Strauss & Co. 2017. 'Fleurs du Mal', item notes in *Important South African and International Art*. Auction catalogue, November:262.

Truter, C. 1947. Untitled, in *Alexis Preller.* Pretoria: The Maroola Press.

Truter, C. 1984. 'Foreword', reproduced in Deichmann, 1986:296-299.

Truter, C. 1988. Interview with Nico Maritz, May, referenced in 'Some Notes from Christi Truter', original hand-written summary in Esmé Berman private archive, Johannesburg.