

# Weaving more-than-human connections in Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn's *The nest* and Jo Roets's *Nest* series

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## ABSTRACT

In *The nest* sound installation series by Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, created for the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition (2023), five structures depict the ruins of non-human animal housing structures. Bird nests are recreated in ghostly white and earth tones in *The core*, *Masks*, *The conflict*, *Abandoned* and *The confrontation*, each with a unique soundtrack. A parallel can be drawn between these works and Jo Roets's air-drying clay sculptures for the *Elegy* exhibition (2024), which also include intricately woven bird nests. Roets emphasises the search for hidden connections to self, other people and nature in her work. Recently more-than-human connections have increasingly drawn attention as people are confronted with the effects of climate change and the impact of human activities on the environment. In this article, I argue that Heenop and Steyn's *The nest* sound installation series and Roets's *Nest* sculptures evoke experiences of loss and transience, with the inherent vulnerability of being on Earth connecting various more-than-human forms of existence, highlighting the interrelationship between humans and non-human agents. This focus on making hidden, often overlooked connections visible is informed by Sol Plaatje's emphasis on the desire to return to ruins or to what remains.

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Stairways and Ruins

# Introduction

In *The nest* sound installation series by Danelle Heenop<sup>1</sup> and Juan Steyn,<sup>2</sup> created for the *Stairways and Ruins* group exhibition (2023),<sup>3</sup> five structures depict the ruins of non-human animal housing structures. In this series, bird nests are recreated in ghostly white and earth tones, as seen in *The core*, *Masks*, *The conflict*, *Abandoned* and *The confrontation*, each with a unique soundtrack.<sup>4</sup> For example, weavers' nests are represented in *The core* (Figure 1), with the sound of a morning routine set against the dawn chorus of birds, with a human voice humming interrupted by the whistle of a steam kettle and the clicking of cutlery against porcelain. A parallel can be drawn between these works and the Cape Town-based sculptor, painter and mould maker Jo Roets's (b.1979) air-drying clay sculptures shown at the two-person exhibition *Elegie (Elegy)* (2024)<sup>5</sup> at the Rust-en-Vrede Gallery. The sculptures by Roets include delicately woven bird nests such as *Nest 2* (Figure 2). Roets (cited by Seidel & Castilho 2024:42) emphasises the search for hidden connections to self, other people and nature in her work (see also MacDonald 2023:194).

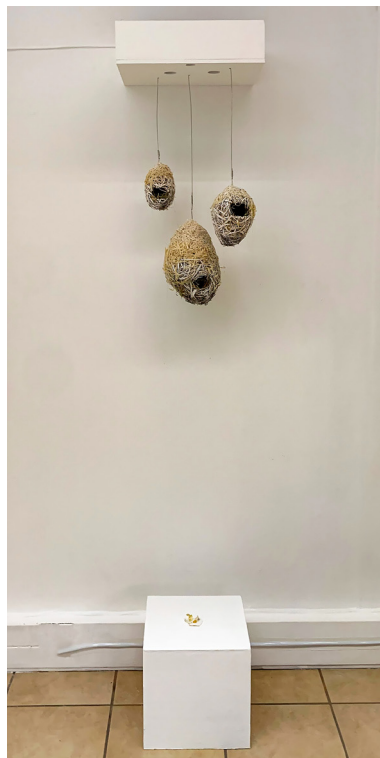


FIGURE **Nº 1**



Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, *The core (Nest 1)*, 2023. Mixed media sound installation, including armature, pasta cooked in bleach, grass, paper strands, thread, found eggshell, spray paint and ash, as well as a Raspberry Pi single-board computer (SBC) and cables. 41 cm x 70 cm x 30 cm. Installation view, *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition, North-West University (NWU) Art Gallery, Potchefstroom. Collection of Juan Steyn. Photograph by Danelle Heenop. Courtesy of Danelle Heenop.



FIGURE **Nº 2**



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Jo Roets, *Nest 2*, 2024. Self-drying natural stone clay. 20 cm x 20 cm. Courtesy of Jo Roets.

