

**Destiny\_02**

**johann van der schijff**



# Destiny\_02

Planet Earth

Solar System

Oort Cloud

Local Interstellar Cloud

Local Cavity

Orion Arm

Milky Way

Local Group

Virgo Supercluster

Laniakea Supercluster

The Universe<sup>1</sup>

Dedicated to Arabella and Tom.

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

The exhibition asks the viewer to see the Earth anew, to experience a moment similar to when the photograph *Earthrise*<sup>2</sup> was taken or astronauts first stepped onto the surface of the Moon. It offers a glimpse of landscapes that, at a fleeting moment in history, were still largely unspoiled. At the same time, it functions as a hand-crafted distress signal – a plea to future generations and possible extraterrestrial beings to heed the urgent call of the environmental movement before it is too late. It is both a gift and a warning, delivered in the hope that these magnificent places can be preserved forever.



*Earthrise*, December 24, 1968

Photograph by William Anders, NASA Apollo 8 mission

AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 61 x 61cm



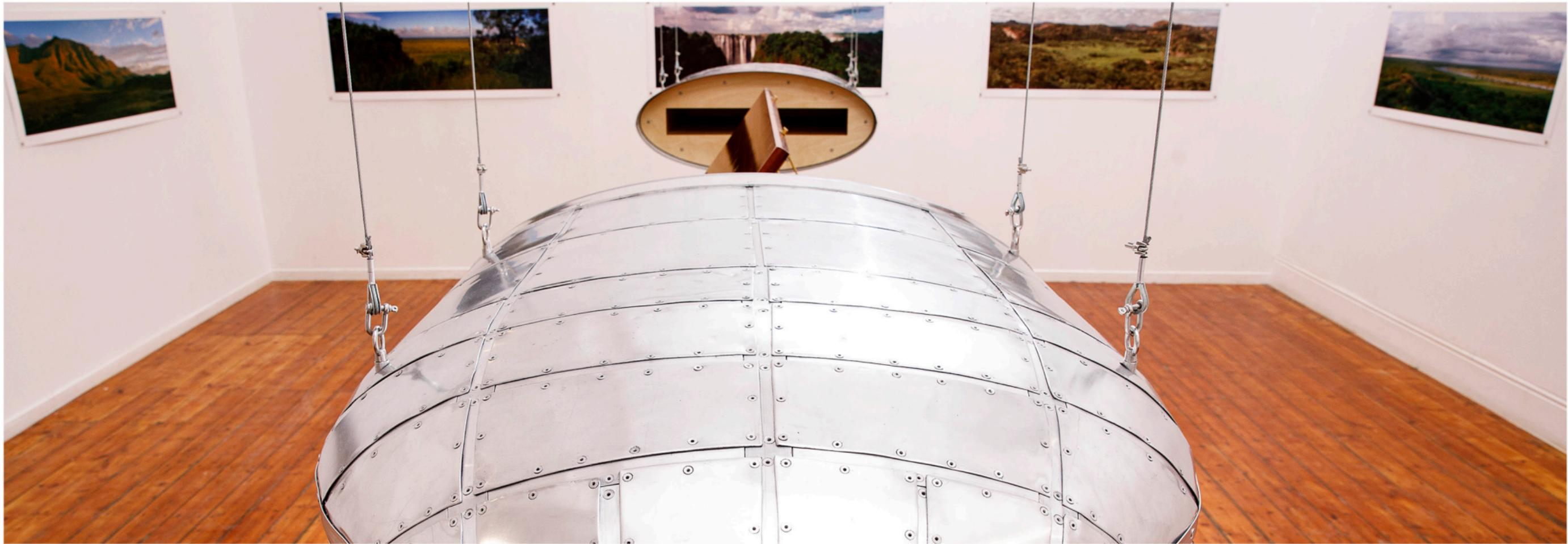
DESTINY\_02  
JVDS - 2025

Johann van der Schijff, *Destiny\_02*, 2025

Cape Town, Western Cape

aluminium, mild steel, stainless steel brackets, brass, galvanised cabling

plywood, sapele mahogany wood, 6 x 5m

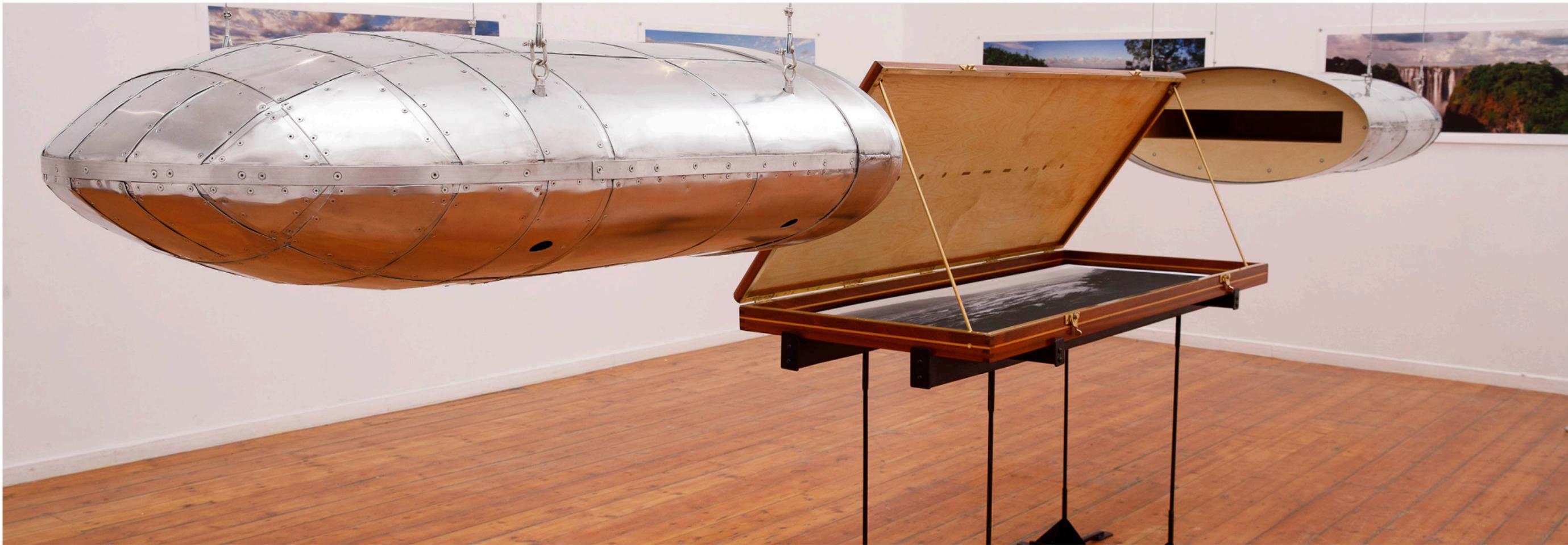


Johann van der Schijff, *Destiny\_02*, 2025

Cape Town, Western Cape

aluminium, mild steel, stainless steel brackets, brass, galvanised cabling

plywood, sapele mahogany wood, 6 x 5m



Johann van der Schijff, *Destiny\_02*, 2025

Cape Town, Western Cape

aluminium, mild steel, stainless steel brackets, brass, galvanised cabling

plywood, sapele mahogany wood, 6 x 5m



Johann van der Schijff, *Fort São Sebastião (Saint Sebastian Fortress)*, 2024  
Ilha de Mozambique (Island of Mozambique), Nampula Province, Mozambique  
Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Ilha de Goa (Goa Island)*, 2024

