

ERNST VAN DER WAL

invasion

10.10.19

16.11.19



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invasion: The Therapeutic Touch of an Artist

Beautiful art is often discredited for wilfully denying the painful complexity of life. It is bemoaned for its sentimentality. But, of course, it can infuse a difficult subject matter with hope. In some artworks, beauty is therapeutic while in others it only emphasises and increases a sense of hunger or lack in the viewer. Could this discrepancy in terms of the effects of images be at all related to the medium of the artwork? In the mid-1930s, the German-Jewish intellectual, Walter Benjamin, asked how the photographer compares with the painter. He turned to the analogy of a surgical operation in order to answer the question. The magician, he argued, heals by the laying on of hands. There is distance between him and the patient but the gesture is personal, tactile and involves looking each other in the eye. This healing is 'auratic' and is likened to the painter's communication with the canvas, and eventually the viewer, through his body, the laying on of his hands. The surgeon, in contrast, uses a scalpel to cut in order to heal. He dismembers and does so without the bother of confronting the patient, man to man. The surgeon, for Benjamin, is not unlike the photographer, whose images mechanically fragment and objectify. Here there is no visceral relationship.

Ernst van der Wal's exhibition offers a powerful antidote to the fracturing effect of the medical gaze. The titular theme connotes the drive to invade or breach a barrier, an impulse that humans share with other species. Whether medical, military or scientific invasion, the concept alludes to the control or authority of an unwanted presence. The exhibition is divided into two rooms. In the first, a series of large drawings hang against the walls. These reference photographs that were printed in medical textbooks and scientific journals from the 1940s and 1950s that used halftone dots as printing technique. These images were blown up from roughly 5cm to 1 meter in height, and redrawn by hand using pen and ink, as well as the careful application, erasure, scratching and reapplication of charcoal dust onto Fabriano paper. Through quiet, time-consuming and careful labour, Van der Wal counteracts a (kind of) Marxist estrangement or alienation, the systemic result of not only capitalism's impact on the Arts, but also the mechanical reproduction of the camera that has so infected our consciousness.

The drawings are a powerful combination of portraits and landscapes. In some cases these portraits are of medical patients, with the trace of the surgeon represented through, for instance, a hand on a chest in lieu of a cardiac impulse. In other drawings, Van der Wal provides portraits of planets whose surfaces are erased and mutilated through scraping. There are also monumental drawings of the HIV virus, an invasive force drawn with an underlying grid pattern that reminds us of the early acronym, GRID (gay-related immune deficiency). These viral landscapes are indistinguishable from the drawings of galaxies. In a nod to the Orphism of Delaunay and Apollinaire in the early twentieth century, Van der Wal renders the inner, microscopic world of the body and the outer realm of space as equally abstract in structure and open to human scrutiny. The drawings are surprisingly childlike yet extraordinarily sophisticated. Whilst trained and ordered, there is an element of chaos – the juxtaposition refuses tidy resolution, the hybrid images merge and clash. They also flout the possibility of placing them within time or history, instead invoking a vague temporal nostalgia. An exhibition of drawings of viruses and galaxies may sound impersonal but together the effect is both of sadness and an almost comic delight at the odd pairings. Scientific fact is tempered by memory and gossip. The political argument is delivered with a gentle nudge, by no means too smart for its own good.

The second room contains an installation of wooden sea urchins, inspired by *Tetrapygus niger*, an invasive species of urchin that was unintentionally introduced to the coast of South Africa. This species is a voracious kelp grazer and is capable of converting healthy underwater kelp forests into barren landscapes. Their astral appearance is uncannily similar to that of the HIV virus but unlike the drawings, which are apprehended photographically, and subsequently feel familiar and intimate, the installation of carved, wooden urchins provokes a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* in the viewer. This Brechtian technique affords the viewer the distance to critically appraise the moral dilemma of Van der Wal's urchins. They sadden. However, their beauty and sophistication is also a spectre interlaced with optimism. The care taken by the artist, his attention to detail, provides a kind of hope. The viewer code-shifts and finds that in negotiating the dual identities of aesthete and political agent, the skin of conscience is peeled back to reveal the vulnerability and surrender that results from viewing all good art.