Recently, more-than-human connections have increasingly drawn attention as people around the world have begun to grapple with the effects of human activity on the environment.<sup>6</sup> The more-than-human world refers to the relations between humans and other, non-human agents with whom their lives are entangled (Abram 2024:341). According to Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey and Ursula Münster (2016:2-3), the ongoing destruction and transformation of environments on both local and global levels, from climate change, loss of biodiversity to mass extinction, demand careful attention to complex relationships with one another, both with other humans and non-human agents. This includes reflecting on how to respond to others in better, more responsible ways (Van Dooren 2016:194). Following Jamie Lorimer and Timothy Hodgetts (2024), individual human lives are recognised as entangled in complex ways with other, non-human agents as part of the material world. Careful consideration of diverse more-than-human stories has the potential to cultivate new ways of living and even flourishing with others, including, but not limited to humans (Van Dooren *et al* 2016:16-17; Van Dooren 2019:13, 195). The question of how to ‘weave the world’ in new ways, as asked by Van Dooren (2019:11), is taken as a starting point for exploring and comparing more-than-human connections in Heenop and Steyn’s *The nest* installation series and Roets’s *Nest* sculpture series.

The term ‘non-human’ to refer to lifeforms other than human should not equate to ‘less-than-human’ (Browning 2021:180). Given the criticism of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, Donna Haraway (2008) suggests ‘multispecies’ as an alternative

concept (Price & Chao 2023:180).<sup>7</sup> As discussed by Van Dooren *et al* (2016:2), multispecies studies emphasise the diversity of organisms that humans are interacting or ‘becoming-with’, but in this article, the term more-than-human is used.

I argue that Heenop and Steyn’s *The nest* sound installation series and Roets’s *Nest* sculptures evoke experiences of transience, with the inherent vulnerability of being on Earth connecting various more-than-human forms of existence, highlighting the interrelationship between humans and non-human agents. The concept of the more-than-human is used to explore human culture as ‘necessarily embedded within, permeated by, and indeed dependent upon the more-than-human world that exceeds it’ (Abram 2024:342). Through a detailed discussion of Heenop and Steyn’s *The nest* sound installation series and with reference to selected sculptures from Roets’s *Elegy* exhibition, I aim to contribute to the critical discussion of more-than-human relations in contemporary South African visual art with specific reference to the analysis of representations of remnants of non-human animal structures. The focus on making hidden, often overlooked connections visible is informed by Sol Plaatje’s (2005 [1930]:191) emphasis on the desire to return to ruins or to what remains.<sup>8</sup> The remnants of animal structures that have been damaged or abandoned are reminiscent of ruins or what remains from the past for the future. Visiting the ruins of the past can inspire the viewer to transcend the broken past and create a better, more interconnected future.

The article is divided into three sections. In section one, the sound installation series, *The nest*, by Heenop and Steyn is described and discussed as depictions of bird nests. The use of and associations with materials are explored, including the importance of experimentation, with the artworks considered as a play on ruins. The second section focuses on Roets’s *Nest* sculptures created from air-drying clay and the care taken in making the delicate nests, emphasising the fragile nature of the artworks. The concept of transience and Heenop and Steyn’s focus on the temporary nature of the nest structures created for *The nest* series are also referenced. The importance of human and non-human connections, as an underlying theme to both Roets’s *Nest* sculptures and Heenop and Steyn’s *The nest* sound installations, form the basis of section three. I argue that, for these artists, representations of bird nests inspire responses to their own experiences of connection and belonging to self, family, and others, both human and non-human.

## Building nests and connections in Heenop and Steyn’s *The nest* installations

The nests built by birds are some of the most recognisable constructions made by non-human animals, with people having a long-standing fascination with the nest building of

birds (Hall, Meddle & Healy 2015:S133). The wide variety of bird nests includes nests woven from leaves, twigs or thin strands of grass, delicate cup-shaped nests using spider silk and saliva and large dome-shaped nests from vegetation and mud.<sup>9</sup> The building of nests, however, is not limited to birds.

The artists depict different kinds of bird nest structures. Heenop and Steyn created multiple nests, in contrast to Roets's individual small, delicate nests. Heenop and Steyn (2023:28) explore issues of belonging and care through the representation of bird nests, drawing attention to family relationships. They reflect on the nature of human identity using the 'nest clusters' as metaphor for the phases of plunder, reconstruction, re-evaluation, and adaptations to find a sense of belonging and security of identity (Heenop & Steyn 2023:28).<sup>10</sup> *The nest* installation series by Heenop and Steyn was conceptualised following the four categories of belonging identified by Hiltunen, Sääskilahti, Vallius, Pöyhönen, Jäntti and Saresma (2020:11 cited by Heenop & Steyn 2023:28) that run parallel with factors influencing identity, categorised as: (a) positive belonging, (b) searching for belonging, (c) struggling to belong and (d) scepticism towards belonging, as highlighted in the artists' statement.