Nampula Province, Mozambique

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Misty Cliffs*, 2024

Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Chapman's Peak Drive*, 2024

Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *View from the rim of the Fish River Canyon*, 2024

IAi-IAis/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, //Kharas Region, Namibia

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnem Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Namibia Koppie*, 2024

//Kharas Region, Namibia

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Grasslands near Graaff-Reinet*, 2021

Eastern Cape, South Africa

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Langeberge outside Barrydale*, 2022

Western Cape, South Africa

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Nkumbe Viewpoint*, 2022

Kruger National Park, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Mosi-oo-Tunya (The Smoke that Thunders) a.k.a. Victoria Falls*, 2023

Zambezi National Park, Matabeleland North Province, Zimbabwe

Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Malindidzimu (Hill of the Ancestral Spirits) a.k.a. World's View*, 2024

Matobo National Park, Matabeleland South Province, Zimbabwe

Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *View from Lubanzuki Hill*, 2024

Kafue National Park, Lusaka Province, Zambia

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Chilojo Cliffs*, 2023  
Gonarezhou National Park, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe  
Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Olifants River Viewpoint*, 2022

Kruger National Park, Limpopo Province, South Africa

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Grasslands near Katoyana Campsite*, 2024

Liuwa Plain National Park, Western Province, Zambia

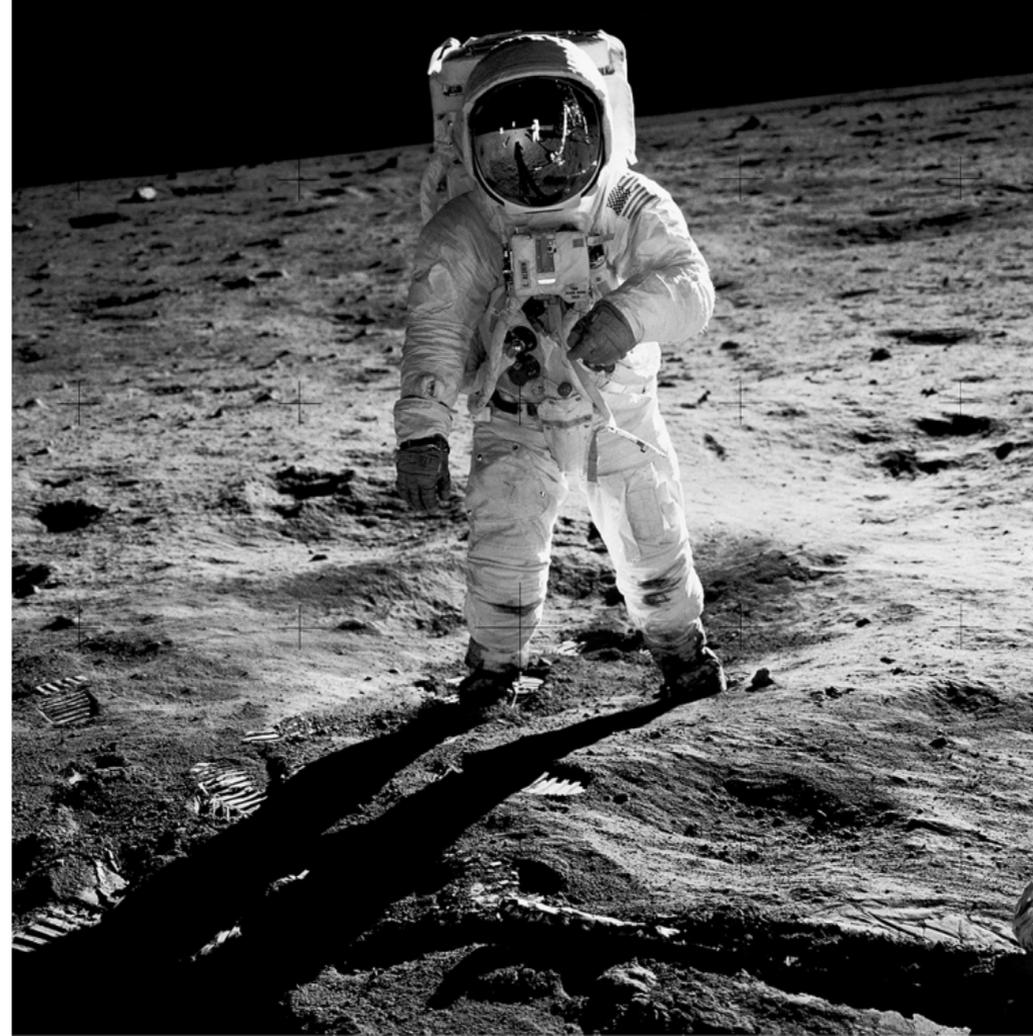
Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



Johann van der Schijff, *Runde River Rapids*, 2023

Gonarezhou National Park, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

Edition 5 + AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 161 x 61cm



*Buzz Aldrin on the Moon, July 20, 1969*

Photograph by Neil Armstrong, NASA Apollo 11 mission

AP, Archival pigment ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Paper, 61 x 61cm



## Introduction

This catalogue features four cognate essays, sequenced so as best to illustrate some of the themes and concepts underlying the *Destiny\_02* exhibition.

Whereas my previous work has dealt with the undercurrent of apartheid and the pervasiveness of violence in its wake, often taking on a highly personal and at times paradoxically playful dimension, the focus of this exhibition has shifted towards contemplating humanity's impact on the planet, utilising landscape photography in conjunction with sculpture.

I provide some conceptual context for this perspective, while Christo Doherty offers a critical framework by considering its intervention in the history of representations of landscape in Southern Africa. Fabian Saptouw expands the discussion by focusing on the process-based nature of the work. Finally, Siyakha Mguni suggests the work's affinity with notions of time travel in San cosmology, a connection that subtly guides the direction my future work may take.



## **A GIFT FROM EARTH – Johann van der Schijff**

“We came all this way to explore the Moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth.” – William Anders, Lunar Module Pilot, Apollo 8 mission.

If I look back, I realise that the idea for this exhibition was planted during a three-month journey I took in 1991, at the age of twenty-two, travelling through Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Kenya. This experience proved formative, and stayed with me for more than three decades until circumstances allowed a return visit to several of these countries between 2023 and 2024. What I particularly remembered, and went back to seek and photograph, were the magnificent landscapes that appear, at first glance, to be free of conspicuous human interference.