This exhibition doesn't merely repeat the contemporary right to look, it reveals (or names) our sense of visual entitlement for what it is. This has particular potency within the South African context where looking is so often asymmetrical. One looks or is looked at from a vantage point of privilege, the look itself becomes an act of invasion. As an exhibition, *invasion* ironically uses the gaze to resist the idea of visuality as a kind of universal affirmation of the authority of the visualiser over the visualised – the cold, instant, prerogative of the photographer. In contrast, Van der Wal uses the slow, gentle, personal craft of drawing and redrawing, carving and woodturning to humanise and validate the human need to be seen ... and healed.

Text by Prof Stella Viljoen

Stella Viljoen is an associate professor in Visual Studies at Stellenbosch University. She holds an MA in History of Art and a PhD in Media Studies. Her research is principally concerned with the politics of gender as it pertains to the representational cultures of art and media.



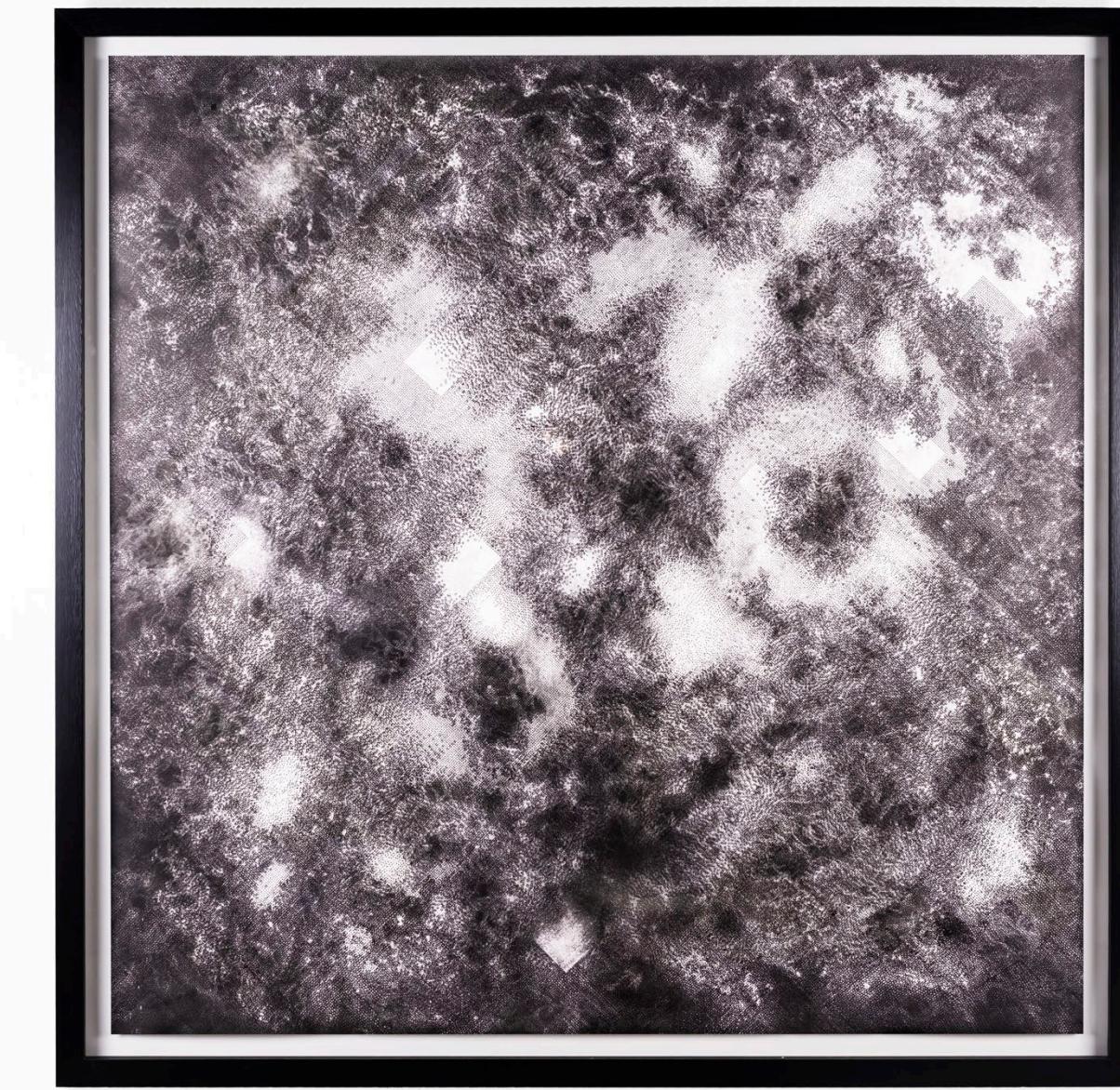


Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on
Fabriano Paper
122 x 120 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on
Fabriano Paper
120 x 120 cm

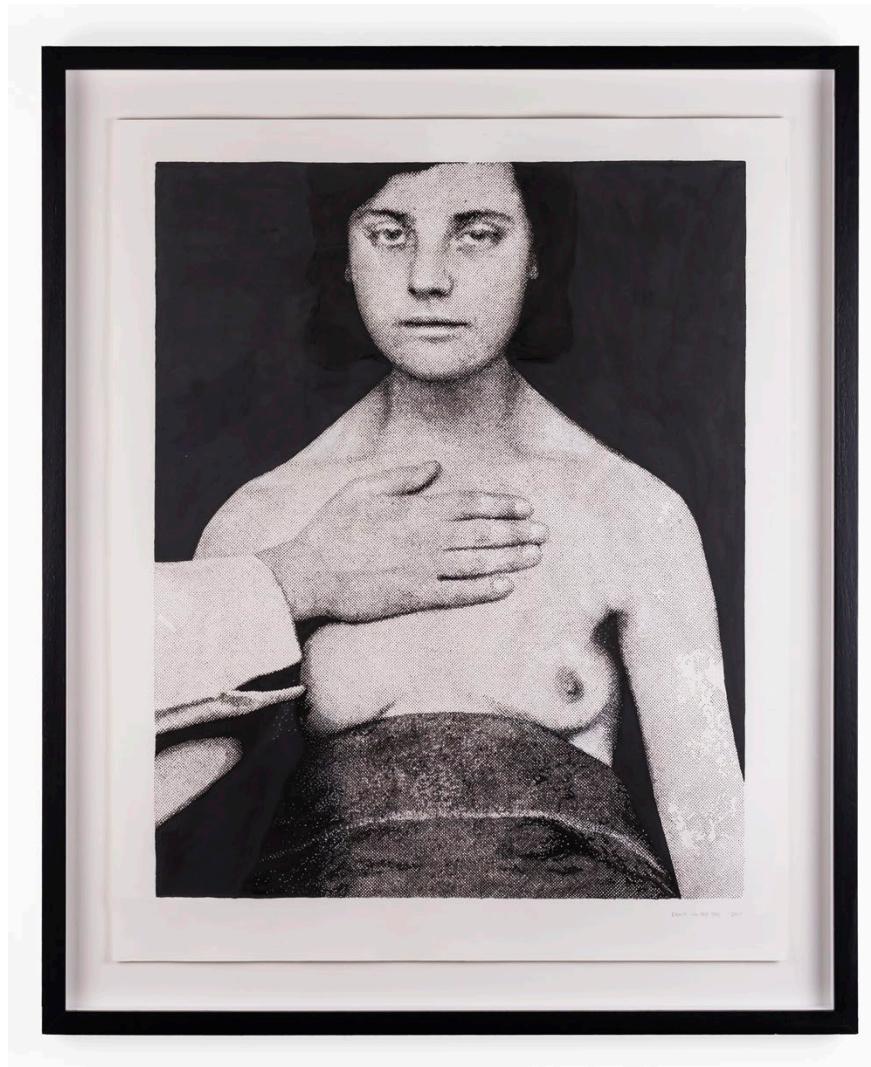


Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on
Fabriano Paper
106 x 106 cm