As recounted by Plaatje (2005 [1930]:191): 'there's always a return to the ruins, only to the womb there is no return'. According to Heenop (2024), this reference to the womb, reminiscent of the embracing space created by a nest, in the call for artists for *Stairways and Ruins*, served as the starting point for the conceptualisation of *The nest* installation series. Heenop (2024) was inspired by the story of a male weaverbird carefully weaving an elaborate nest, only to tear the nest apart when rejected by a female, compulsively building and rebuilding nests. The bird is likened to an architect, with the nest as a haven to be destroyed, abandoned or rebuilt (Heenop & Steyn 2023:28).

After the initial conceptualisation of *The nest* project, Heenop approached Steyn to collaborate, given his technical expertise in sound design. The decision to add sound to the design gave direction to the project, although Heenop (2024) highlights the technical challenges including sound in the installations using Raspberry Pi single-board computers (SBC). At first, the choice of sounds was dictated by Heenop's suggestions, with the nest structures sculpted by Heenop, but the project became increasingly collaborative. *The core* includes Steyn's wife humming and the sounds of a kettle whistling and cutlery rattling, which was recorded in his kitchen. When not recorded by the artists, open-source sounds were used. The sound installations embedded in the nest structures help to promote an immersive experience, creating an opportunity for contemplation (Heenop & Steyn 2023:28).

Mixed media is used throughout *The nest* installation series and includes both natural and man-made fibres (Heenop & Steyn 2023:28). As suggested by Van Dooren *et al* (2016:9), multimedia installations can focus attention on animals and other non-human agents. The use of different materials by Heenop and Steyn recalls the wide variety of materials used by birds to build nests. The weaver's nests depicted in *The core (Nest 1)* installation (Figure 1) are woven from diverse, unconventional materials, including pasta cooked in bleach to avoid mould, grass, paper strands, thread, spray paint and soot. On a walk, Heenop (2024) found the remnants of a nest and a broken egg blown down by a storm. Grass from the fallen nest was woven into *The core* and the eggshell placed under the three nest structures.

As already highlighted by the guest curator of *Stairways and Ruins*, Andrew Lamprecht (2023a:3), building the nestlike structures was a labour-intensive process, pushing the boundaries of the various media. Collaboration was central to the process for Heenop and Steyn, and also encouraged experimentation. The process included testing different materials, followed by preparatory sketches based on photographic references, with prototypes created (Heenop 2024/10/1). The final works were created in the last two months leading up to the exhibition. According to Heenop (2024), she likes to test the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen material. Roets is also known for pushing the limits of her chosen medium (Seidel & Castilho 2024:42), for example, the delicate twigs depicted in air-drying clay in *Nest 2* (Figure 2).

Heenop (2024) started with a defined theme for the *Masks (Nest 2)* sound installation. The *Masks* installation (Figure 3) consists of a core structure in the middle, surrounded by smaller, fragmented structures, suspended from a box. *Masks* was created by dipping moulded paper and air-drying clay in wax, giving the work an overall white colour. The hollow structures (made of delicate layers of white paper, air-drying clay, thread and wax) are reminiscent of cell structures seen under a microscope. The central nest structure, resembling a bird nest with a round entrance, is still largely intact, while the rest of the peripheral structures are pierced with lacelike holes, comparable to cell membranes slowly disintegrating.

The cells referenced in *Masks* are disintegrating, like the persona created by someone using social media platforms (Heenop 2024). A false sense of identity is often provided, but as social media personas are challenged, their masks easily break apart. The incessant sound of instant messages being delivered reinforces the artificiality of social media. The central structure is described by Heenop (2024) as representing the most authentic identity, with the structures becoming more fragmented as one moves away from the centre, with Heenop suggesting that social media provides a superficial sense of belonging.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



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Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, *Masks (Nest 2)*, 2023. Mixed media sound installation, including fabric, thread, paper, cold glue, wax and air-drying clay, Raspberry Pi and cables. 45 cm x 150 cm x 30 cm. Front view, *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition, NWU Art Gallery, Potchefstroom. Photograph by Danelle Heenop. Courtesy of Danelle Heenop.