By focusing on the landscapes, instead of the people inhabiting them, I am not overlooking their presence or histories. My photographs are instead an attempt to record places that have not yet been overtaken by development. The ghosts of colonialism and slavery loom large in the histories of some of these sites, and this historical context is a key part of the exhibition’s narrative. At the same time, the landscapes face urgent contemporary pressures: the clearing and burning of vegetation, logging, industrial farming, mining, urban expansion, and the pollution that follows. The exhibition presents these land-

scapes as places to be cherished, as they exist(ed) at a moment in time.

The *Destiny\_02* exhibition consists of both sculptural and photographic components, which work in unison. The sculptural components only come into their own when they are surrounded by the photographs that emerged from within them. The photographs, in turn, achieve their full visual and conceptual impact once the viewer realises that they have been “delivered” from inside the sculptures. In this sense, the work draws inspiration from the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecraft, which left our solar system carrying messages from Earth engraved on a Golden Record.

The sculptural component of the exhibition consists of a large, narrow rectangular box out of which all the prints displayed on the walls – except the last one still inside – have been removed. The box is made using intricate wooden joinery and inlay techniques, brass hinges, and a lacquered finish, recalling the visual language of an immaculately crafted grand piano. Inside the lid, Morse code dots and dashes are inlaid in wood; on top of the box, stainless steel crosshairs echo those that appear in the photographs.

Suspended from the ceiling (or alternatively balanced on spindly legs) on either side of the box are two capsule forms. Covered in riveted aluminium sheeting, they have openings into which the wooden box can slide, before joining together to become a space probe. The riveted aluminium surfaces refer to wing

construction techniques and the spaceships found in the sci-fi movies I grew up with.

The photographic component consists of large colour panoramic landscape photographs. These were taken with vintage large-format film cameras, chosen for the exceptional quality of their lenses and the unique look that film as a medium offers. If one spends enough time before each photograph, small surprises reveal themselves: a tiny elephant on the plateau in the *Nkumbe Viewpoint*; a styrofoam cup lying on the bank of the river next to the *Chilojo Cliffs*; a rainstorm on the horizon taken from *Lubanzuki Hill*.

Implicit in many of the photographs is the troubled history of colonialism: *Mosi-oo-Tunya (The Smoke that Thunders)* waterfall still bearing Queen Victoria’s name; Rhodes’s Grave situated behind the point where the photograph in Matobo National Park was taken. Two works, *Saint Sebastian Fortress* and *Goa Island* in Mozambique (with its historic links to Goa in India), point to 500 years of colonial rule. Where once the fort projected Portuguese power, analogous to today’s aircraft carriers, it now lies in ruins.

Time is thus an important overarching theme of the exhibition, and it reaches both far back into the past and far into the future. The photographs themselves represent the briefest of moments, a fleeting instant when the scene in front of the lens is burned onto the film. The photo of *Misty Cliffs* is a homage to the Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto’s seascape series, in which he contemplates the idea that

seascapes predate life and will likely remain long after it has gone. *View from the Rim of the Fish River Canyon* looks into deep geological time (350 million years ago), when the canyon started forming. The area where the photo of *Grasslands near Graaff-Reinet* was taken is part of the Karoo Basin, where fossils of therapsids (mammal-like reptiles) from the late Permian period (about 260–252 million years ago) have been found. In the //Kharas Region of Southern Namibia, where the photo of the *Namibia Koppie* was taken, there are rock engravings possibly older than 6,000 years and rock paintings from possibly 2,000 years ago.

The *Olifants River Viewpoint* in Kruger National Park evokes a strong sense of nostalgia, holding memories of visits with my late father and the celebration of my daughter's tenth birthday there many years later. The lush *Grasslands near Katoyana Campsite* in Zambia's Liuwa Plain National Park sustain vast herds of blue wildebeest. These animals follow the rains from Angola across the plains each year, gathering to graze and give birth to the next generation. *Chapman's Peak Drive*, the most urban of all the places photographed, marks the daily rhythm of my own life, as it is the road I take to work in the morning and back home every afternoon.

The crosshair pattern repeated across all the photographs, echoing that on the lid of the box, refers back to the black-and-white astronaut photograph displayed at the exit of the exhibition. The technical term for

the crosshairs in the original image (taken of Buzz Aldrin by Neil Armstrong in 1969) is fiducial markers, or reseau marks, used as reference points for measurement, alignment or calibration. By overlaying these marks on my photographs, I have created an artificial veil between the viewer and the landscape. In this way, the viewer becomes an active participant in the exhibition and stands in for the absence of humans in the images themselves. Interpretations of the superimposed crosses are multifaceted and deliberately ambiguous: they may suggest occupation and expansion, or alternatively, a means of weighing up how these largely untarnished places might be preserved for generations to come.

The mission of *Destiny\_02* is to take a journey through space and time, delivering a gift to future generations on Earth, as well as to possible beings from other galaxies. Its aim is to offer a glimpse of the landscapes I have known in my lifetime, while also sending a communiqué that these places are under threat of vanishing forever.

*Johann van der Schijff is an Associate Professor of Sculpture at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. His practice, previously focused on power relations and the legacy of violence in South Africa, has shifted to sculptural and photographic inquiries into Deep Time, Shallow Time, and Techno-Cosmic Time to address humanity's impact on the planet within the Southern African landscape.*

## End Notes

1. The “address” traces a journey outward from Earth to the farthest reaches of the universe. It is inspired by the Voyager Golden Records, launched into space in 1977 aboard the Voyager 1 and 2 space probes. Both probes have now left the Solar System and are travelling through interstellar space. The records carry images, sounds, and scientific diagrams intended for any extraterrestrial intelligence that might encounter them. Most notably, they include a diagram showing the location of the Sun in the universe, which could, in principle, be used to locate Earth.
2. William Anders took the iconic *Earthrise* photograph on December 24, 1968, during the Apollo 8 mission.

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## ALIEN EYES ON FAMILIAR GROUND – Christo Doherty

### The impossible photograph

To write about landscape photography in the African postcolony is to circle the impossible. The very gesture of pointing a lens at a mountain range, river valley or savannah inevitably summons the ghosts of colonial cartographies, tourist postcards, and the gendered gaze of the male explorer-photographer. Landscape photography in Africa has long been overdetermined: it bears the weight of conquest, settler nostalgia and extractive seeing. The camera has always been not a neutral tool but an accomplice to dispossession. To speak of “capturing” the land is already to invoke the language of appropriation.

For decades, African artists and scholars have wrestled with this legacy, asking whether landscape photography can be redeemed, or whether it is irreparably tainted. Postmodernist theory sharpened these anxieties by teaching us to distrust images, to see every act of representation as implicated in power. In this atmosphere, the African landscape seemed impossible to approach without reproducing histories of colonialism, patriarchy and violence.