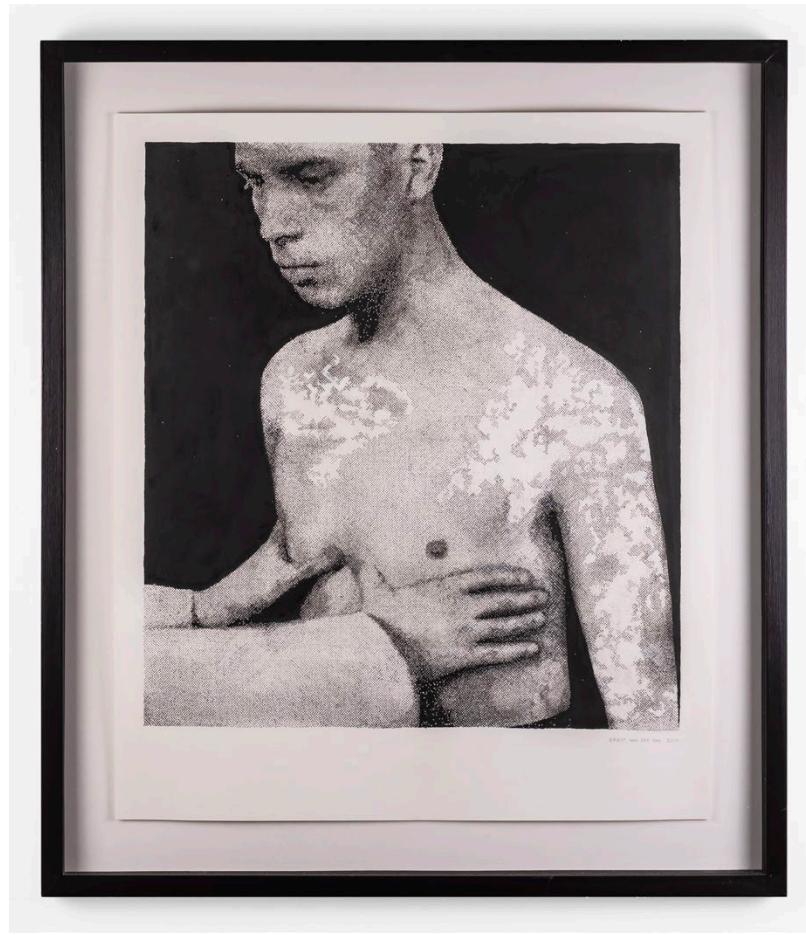


Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2016

Indian Ink and Graphite on
Fabriano Paper
81 x 64.5 cm



Ernst van der Wal

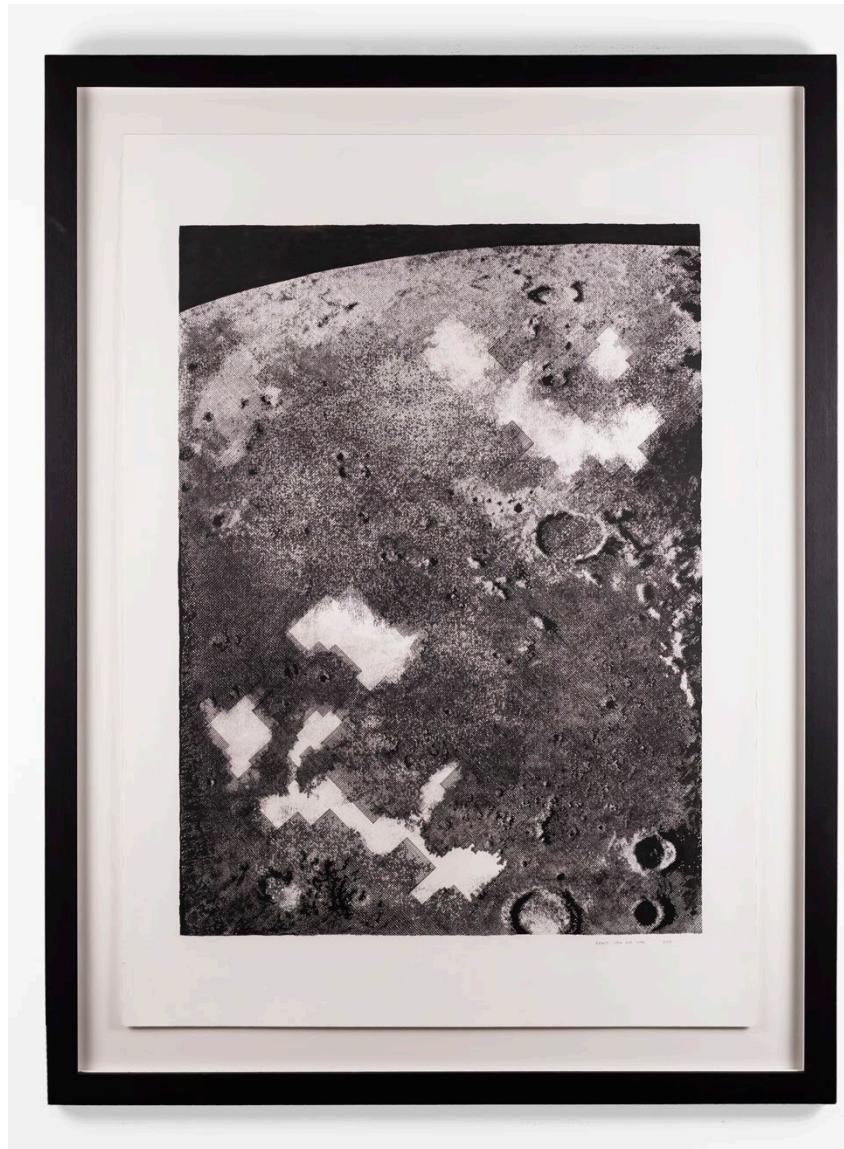
Untitled

2015

Indian Ink and Graphite on

Fabriano Paper

71 x 60 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2015

Indian Ink and Graphite on

Fabriano Paper

100 x 71 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

48.5 x 39 cm



Ernst van der Wal

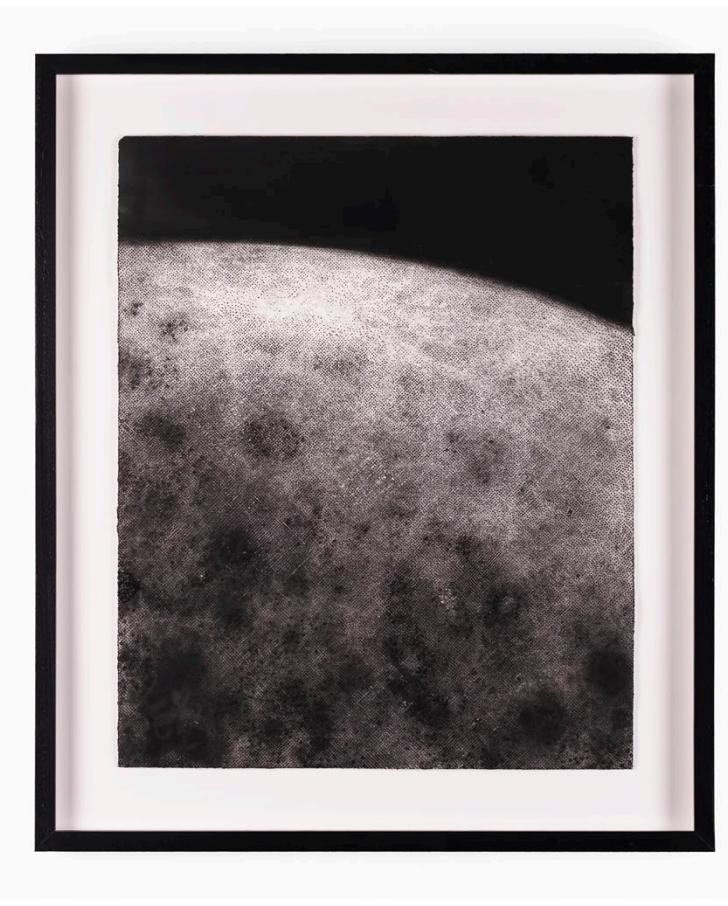
Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

100 x 70 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

48 x 39 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

117 x 62.5 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

99.5 x 70.5 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

85.5 x 60.5 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on
Fabriano Paper
100 x 70 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

63 x 63 cm



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Untitled

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Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

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Indian Ink and Charcoal Dust on