In *The conflict (Nest 3)* (Figure 4) a series of hollow, black and white enclosed nests are arranged on stilts of differing heights. Heenop (2024) describes searching for materials that suggest the specific qualities of the bird nests, such as the foam clay pressed into moulds. The foam clay and upholstery padding suggest the softness of silk collected from spider webs (Heenop 2024). Some small bird species, such as sunbirds, use spider silk, a characteristically lightweight and strong material, to construct and insulate their small ball-shaped nests, with other materials such as lichens added for camouflage. The nests staggered higher and lower can suggest different steps in the process of migration, between leaving and belonging and the status of the different places for those leaving or staying behind.

The possibility of violence and conflict is implied by the title. Some of the nests are blackened with soot. The potential for conflict between human and non-human agents is hinted at by the sound design for *The conflict* installation, including sounds asso-

ciated with human activity in the urban environment, heels clicking on pavements, vehicles honking and a train rushing by. Birdsong is largely absent from *The conflict* sound installation, with the soft cooing of doves barely audible at the end of the sound loop. The discussion of *The conflict* can be expanded to refer to the conflict between human and non-human neighbours, with the need to work towards better, more caring relationships.



FIGURE N° 4



Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, *The conflict (Nest 3)*, 2023. Mixed media sound installation, including foam clay, textiles, thread and found tree fibres, Raspberry Pi and cables. 92 cm x 157 cm x 47 cm. Installation view, *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition, NWU Art Gallery, Potchefstroom. Photograph by Danelle Heenop. Courtesy of Danelle Heenop.

*Abandoned (Nest 4)* (Figure 5) refers to the mud nests of swallows, often built under a bridge or roof overhang. Air-drying clay was pressed into moulds and then worked on in an organic, largely intuitive manner. Soil, collected from the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, was mixed with glue and painted onto the work. Although most birds nest individually, some species nest together for increased protection against predation. Family or groups can offer a sense of security and safety in belonging. The nests are built close to one another for safety but are now abandoned as the birds migrate (perhaps never to return). Identity is not created alone, but through connections, fostering a sense of belonging through relationships with family members, but also with strangers, both human and non-human.



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, *Abandoned (Nest 4)*, 2023. Mixed media sound installation, including air-drying clay, recycled maps, soil and cold glue mix, Raspberry Pi and cables. 72 cm x 70 cm x 50 cm. Front view, *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition, NWU Art Gallery, Potchefstroom. Photograph by Danelle Heenop. Courtesy of Danelle Heenop.

To allude to the idea of travel, fragments of recycled maps of South African provinces are included as part of the *Abandoned* installation. Heenop (2024) refers to the people in her life who always seem to go wherever life takes them, like swallows, as opposed to the need she feels to be rooted in one place, the need for connections, to belong somewhere. When migrating, much is left behind. This can include family, culture and language. The nests depicted seem to have been abandoned, reminiscent of people having to leave their homes behind when fleeing danger. The hollow depressions, where the eggs and later chicks would have been kept safe and allowed to grow, are empty. The swallows might return from migration to use the nests again, as they might have done over generations, but because of a catastrophe (being hunted or the effects of climate change), they might never return. The white colour of the nests adds to the ghostly feel of the work, despite the warm earth tones of the mud structures. The unsettling feeling of the hollow structures in *Abandoned* is highlighted by the sound design, including the wind howling and a repetitive percussive, dripping sound.

A comparison can be drawn between the abandoned nest structures and ruins. The ruins of non-human animal housing structures can be the result of abandonment or destruction by living creatures or the devastating effects of the elements such as a storm. Ruins suggest a reconsideration of the past, of destruction and wreckage (Lamprecht 2023b:4). A ruin implies a loss of some kind, alluding to what might once have stood there while

imagining possible narratives about what might happen in future (Pitetti 2019:358). According to Connor Pitetti (2019:365), the aestheticisation of ruins can be used to explore larger narratives about the roles assigned to human and non-human agents. Nate Millington (2013:280) considers images of ruins as reflections of contrasting understandings of humanity's relationship to the larger non-human world: 'nature' creates ruins by destroying human structures, revealing the already present interaction of natural and cultural forces. As argued by Cal Flynn (2021:7, 9), sites abandoned by humans offer a glimpse into a future in which climate change and other human legacies have come to create a very different world.