It is within such a context that Johann van der Schijff’s exhibition *Destiny\_02* stages its intervention. Rather than attempting to reclaim a lost innocence or retreat from the genre altogether, Van der Schijff

offers a more audacious solution: to look not with a human eye, but with an alien one.

### **The alien eye as strategy**

What does it mean to posit an “alien eye”? In *Destiny\_02*, Van der Schijff does not simply use the phrase as metaphor. He deploys it as a speculative proposition that reframes the act of seeing. By attributing the landscapes in the exhibition to an extraterrestrial observer, he invents a vantage point unburdened by the legacies of colonial and patriarchal seeing.

Of course, this is a fiction. The landscapes remain mediated by Van der Schijff’s own lens and history. Yet the fiction of the alien eye is powerful precisely because it exposes the impossibility of neutral vision. It displaces authorship, dodges the inherited scripts of colonial photography, and invites us to imagine how the familiar might look when refracted through an impossible, nonhuman gaze.

### **The spacecraft as sculptural core**

At the centre of the exhibition stands a sculpted spacecraft, a vehicle poised between object and prop, between sculpture and speculation. Hovering or balanced on spindly legs, a visual echo of the iconic fighting-machines in H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, the craft anchors the fiction with a material presence. Without it, the alien eye would remain a figure of rhetoric. With it, the fiction gains material presence.

Visitors encounter not only photographs but the apparatus of their imagined production.

This vessel extends Van der Schijff’s longstanding fascination with fabricated forms that oscillate between the utilitarian and the fantastical. Like his earlier works that recall playground structures, military equipment, or urban infrastructure, the spacecraft is meticulously built yet obviously non-functional. Its destiny is not flight but estrangement. It anchors the imaginative conceit of the alien gaze, reminding us that all seeing is technologically mediated.

The spacecraft’s presence situates *Destiny\_02* within a lineage of speculative aesthetics where machines become prostheses for altered perception. It is a sculpted fiction that makes the alien eye plausible.

### **Alien listening, alien seeing, and the Golden Record**

Van der Schijff’s strategy resonates with a recent intellectual experiment by musicologists Daniel K. L. Chua and Alexander Rehdin in their book *Alien Listening*. They pose the question: what would it mean to hear music as if one were an alien, stripped of cultural codes and disciplinary assumptions? To frame their thought experiment, they turned to one of the twentieth century’s boldest gestures of extraterrestrial communication: the Voyager Golden Record.

In 1977, NASA launched the Voyager 1 and 2 spacecraft as part of its Interstellar Mission. On board was the “Golden Record”: a 12-inch gold-plated copper phonograph disc, etched with sounds, images, and instructions for constructing a playback device. Conceived as a message to hypothetical extraterrestrials, the Record embodied the hope that human culture could be made legible to an alien intelligence. It was, in effect, a wager on the possibility of cross-species perception.

Chua and Rehdin seize upon this artefact not to speculate about aliens per se, but to estrange our own listening habits. By imagining how a being without our histories of tonal harmony, rhythm, or cultural meaning might receive Bach or Blind Willie Johnson, they invite us to hear differently – to strip away sedimented conventions and make the familiar strange.

Van der Schijff’s alien eye functions in a parallel register. Like *Alien Listening*, *Destiny\_02* does not claim access to real extraterrestrial consciousness. Instead, it uses the conceit of alien perception to suspend the ideological baggage of human seeing. Just as the Golden Record was a speculative act of translation across species, Van der Schijff’s landscapes are speculative acts of translation across histories. Both projects use the alien as a heuristic, a device for defamiliarisation.

### **Defamiliarisation and earlier works**

The impulse toward estrangement has long animated Van der Schijff’s practice. In his earlier exhibition *I to I*, meticulously crafted sculptures disrupted the ordinary dynamics of looking and being looked at. Viewers confronted distorted or delayed images of themselves and domestic life, unsettled from the comfort of recognition. These works made the familiar self uncanny, insisting that perception is never straightforward. As John Higgins observed of the works in the *I to I* exhibition: “The appealing surface simplicity of Van der Schijff’s artefacts works as a screen that masks yet somehow (and there is the artistry) also engages considerable complexity of response” (15).

In *Destiny\_02*, this strategy of defamiliarisation expands outward. Where *I to I* estranged the subject from their own body, *Destiny\_02* estranges the artist from his environment. The landscapes, seen through the alien eye, become unmoored from their colonial histories of representation. The familiar veld, mountains and skies of Southern Africa are no longer consumed as picturesque or sublime. They become uncanny, viewed from elsewhere.

### **The inescapability of Pretoria**

Yet even as the alien eye offers escape, Van der Schijff’s work remains tethered to biography. Raised in Pretoria, schooled in Afrikaans institutions, his formative years were shaped by a city symbolic of Afrikaner

power and apartheid bureaucracy. Pretoria is not simply a backdrop but a structure of feeling, a landscape inscribed by ideology.

The alien spacecraft may hover imaginatively above the veld, but its launchpad is Pretoria. Van der Schijff's invention of an alien perspective acknowledges the impossibility of escaping the gravity of one's upbringing. The fiction of extraterrestrial vision arises because earthly vision is already corrupted. The alien eye is both a denial and an acknowledgment of biography: it desires escape while confessing its impossibility.

This tension gives *Destiny\_02* its poignancy. It stages the paradox of being both implicated in and estranged from the landscapes we inhabit. The alien eye is not a solution but a performance of impossibility.

### **Destiny\_02 as methodological proposition**

Ultimately, *Destiny\_02* is less about landscapes than about the conditions of seeing. It does not resolve the contradictions of African landscape photography; it dramatises them. By embedding his images within the fiction of alien perception, van der Schijff opens a space in which the act of photographing is both possible and impossible.

Like the Golden Record, the project wagers on communication across unbridgeable gaps. Just as NASA imagined a nonhuman listener deciphering human culture, Van der Schijff imagines a nonhuman viewer encountering the African landscape. Both gestures are speculative, utopian, and tinged with absurdity – yet both generate critical possibilities by making the familiar strange.

*Destiny\_02* synthesises the strands of Van der Schijff's career: the defamiliarisation of *I to I*, the sculptural fictions of his fabricated objects, and the inescapable imprint of Pretoria. It is a project that insists on the necessity of estrangement, even when estrangement is impossible.

### **Toward an impossible future**

What, then, is the destiny of landscape photography in the African postcolony? Van der Schijff's *Destiny\_02* suggests that its future lies not in purification or denial, but in fiction. By imagining an alien eye, the artist acknowledges the impossibility of neutral vision and yet insists on continuing to look.

The spacecraft at the centre of the exhibition does not leave Earth; it remains stubbornly terrestrial. But its very earthbound presence reminds us that to see differently requires imagining otherworldly vantage points.