The viewer is 'confronted' with the large hanging structure of *Confrontation (Nest 5)* (Figure 6) when approaching *The nest* sound installation series. In my first encounter with *The nest* installation series, I was engulfed by *The confrontation*, finding a quiet space for introspection, with the chattering of birds in the background. *The confrontation*, the largest individual nest in the series, contains a hollow opening. Heenop (2024) relates that she wanted to create a nest that the viewer could physically enter from below to fully engage with the artwork. The structure is reminiscent of the large community nests of Sociable Weavers constructed in trees or on telephone poles. According to Heenop (2024), *The confrontation* installation emphasises the interaction of the built nests and sound design to create an opportunity for reflection (Heenop & Steyn 2023:28). Despite the sound of hundreds of birds chirping together, the installation creates a space for contemplation.



FIGURE N° 6



Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, *The confrontation (Nest 5)*, 2023. Mixed media sound installation, including mesh wire, copper armature, paper and tissue paper, textiles, Plaster of Paris, cold glue, soil, Raspberry Pi and cables. 100 cm x 150 cm x 75 cm. Installation view, *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition, NWU Art Gallery, Potchefstroom. Photograph by Danelle Heenop. Courtesy of Danelle Heenop.

The process of creating *The nest* installation series is described by Heenop (2024) as therapeutic, an opportunity for thinking through personal issues around migration and family relationships. A space is offered for viewers to contemplate their own questions and reflect on how to live after change (Lamprecht 2023b:4). The three nest structures in *The core* installation (Figures 1 & 10) reference Heenop (2024) and her two children as a core family unit, with family placed at the centre of the discussion. Despite some damage, including hanging threads and grass strands unravelling at the edges, the three structures still exist to support the family in future. I argue that associations between human and non-human experiences and the need for belonging can also be explored in Roets's *Nest* series.

## Fragility and transience in Jo Roets's *Nest* sculptures

Roets's work often references natural forms such as bones, coral and pebbles (MacDonald 2023:193). The representations are not meant to be scientifically correct, but rather to evoke specific feelings (Seidel & Castilho 2024:39; Stehr 2022). The sculptures created for the *Elegy* exhibition include six sculptures representing cup-shaped bird nests from self-drying natural stone clay and plant material. Delicate layers of air-drying clay are used by Roets to represent bird nest structures in *Nest 1* to *Nest 6* (2024). Her characteristic use of air-drying clay, a medium usually associated with craft projects by children, challenges the boundaries of conventional ceramics (Women Create 2024).

Roets (2024/10/7) emphasises that the *Nest* sculptures each required different techniques. She uses unusual sculpting tools such as toothpicks and needles to carve out forms and make indentations, holes and incisions in the damp clay surface (Stehr 2022). A fine crocheting needle was used to form the feathers and leaves inside the nest structures (Roets 2024/10/7). For the small nests, such as *Nest 2* (Figure 2) and *Nest 6* (Figure 8), air-drying clay was rolled out into thin clay sheets, dried and cut into small pieces to shape the twigs for each nest. The stick shapes were then individually placed and pressed over one another to shape the nest. For some of the nests, such as *Nest 3* (Figure 7), Roets incorporated organic material from her garden, including sticks and dried leaves. The sticks were soaked in water to make them flexible and then woven together.

Roets's 'light relief sculptures'<sup>11</sup> are characterised by their delicate textures and unexpected warping<sup>12</sup> (Misra, Lala, Sequeira & Singh 2024:12). Similar to the experimentation by Heenop and Steyn, Roets tests the limits of her chosen medium of air-drying clay, encouraging warping (Art.co.za 2024). As it dries, the clay distorts and cracks in interesting ways (Seidel & Castilho 2024:40), such as in Roets's *Nest 6* (Figure 8). In this regard, Caitlin MacDonald<sup>13</sup> (2023:197) emphasises the transformative nature of Roets's handling of the medium of air-drying clay.



FIGURE **Nº 7**



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Jo Roets, *Nest 3*, 2024. Self-drying natural stone clay and found materials. 20 cm x 20 cm. Courtesy of Jo Roets.

Roets's ability to transform one material into another can be attributed to her work in the film industry and years lecturing at a multimedia film school (MacDonald 2023:197).<sup>14</sup> Roets's background in art direction and production design for film and television also inspired a focus on detail, composition and visual storytelling to convey mood, tone and meaning and draw viewers into the narrative (Seidel & Castilho 2024:39). Roets's visually compelling work has been exhibited both locally and internationally.<sup>15</sup>

Roets (2024/10/7) referenced actual birds' nests during the conceptualisation and making of the *Nest* sculpture series. She had not initially planned to create nests, but, like Heenop, a nest she found on the lawn near her house helped to inform the *Nest* sculptures for the *Elegy* exhibition. She felt a sense of wonder seeing the diverse range of material the birds had used to build the nest, from leaves, feathers, sticks, threads to the soft fluff of their dogs' hair. After finding the fallen nest, Roets (2024/10/7) relates that she started to observe the birds flying down from a Bottlebrush tree to the lawn to pick up the dogs' hair and take it back to line their nest. Roets often takes inspiration from her immediate surroundings, including her garden (Misra *et al* 2024:6).

From a young age, Roets would collect interesting objects, regularly going on walks to find 'treasures' such as bones, feathers or rocks, but finding a nest was 'the first prize'

(Seidel & Castilho 2024:39). According to Roets (2024/10/7), finding a nest was like finding a free artwork, built by a 'bird artist'. Roets (2024/10/7) considers each nest to be unique, both in form and the choice of material used to construct it. Roets (2024/10/7) recounts that when she started to build and weave the nests for the *Elegy* exhibition, she could not stop thinking about the skill required of the birds, using their beaks and claws, to build nests on such a small scale. According to Roets (2024/10/7), there is something very 'magical' about nests, recalling associations with home, birth, as well as a sign of new seasons, life and death. Since childhood Roets (cited by Stehr 2022) has had a fascination with remains, such as bones, perhaps as reminders of transience (see also Seidel & Castilho 2024:39).

In the *Nest* sculptures, air-drying clay is transformed into eggshells, twigs and feathers, woven together to form birds' nests. MacDonald (2023:197) argues that through the transformation of air-drying clay, Roets evokes half-forgotten memories, including those of decay and transience. According to the introduction in the exhibition catalogue, the *Elegy* exhibition explores the complex emotions surrounding death. In an attempt to break free from grief and the fear of loss, the certainty of death can be made bearable by recalling memories (Elegie 2024:2). These associations with transience and memories of the past are foregrounded in the *Nest* series.

A similarly limited colour palette of shades of white and brown is used in the *Nest* sculpture series by Roets and *The nest* installation series by Heenop and Steyn, bringing unity to both. The artists also share an interest in exploring textures. The ivory colour and fine texture of the natural stone air-drying clay are reminiscent for Roets of bone and eggshells (Seidel & Castilho 2024:40). In *Nest 2* (Figure 2), for example, a cup-shaped bird nest, made up of twigs and feathers, is represented in white air-drying clay. The colour white in Western culture usually expresses purity, peace and calm, while in Eastern cultures white often symbolises death, the afterlife and mourning, reflecting the remains returning to dust (Women Create 2024).

The white colour and 'feather-light weight of the dried clay', as in *Nest 6* (Figure 8), enhance the sense of fragility and vulnerability (Roets cited by Seidel & Castilho 2024:40). Roets's work has a sense of lightness, with birds, the original builders of the nests depicted, associated with flight and the element of air (MacDonald 2023:194). The thin layers of air-drying clay, like the nests and eggs depicted, appear fragile and easily breakable, but are surprisingly strong, according to Roets (2024/10/7).

The use of gold in *Nest 3* (Figure 7) and *Nest 6* (Figure 8) represents the start of life. The gold inside the eggshells is described by Roets (2024/10/7) as a 'nod' to the mystical processes of new life. Although the use of gold according to Roets (2024/10/7) does not



FIGURE **Nº 8**



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Jo Roets, *Nest 6*, 2024. Self-drying natural stone clay. 20 cm x 20 cm. Courtesy of Jo Roets.

refer directly to the technique of *kintsugi*, Michaela Stehr (2022) argues that the use of gold leaf in some of her earlier works recalls the Japanese art of mending broken pottery with gold. The empty eggshells in Roets's *Nest 3* and *Nest 6*, lined with gold, suggest that the chicks had successfully hatched and were able to leave the nest. In contrast, the broken eggshell and spilt yolk in *The core* (Figure 9) by Heenop and Steyn, hint at violence and an unsuccessful breeding season, perhaps because of human interference or the effects of climate change.