In this sense, *Destiny\_02* is both an exhibition and a methodological proposition. It argues that art in the postcolony must embrace impossibility, use fiction as critique, and stage estrangement as the only path to renewed vision. The impossibility of African landscape photography remains – and in that impossibility, Van der Schijff finds the possibility of art.

*Christo Doherty is the Acting Angela & David Fine Chair of Innovation, University of the Witwatersrand, and an Associate Professor in the Wits School of Arts. His research explores photography and Southern African visual culture, including the role of digital imaging and archives in shaping contemporary post-colonial narratives.*

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## **CONTRARY ANECDOTAL DIRECTIONS – Fabian Saptouw**

I love going out of my way, beyond what I know, and finding my way back a few extra miles, by another trail, with a compass that argues with a map, with strangers' contrary anecdotal directions. (Solnit, 2005:25)<sup>1</sup>

### **I love going out of my way**

When I was asking for directions on traversing the back roads of the Northern Cape in stormy weather, a fellow traveller showed me a well-worn road map of South Africa. The routes taken on all his journeys were marked in blue and black ink. The way the ink snaked along the various routes told an individual story of exploration by following the course of years of industry and roadwork connecting one town to the next. His annotation changed the visual language of the map – instead of indicating possible ways of travelling from one point to another, it reflected hours of his life spent on the road. In reflecting on his travels, he solemnly declared that driving through a place gives you a particular understanding of your relation to it.

Trying to access that mode of understanding is part of my approach in this essay, which explores the idea of time as a distinct strategy of process-based production in Van der Schijff's creative research for

*Destiny\_02*. Process-based production is a mode of creative practice that emphasises process as an end in itself and not just a means to an end.<sup>2</sup> This is critical in terms of my approach to the work, because it reframes these art objects as articulations of process rather than individual products. The distinction is crucial for engaging with the work's complex self-referential nature, a key idea that Van der Schijff hints at in his catalogue essay.

According to Barbara Bolt (2006), "Material thinking offers us a way of considering the relations that take place within the very process or tissue of making". This idea is a thread running through this exhibition, as well as through Van der Schijff's previous creative research. His interest in making objects manifest in material existence through labour-intensive woodworking and digital fabrication methods is clear in his body of work. In this specific creative research project, he positions the viewer in the liminal space between the making and the made.<sup>3</sup> The sculptural and photographic components work together to hint at another place and another time, but one which we cannot access as viewers. This barrier between what is perceived, what is implied and what cannot be materialised adds a layered complexity to the work.

### **beyond what I know**

When discussing what inspired her book, *A field guide to getting lost*, Rebecca Solnit references a fragment from the Socratic philosophical tradition. Meno said: "How will you go about finding that thing

the nature of which is totally unknown to you?" (2005:19). The challenge of trying to explore something whose identity is not known involves an intentional engagement with the complexity of the conversation between the two points in time we experience through the work. As viewers we are situated in the contemporary moment, but we are also transported to an elsewhere – or 'elsewhen'– that we cannot quite place. The various traces of historical events in the land, paired with the visually complex compositions and the loaded history of landscape photography, make it nearly impossible to locate these images in a specific time. The multiplicity of the views we are surrounded by creates a perceptual experience that I found poetically disruptive. Looking across the room, we gaze out on so many parts of the continent that our sense of reality starts to fragment as we move from image to image. The view from the interior of the exhibition space presents us with too many simultaneous inputs to experience or understand. This displacement of the viewer's sense of perception and, to some degree, her understanding of time itself, is crucially important in terms of why and how we encounter the images.

The root of this phenomenon is the labour-intensive process that Van der Schijff has employed to materialise the images. Through an extended journey across South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, Van der Schijff has somehow contrived to suspend his body in space and time. This process is evident in the way the images present the audience with a complex understanding of space. Anyone who has undertaken extended travel by road to the interior of the continent can attest to the challenges

one faces en route. The condition of the road, the specific route, the weather and navigating complex terrain by day and night render such a journey a daunting undertaking.

This is very different from travelling by bus, train or plane as a passenger: it requires paying attention to what is right in front of you while the traces of the past rush past the periphery of your vision.<sup>4</sup> Travelling in a ton of metal precariously tethered to the tarmac by four handfuls of rubber shifts the way one experiences the land. The process makes one attentive to the difficulty of acknowledging the history of a place rendered opaque by the passage of time, and in turn alters one's self-perception.

When talking about the challenge of attempting record-breaking distances on foot, the ultra-running legend Marshall Ulrich observed: "the absolutely greatest obstacle we encountered during this effort was, simply, the distance" (2011:232). He prefaced this remark by noting that it was "obvious", but I don't think that it is obvious to everyone: there is no way one can realistically imagine what it feels like to endure running across an entire country. There is a considerable difference between the intellectual understanding of a distance and the experiential understanding of that distance. And it is humbling to acknowledge the scale of our human capabilities in relation to the vastness of the earth. Having a deep respect for the distance and the toll it takes on the body is what makes a true endurance athlete: *you simply have to respect the distance.*

Van der Schijff's vehicle of choice was a Toyota Land Cruiser 70 series,<sup>5</sup> and the total distance travelled was 25 278.4 km over the course of 116 days on the road. I would like to take a moment to break from the writing conventions for presenting numerical data for the sake of emphasis: twenty-five thousand, two hundred and seventy-eight point four kilometres. That is an arduous undertaking in anyone's book. Whilst Van der Schijff's mode of transport moves him across the land slightly faster than bipedal movement, there is still something significant in the cost in time, effort and fuel. It is a curious choice given the surge of digitally or AI-generated imagery that can quickly create high-resolution products. The implicit resistance to these more immediate processes should be acknowledged as part of the work. The choice to endure such an intentionally arduous process is highly significant in terms of locating the images in time and place. The images intertwine with the complexity of laboriously moving across the land and become significant in terms of the artist. The terrestrial exploration is a critical part of his experience of the land, and thus part of his process of coming to terms with the notions of time, space and place.

Given my interest in process-based production, and the argument for its importance in this work, the relationship between the images and the journey needs slightly more investigation. Earlier I hinted at the difficulty of locating these images in time, which disrupts our relation to their stories. Now I would query the impact of the vantage points on the land in combination with their position in the gallery space. The images are moments in a journey, but in no way do they attempt to represent the entirety of the journey.

Van der Schijff presents the viewer with an aesthetic acknowledgement that the breadth of that experience cannot be altogether captured by static images.

Furthermore, the images alert us to the fact that they are in process rather than finite or finished. This reflects a specific approach to photography – the labour of the photograph becoming an essential part of how and why we engage with the image. The photographs on display are not an attempt to illustrate or document the land in a finite and conclusive way. Instead, the work is a speculative investigation of the land as an ever-changing place, and of the traveller as a temporary witness to the moments in between change. This accounts for the intentional instability of the images that undermines the very act of looking at them. The photography becomes an exploration of the very act of looking at the world around you and poses a challenge to anyone expecting a clear narrative. Van der Schijff draws us into the picture plane, but presents a land that is vast and unfathomable, a place whose defining stories are hidden from the viewer.

### **and finding my way back a few extra miles**

When I mentioned statistics earlier, I omitted a crucial detail: completing the works for the exhibition actually required two journeys: the first from 2023/07/07 to 2023/10/07, and the second from 2024/01/03 to 2024/01/26. The first journey was 16 977.6 km over 338:26:09 hours, and the second, 8 300.8 km over

the course of 135:04:38 hours. Although these statistics, verified by the tracking module installed in the vehicle, are a testament to the endurance of Van der Schijff, they tell us very little about the actual journey. They direct our attention to an external measure of effort and endurance without giving an account of what is humanly required to complete such a journey.<sup>6</sup> They also give us an indication that there is an inaccessibility to these moments of contact with each location in the same sequence, in the sense that no one except the artist will see the images as filtered through the complex process of production required for their emergence.

There is another important fact about this narrative: the images we see are only the images taken from the second journey. Like Sisyphus standing victorious atop the hill, Van der Schijff couriered his film home to have it printed in advance of the exhibition opening. The boulder came tumbling back down, as all the images taken from the first journey were lost in transit to Cape Town. The images, taken on film, are an absence in the exhibition space, yet they cannot but somehow inform the nature of the images that are present in the exhibition – something alluded to by the compressed second journey which was just under half the distance and time, a furious attempt to grasp hold of the echoes of the images that no one will ever see.

There are thus many stories being told, some that we can view and some that we can only imagine. One

story belongs only to the interior space of the camera that will forever have dominion over those unseen images. Another is what Van der Schijff imagined the exhibition to look like with the first collection of photographs. Yet another is the journey of the film that has disappeared from our timeline – a story lost on the road. The story we can see comprises the traces left from the second journey, an attempt to fix an unstable image in memory.<sup>7</sup> There is an interior space in the process of making that we cannot perceive, and a deeper understanding of the process that only people who have endured such challenges will understand (Murakami, 2008).

#### **by another trail, with a compass that argues with a map**

In the story “Let maps to others”, a fictional scholar discusses the importance of archival research as a means to locate a mythical place in reality (Parker, 2014). By venturing through sea and storm, he eventually finds the right location, but not in the ‘when’ of his predecessors’ cryptic description. Thus, a lifetime of scholarly effort is undermined by the protagonist’s not paying attention to time as a primal factor in everything, and it nearly costs him his life.

To discern the differences among myth, fiction and fact requires looking again and again at the same thing. “The map is therefore not evidence. Discount the map, and we’re back to interpretations of the text” (Parker, 2014:176). This process of intense looking is in part why the images presented by Van der

Schijff have so much impact. The process of going back to these specific sights has allowed him to draw something else out of places seen before. The visual quality of the photographs, paired with the overlaid grid, points our attention to the complexity that exists in the space between the images.

The sculptural component of the exhibition contributes a fascinating extension of the idea of the journey. The capsule’s function as a means to transport the images to another time and place shifts the way in which we respond to them. After the artist had concluded an enormously time-consuming terrestrial endeavour, he then proceeded to dedicate hundreds of hours to crafting a means of containing a narrative this vast and unfixed. The sculptural objects were laboriously created to produce exquisitely complex and highly detailed objects. The wood joinery techniques of the chest in which the prints are stored echo the craftsmanship associated with grand pianos. This merger between a site of musical creation with a long history of reverence is nearly subsumed by the associative complexity of the exhibition.

The capsule directs our attention by hinting at another leg of the journey that awaits these objects. If my memory is correct, Van der Schijff required the assistance of his son to complete the capsule as the exhibition deadline drew closer. Upon inspecting the work, one can easily see why: it required thousands of rivets in a seemingly never-ending repetitive process of working with the hand riveter. Having endured that process myself, I know that it is tedious and time-consuming, producing a unique constellation of

pain in the wrist, thumb and elbow.<sup>8</sup> Yet the object presents as a mass-produced military grade machine, polished and ready to withstand direct projectile assault if required for mission success. That tone is very different from the delicacy of the woodwork and the compositional complexity of the interior of each of the photographic sources. This tension between different ways of working with and against time is a notable feature in the work of Van der Schijff.

#### **with strangers' contrary anecdotal directions**

In this writing, I have suggested how the idea of time is central to the creative research of Van der Schijff. The laborious production process was presented as an intentional strategy to guide our experience of the sculptural and photographic works in the exhibition. All the artworks are tethered to a performance of endurance which the audience will never be able to witness. This tension between what is revealed and what is concealed is critical to understanding Van der Schijff's research. I have drawn on the writings of Solnit and Murakami to hint at the hidden half of his practice. Through reference to process-based production rather than product-based production, I have made the case that the work is not about realising something finite, but is rather concerned with exploring the unfolding of images and ideas in time.

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*practices where inscription and erasure operate as intertwined production processes. His exploration of materiality and ephemerality complicate the visibility and objecthood of art across various media.*

#### **End Notes**

1. This quotation provides both part of the title of the paper and a structure for my engagement with Van der Schijff's creative research.
2. This has clear roots in the Process Art movement of the 1960s, but has gained a degree of specificity in contemporary art as a distinct mode of practice – specifically by certain South African artists.
3. I can see the root of this intention in the interactive artworks and collaborative workshops that Van der Schijff created in previous years.
4. Travelling by vehicle does make the land speed past faster than if you were travelling on foot, so runners and hikers get to see more of the world at a slower pace.
5. Designed for challenging off-road and weather conditions, it is the vehicle of choice for the UN, the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, and, until recently, USAID across the globe.
6. One can only imagine the intensity of staying focused while at the wheel, planning the route, stretching, walking to the best position to take the photograph, and repeating the process over and over and over again.
7. A phrase I borrow from a title of the work of Vija Celmins, which in her case mischievously asks ques-

tions about the way different modes of practice relate to one another and the traditions of representing and distorting the perception of reality.

8. The work's ability to evoke this response is at its core a central concern of the process artists I referred to in an earlier footnote.

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**||KABBO'S DREAM VOYAGES: glimpses of the notion of 'time travel' in San cosmology**  
– Siyakha Mguni

Did I ever make a Time Machine, or a model of a Time Machine? They say life is a dream, a precious poor dream at times – but I can't stand another that won't fit. It's madness. And where did the dream come from? I must look at that Machine. If there *is* one. (Wells, 1922:209-210, original emphasis)

Throughout history, preliterate indigenous cultures of the world have used dreams to transcend time and space. In southern Africa, KhoeSan (San and Khoekhoe) people are known to traverse territories and temporalities in their dreams. In sleep as well as in waking states, people (re)visit the past or the future with visceral immediacy by dreaming, to preview the unknowns of other temporal dimensions while at the same time demonstrating their agency by participating in such mentalistic previews. Although such activities may be regarded as the illusions of slumber or the fantasy of daydreams, the KhoeSan worldview regarded them as valid realities. Transcendence via dreaming entailed disembodied movement – accompanied by familiar worldly sensations, at least phenomenologically – outside the linear sequence of waking life into realms with different spatial and chronological properties. The phenomenon is generally referred to as oneiric time, a subjective temporality where memory, anticipation and imagination become

intertwined in the dreamer's perception.