The structures for Heenop and Steyn's *The nest* sound installation series are fragile and were not built to last. The sound technology was also difficult to install.<sup>16</sup> *The confrontation*, *Masks* and *The conflict* were destroyed with de-installation (Heenop 2024). *The core* was taken home by Steyn, and Heenop displayed *Abandoned* in her office at the time of the interview. The fragile and transient nature of nests and by extension of home is emphasised, for example, by weaving threads and black plant fibres from a burnt-down tree into *The conflict* installation (Figure 4) and by the thin layers of white clay in Roets's *Nest 6* (Figure 8). The nests are gradually torn up and destroyed. Heenop (2024) notes that she likes the idea that the works were not permanent, with the temporary nature of the works particularly appropriate for the depiction of nests. Some bird nests are easily destroyed or abandoned, while other nests are rebuilt and reused over generations.



FIGURE **Nº 9**



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Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, detail of a broken egg in *The core (Nest 1)*, 2023. Mixed media, including found eggshell. Collection of Juan Steyn. Courtesy of Danelle Heenop.

## More-than-human connections

The theme of connections (and belonging) is explored by both bodies of work. In Roets's sculptures of birds' nests an emphasis is placed on connection 'to oneself, with humanity, with nature' (Roets cited by Seidel & Castilho 2024:42). A central theme informing Roets's work is the recognition of people's shared vulnerability and a need for connection, despite different circumstances and experiences (Women Create 2024). Through careful observation of natural patterns and forms, new connections can be discovered within the work (Seidel & Castilho 2024:41). Heenop (2024) also places the theme of connection and belonging as central to her and Steyn's *The nest* sound installation series. The nests and eggs represented include associations with non-human animal relations.

Particularly relevant for the discussion of these artworks is the entanglement of belonging and abandonment (Van Dooren 2016:198). Belonging also implies that some do not belong and might be unwelcome. Different ways of connecting can be imagined through shared experiences of suffering and mutual care (Van Dooren *et al* 2016:9). Suffering, however, is not experienced equally, with some people suffering more than others because of ongoing environmental change, but all people are engaged in the shaping of more-than-human worlds (Van Dooren 2016:200-201).

Heenop (2024) emphasises the importance of creating spaces for reflection, encouraging viewers to engage with *The nest* sound installation series. Similarly, Roets aims to create thought-provoking experiences for viewers to enable self-discovery (Misra *et al* 2024:10). Following Van Dooren (2019:12), I suggest that Heenop and Steyn's *The nest* sound installations require not only attentive 'seeing-with others' but also listening-with others. An encounter with a bird, as suggested by Parker, Roudavski, Isaac and Bradsworth (2022:352), can contribute to greater understanding. Sharing a more-than-human space alongside birdsong allows for reflection on the diverse, interwoven connections that can be made to other people and to non-human agents, such as birds (Browning 2021:186; see also Van Dooren 2016:194).

The time it takes to view *The core* installation (Figures 1, 9, 10) and listen to the sounds of a morning routine and the dawn chorus of birds slows down the viewing process and captures the viewer. According to Jonathan Gilmurray (2017:34) 'ecological sound art' can offer 'metaphors which facilitate a personal connection with environmental issues'. In this regard, Anna Maria Ochoa Gautier (2016:127) refers to sound as an 'ontological suture' or stitch connecting humans and the environment. I argue that the more complex, layered soundscape of *The core* and by extension, *The nest* installation series by Heenop and Steyn highlight more-than-human connections around belonging and transience. Through a fascination with birds and the carefully constructed nests they build, the sculptures by Roets also evoke associations with fragility and transience as well as strength and resilience.



FIGURE **N° 10**



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Danelle Heenop and Juan Steyn, detail of *The core (Nest 1)*, 2023. Mixed media sound installation, including armature, pasta cooked in bleach, dry and wet grass, paper strands, thread, found eggshell, spray paint, ash, Raspberry Pi and cables. 41 cm x 70 cm x 30 cm. Collection of Juan Steyn. Courtesy of Danelle Heenop.

## Conclusion

Bird nests are represented in both Heenop and Steyn's *The nest* sound installation series and in Roets's *Nest* sculptures in such a way that they enable critical reflection on more-than-human connections. Through metaphor and association, the works of art allow for introspection into the entangled lives and social environments of the artists and viewers. I suggest that for these artists the artworks encourage reflection on their own experiences of connection and belonging. Notably, both Roets and Heenop reference a fallen nest they found as a starting point for the works under discussion. The diverse range of materials used by birds to create their nest is a further shared point of fascination for the artists. The artists became increasingly aware of their interactions with birds and other non-human agents.