This perception, reflecting a dreamer's displacement in time and space, can be framed as 'time travel', but in a metaphorical rather than mechanical sense. It is primarily a felt capacity, where dreaming provides a person with sensations of moving backwards and forwards beyond the present reality into other existential dimensions. KhoeSan societies did this for various reasons, including gathering spiritual knowledge, restoring connections, rehearsing action, and often participating in or even initiating activities in other realms. Such transcendental impressions find a striking analogue in KhoeSan beliefs and narrative traditions, because cosmologically these ancient cultures treated everyday dreams as time capsules for journeying to other realms. Not only were dreams avenues for obtaining vital and timeless knowledge but also vehicles for harnessing supernatural power and the ability to call into existence desired outcomes. Glimpses of this perspective on KhoeSan spiritual journeys come from some !xam narratives in the Bleek and Lloyd Collection.<sup>1</sup> (This archive accumulated from the work of Dr Wilhelm Bleek, a philologist and linguist from Germany who in the late 1860s initiated the ethnographic and linguistic study of the Northern Cape !xam people, assisted by his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, who continued the project after Dr Bleek's death in 1875.)

### **!|kabbo's dream rendezvous with his family amidst the supernatural rain**

A compelling instance of the notion of 'time travel' by means of dreaming is from a !xam man called !|kabbo (meaning 'to dream' in the vanished !xam language), who reported a dream in the early 1870s while staying in Mowbray, Cape Town. It is noteworthy that Lucy Lloyd expressed perplexity in her accompanying note to !|kabbo's serial narrations about his dream of rain and seeing his family back in his Northern Cape homeland. Why was Lloyd puzzled by an apparently standard narrative report of an ordinary dream? The key to conceiving 'time travel' in !xam society may lie in her bewilderment over !|kabbo's dream account, when she wrote on the 12th of October 1871 (LXII.6: 625) that:

(Jantje Tooren told me on the 11th that he had asked for rain on the previous night, when lying down [in his bed] to make the garden wet, as his arms and chest were painful, that it had come in the night. He told this with an appearance of satisfaction, so I today 12th asked more about it, and got the history, which appears to be that of a dream, he says he saw the rain coming, and also saw and spoke to his wife, his son, and his daughter in his dream.)

In a follow-up note two days later, she continued this theme, writing:

(14th The whole is, I believe, not a dream. I think he has branched off into ordinary Bushman life in the course of it.)

Without rehashing the whole narration (which is contained in Lloyd's notebook XII), suffice it to say that !|kabbo described a dream he experienced on the night of the 10th of October 1871 in which he asked

for the rain to fall. Rain came that night and watered the garden in a Mowbray household where he and a few other fellow San people lived with Dr Wilhelm Bleek and Miss Lloyd. ||kabbo summed up the rainfall of his dream experience thus, “And I first sat, the rain wet the garden bushes, as I sat quietly, for, I used to dream when I was at my home, I dreamt; the rain assented to me, when I was at my place”. In this sentence, he signalled an expanded treatment of his current dream report in order to incorporate historical information and characters into its central features. His narrative thereby moved seamlessly between the present dream and past dreams in the rain-calling trope, which included dialogues with his immediate family. This fluid combination of the past and present tenses in his speech as he wove together complex oneiric and social information made it possible to couple historical time with dream time. In doing so, he was travelling from a realm of time into another of timelessness. His bodily location in Mowbray did not prevent the collapsing of chronological and cadastral reference points between Cape Town and the Karoo, separated by over 700 kilometres. This narrative format allowed continuities of affective and phenomenological experiences between the past and the present and across different spatial settings.

Evidently, ||kabbo’s bodily and emotional presence, while sitting next to Lloyd and relating his current dream, was sensorially registered in two distinct localities and in various periods. He seemed to be oscillating between obvious moments of time that are signalled by Lloyd’s dates in her notes and those of undated moments from ||kabbo’s past in the Karoo. Despite the ambiguous chronology of the latter, the

key events and characters in those episodes were still alive and vibrant in that moment of dictating his dream experiences. They all still existed in the past and present times and places that ||kabbo was able to visit in his dreams. Unlike ordinary dream reporting, this type of recollection and narration of dreams is nuanced: it bears a sophisticated understanding of the dreamer’s fixity in different realms and realities and an awareness that these could be realised from the perspective of the intersecting dream experiences. ||kabbo clearly understood his existing position within the ‘present moment’ of the time and space of his several connected dreams, even though they were themselves situated in different periods and territories. Therefore, the blurring of the narrator’s states of being between dream life and waking life is itself a central indicator of that person’s seamless oneiric movement back and forth between physical and non-physical realms and his transcending of historical and mythical chronologies and landscapes. Overall, can dreams be conceptual ‘time capsules’ for connecting different eras and realms?

A useful but fleeting analysis of the episodes of ||kabbo’s dream under discussion appears in the book *The broken string* (2004). Commenting on what he describes as “Lloyd’s confusion”, Neil Bennum notes that ||kabbo’s dream report “had put himself in Cape Town and in /Xam-ka lau in the same breath” (Bennum, 2004:203). He concludes his discussion thus: “||kabbo believed that he had made a journey to /Xam-ka lau during a ‘dream’, and as far as he was concerned his visit to his family was as real, in its way, as the rain that had assented to his request to fall” (Bennum, 2004:205). Such dream explorations were also vehi-

cles for visitations between the living people and those from ancestral societies of bygone eras. Although this mental capacity may have been nurtured, some individuals were naturally predisposed to possess rich inner lives with such dream experiences. ||kabbo's inwardly-orientated mental disposition was observed as follows: "This gentle old soul appeared lost in a dream-life of his own" (Bleek & Bleek, 1909:38). A similar perspective on this mental disposition and its relationship with the ability to dream travel at will was noted for some contemporary San people in Southern Angola: "Often you may see a man sitting under a tree with a blank stare into the distance as though they have lost consciousness, but their soul having travelled to faraway places in a daytime dream" (Roman Ndeja, pers. comm., 24 October 2024).

### **Time travel was for anyone who cultivated their dream capacity**

Although Bennum, following David Lewis-Williams (1987), considered ||kabbo to be a shaman and thus positioned this dreaming ability in the arena of ritual, such dream journeys were not the sole preserve of ritual specialists. Besides, there is no archival instance of ||kabbo referring to himself as a *!gi:xa* (medicine person). His son-in-law, |han=kass'o, who knew him very well as both his father-in-law and hunting partner, never referred to him as a *!gi:xa*, even though they both spoke freely about their Northern Cape compatriots whom they knew to be *!gi:ten* (medicine people). This view is supported by a brief appraisal of the narratives of some |xam people who lived in Mowbray as part of the |xam language and folklore project (Bleek & Lloyd, 1911). One of their |xam teachers, Dǃ!kwāin, reported some of his own dreams –

one which was particularly revealing as it appeared to have portended the death of his father – where waking life undoubtedly intruded seamlessly into a dream narrative. Furthermore, departing momentarily from these dream experiences, Dǃ!kwāin narrated a story from his boyhood when he played the goura (a bow string instrument) one evening in a manner that they believed to have caused a violent thunderstorm that night. He is not known to have been a *!gi:xa*. He dreamt well like ||kabbo and believed that his childhood goura-playing ability caused rain to fall. In sum, effectual dreaming and extra-human abilities, which also had the ability to invade supernatural realms, were not uncommon among ordinary members of KhoeSan societies.

A significant aspect of this portion of ||kabbo's dreams concerns the nature of his interaction with other dream characters. When he saw the rain coming, he also saw and spoke to his wife, his son and his daughter. He then went on to give an extended relational exploration of his dream-time interactions and conversations with his family, now with references to a period in the past back in the Karoo. Similar conversational interaction in the past now featured in the present episode of the 11th October dream he reported in Mowbray. In essence, the |xam use of dreams as a conduit for time travel and spiritual exploration of other realms reflects a profound understanding of human consciousness and its potential to transcend physical limitations. |xam practices reflect a rich tapestry of human belief through the use of dreams to bridge the temporal and spiritual realms, offering a unique perspective on the nature of time

and existence. There appears to be no limit to the period and distance a dreamer could travel in their dreams. As documented by modern-day ethnographers in the Kalahari Desert, San people could visit the sky where God's House is located (see a discussion of this belief in Mguni, 2015), not only through dreams but also via the experiences of their communal healing dance, during which *n|um* (potency) would 'boil' in the dancers' *gebesi* (stomach) until they enter *!kia* (altered state of consciousness). It was in this state that their souls or spirits would visit other realms, including the supernatural (Katz, 1982; Katz et al., 1997; Marshall, 1969). In this state dancers and healers perceive distant events, diagnose causes of illness, and undertake supernatural journeys beyond ordinary space and time.

J.D. Lewis-Williams (2000) understands this under the 'shamanic' perspective when describing what the Kalahari San call 'threads of light' to the sky and the underworld – routes along which healers travel to gods and ancestors. In these journeys, a San dreamer or healer would "travel underground", following subterranean rivers and end up "ascending celestial threads to god's house", a feat that can only be possible as time travel. These spiritual journeys are narrated as movements through non-ordinary spaces that collapse distance and, crucially, allow the attainment of knowledge with future consequences. In this sense, such journeys can be seen as forms of time travel: they step outside everyday causality to bring back actionable information from other periods and realms.

Do dreams foretell the future in Khoisan thought? Ethnographic and historical sources suggest that dreams are treated as meaningful signs and sometimes as omens or communications from powerful beings. The !xam archival record preserves accounts in which dreams and nocturnal encounters inform ritual action and social decisions; while not a mechanistic 'prediction', they are future-oriented in that they guide what ought to be done next in a largely unpredictable environment. Among the Jul'hoansi in the Kalahari, detailed studies of healing and narrative (Katz, 1982; Bieseke, 1993) likewise show that dream and trance experiences are discussed communally, interpreted for practical implications, and linked to healing, hunting and conflict resolution, among a range of other concerns and purposes. Richard Katz's study of Jul'hoansi healing shows that transition into *!kia*, during which healers reported seeing and visiting the spirit realm, was in itself a supernatural transformation that gave them the ability to traverse distances and return with powers to change outcomes. This is a form of spiritual universe – predicated on people's anticipatory awareness of the existence of future-shaping knowledge – which can be accessed and travelled via thoughts and dreams. In similar vein, Megan Bieseke has showed how oneiric and visionary episodes are embedded in story cycles that align personal experience with collective norms and expectations about the state of San society, what is past and what is to come. These stories become vehicles for memorialising episodes of time travel into distant spiritual territories and periods, but they continue to evolve as new material is added from ongoing dream travel experiences. In general, Khoisan dream phenomena and trance-related journeys provide culturally valuable material: beliefs and practices

that enable people to (re)visit the origins of their society (mythic time, which the San people named the ‘Early Race’ or ‘First Bushmen’ period), interact with spirit beings and gods, and return with knowledge that can guide their future trajectories.

### **Bridging the Past and the Future within the Present**

At least since H. G. Wells’s novel *The time machine* (1895), time travel has featured in science fiction as a journey through different temporal dimensions. Yet the notion of time travel has been a central trope of transcendence in the spiritual life of most pre-industrial societies. Modern understandings of time travel rely on technological means – involving the use of mechanical devices – but many ancient cultures incorporated the concept psychologically, using dreams and spiritual practices such as meditation, trance and divination to produce out-of-body experiences. Yet as the epigraph to this essay suggests, in much of his writing the originator of the notion of time machine, Wells himself, thought extensively about dream phenomena and to some degree associated dreaming with time travel. In KhoeSan cosmology, dreams are not merely subconscious reflections or recollections from memory stores but are considered to be active and dynamic supernatural portals into other existential dimensions – subtextually, the spirit world. In such societies, all temporal dimensions can be collapsed or unified in the spirit realm. Hence, in !xam and in Jul’hoan narratives, dreams (and visions) intrude in and inform action in social life. KhoeSan expressive forms that flow from human experience, such as artistic and folkloric creations, can be understood as

didactic visual and performative memory stores of these temporal crossings, as durable societal archives of how these people have long imagined moving beyond the present reality in order to understand their ontological position in their lifeworld. In similar vein, Johann van der Schijff has imagined a landscape that combines the familiar and unfamiliar – coupling the terrestrial and the lunar – through photography and sculpture. Has he not, in his own imagination and perhaps dreams, too, time travelled across planetary territories even though his body was physically located in those southern African places where he captured his breathtaking landscape images?

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Our expeditions took us to places with the most beautiful names: Sossusvlei and Spitzkoppe in Namibia; Cha Cha Metsi in Botswana; Kasabushi and Ndole Bay in Zambia; Nkhata Bay and Mount Mulanje in Malawi. Among the many National Parks we visited were: Etosha and |Ai-|Ais in Namibia; the Okavango Delta and Central Kalahari in Botswana; Gonarezhou and Hwange in Zimbabwe; Gorongosa and Bazaruto Archipelago in Mozambique; Golden Gate and the Kruger in South Africa. Along the way you took your own photographs and made sketches and paintings for your work. Your enthusiasm and creativity are

infectious and made these experiences truly unforgettable. “Jy is die Gipsy in my oë.”

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