In conclusion, I argue that Heenop and Steyn's *The nest* sound installation series and Roets's *Nest* sculptures evoke experiences of loss and transience, with the inherent vulnerability of being on Earth connecting, or weaving together, various more-than-human forms of existence, emphasising the interrelationship between human and non-human agents. The focus on making hidden, often overlooked connections visible is informed by Plaatje's (1930) emphasis on the desire to return to ruins or to what remains, inspiring the viewer to transcend the broken past and create a better, more interconnected future. Accordingly, both Heenop and Steyn's *The nest* sound installations and Roets's *Nest* sculptures encourage reflection on the sense of belonging and connections with self and others, both human and more-than-human.

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## Notes

1. Danelle Heenop (b. 1989) is a designer, artist and illustration lecturer in Graphic Design at the North-West University (NWU), based in Potchefstroom. She completed a MTech in Graphic Design in 2018. She regularly participates in group exhibitions, taking inspiration from nature and current social issues in works using a variety of media (Heenop 2024).

2. Juan Steyn is the Director of Operations of the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR) and has previously collaborated on Digital Humanities and Educational technology-related projects.
3. The *Stairways and Ruins* group exhibition by the research niche Visual Narratives and Creative Outputs through Interdisciplinary and Practice-Led Research (ViNCO), in association with Iziko Museums of South Africa, at the NWU Art Gallery in Potchefstroom opened on 17 July 2023 and ran until 8 September 2023 (Stairways and Ruins 2023). The exhibition was guest curated by Andrew Lamprecht, Curator of Historical Paintings and Sculpture at the Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG) (Lamprecht 2023a).
4. The digital exhibition catalogue *Stairways and Ruins*, which includes the artists' statements and links to the soundtracks for the installations by Heenop and Steyn, can be found at: <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/stairways-and-ruins-exhibition>
5. The collaborative exhibition *Elegie* (2024) at the Rust-en-Vrede Gallery in Durbanville, Cape Town, from 18 May 2024 until 22 June 2024, showcased artworks by Jo Roets and Marike Kleynseldt. The exhibition reflects on a poem in Afrikaans by RK (Ronald Kenneth (Ronnie) Belcher (1933-2006) titled *Voël (Bird)*, reinterpreted through sculptures, paintings and embroidery (Elegie 2024:2).
6. Popularised by authors such as David Abram (1996) (see Maller 2021:2), the term more-than-human has been widely used in the social sciences and humanities (Price & Chao 2023:180). Authors such as Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose (2016) and Michael Silvers (2020) explore more-than-human relations within the context of environmental humanities.
7. Although authors associated with posthumanism are mentioned in this article, this is not the focus of the discussion, with the connection between posthumanism and the more-than-human world discussed by authors such as Catherine Price and Sophie Chao (2023).
8. Sol (Solomon Tshekisho) Plaatje's (1876-1932) novel *Mhudi. An epic of South African native life a hundred years ago*, first published in 1930.
9. The variety of nest shapes and materials used is evident from the descriptions by Douglas GD Russell (2024) in the *Smithsonian handbook of interesting bird nests and eggs*.
10. Extensive literature is available on belonging, referring for example to Jacques Derrida's discussion of hospitality, including on 'introduced species', with comparisons often made to human migration, with someone also rendered 'out of place' (Van Dooren 2016:207).
11. Roets (cited by Seidel & Castilho 2024:39) refers to her artworks created from thin layers of air-drying clay medium as 'light relief sculptures'.
12. Roets experimented with different kinds of clay while working as a lecturer (Seidel & Castilho 2024:40-42). A last-minute wedding present made from air-drying clay served as inspiration for her artistic approach (Women Create 2024).
13. Roets's work is discussed by Caitlin MacDonald (2023:193-197) in *Clay formes. Contemporary clay from South Africa*.
14. After working in the film industry and as a lecturer, Roets decided to become a full-time artist in 2017 (Misra et al 2024:3).
15. Roets's work has been showcased at festivals and art fairs. Her work has been recognised in art competitions, winning the inaugural StateoftheART Gallery Award in 2018 and receiving the international Sustainable Arts Foundation Grant in 2021 (Roets 2024).
16. Heenop (2024) notes that initially, they could not get the sound to work because some of the material absorbed the sound, and an alternative plan had to be devised to conceal the speakers and cables. During the exhibition, the sound continued to work successfully.

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