Fabriano Paper

63 x 63 cm



Ernst van der Wal

Untitled

2019

Wood, Ash and Imitlin
Installation: Sizes Variable



Ernst van der Wal
Untitled
2019
Wood, Ash and Imitin
Size Variable



Ernst van der Wal
Untitled
2019
Wood, Ash and Imitlin
Size Variable



Ernst van der Wal
Untitled
2019
Wood, Ash and Imitlin
Size Variable



Ernst van der Wal
Untitled
2019
Wood, Ash and Imitlin
Size Variable

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Ernst van der Wal was born in 1983 in Paarl, South Africa. As a researcher, lecturer, writer and practising artist, he works at the intersection of a range of creative disciplines.

He is currently a senior lecturer in the Visual Arts Department of Stellenbosch University, where he obtained his doctoral degree in Visual Arts in 2013. He has also worked as a researcher and lecturer at the Humboldt University of Berlin and the Centre for Area Studies in Leipzig.

Van der Wal has participated in a number of group exhibitions, amongst which *Swallow My Pride* (Blank Projects, 2010), *Graven* (GUS, 2015) and *Hiervandaan/From here on/Ndisuka* (Stellenbosch Outdoor Sculpture Trust, 2016-2017) were some of the platforms

where he showcased his work. He has also worked on a number of curatorial projects, such as *Steek* (Stellenbosch University Museum, 2013), *55.4 kms* (Cape Town Art Fair, 2013) and *The Story That Travelled* (Gallery KUB, Leipzig, 2016).

Van der Wal is an elected member of the South African Young Academy of Science and the recipient of the Georg Foster Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. For the latter, Van der Wal worked on a research project in Berlin that examined the impact of images on public understandings of gender and sexuality. At present, much of his research and creative practice deals with human-object relations within the age of the Anthropocene.



Tissues and Holograms of Energy

tissues and holograms of energy circulate in
us and seek and find representations of themselves
outside us, so that we can participate in
celebrations high and know reaches of feeling
and sight and thought that penetrate (really
penetrate) far, far beyond these our wet cells,
right on up past our stories, the planets, moons,
and other bodies locally to the other end of
the pole where matter's forms diffuse and
energy loses all means to express itself except as spirit...
(from Garbage, A.R Ammons)

"geological, biological, and cosmic stories ... compel us to envision the physical world as storied matter teeming with countless narrative agencies that infiltrate every imaginable space and make the world intelligible" (Oppermann 2013: 57).

Ernst van der Wal's *invasion* is a palimpsest of stories. In it, familiar Grand Narratives of science and progress are undone by tales of teeming microscopic ecospheres entirely unaware of our sympoetic co-existence. And all of this is overwritten by magnificent sagas of cosmic energy-matter doing an endless dance of formation and dissolution.

The earliest drawings in this exhibition are of black and white photographs of patients with skin conditions from old medical text books. The tried and tested method of the grid is used to scale up small reproductions to larger drawings, but also captures the technology of mid-20th century ink printing, which produced images through a grid of densely woven ink dots of varying sizes that, though hardly visible to the naked human eye, blend to create what we accept as 'reality'. These dots are painstaking and laboriously recreated by hand, every flaw of the reproduction magnified, so that the flaw in human reproductive technology cannot be unravelled from the flaw in the human's skin, and so form a spectacular technonatureculture continuum (Rosie Bradotti).

What revealing stories these prove to be. There are all the familiar modernist tropes: the astronomer with his telescope against a backdrop of stars, the scientist/doctor as the agent who acts upon the passive patient with the distance conferred by absolute authority. Both of these figures are paragons of enlightenment subjectivity, intent on restoring to the human his proper place in the universe.

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From an ecocritical or New Materialist viewpoint, however, we know that our bodies are not ours, but sites of myriad material interchanges. We are quite literally stardust, to quote an epic song, while the skin, that thin membrane between inside and outside, is a highly permeable site of trans-corporeality. The bacterial communities that populate the human skin are immensely varied. Not only do we communicate with these invisible, non-human symbionts in corporeal language, but molecular biologists have found that bacteria communicate within and between other species of bacteria using an astounding array of chemical and molecular signs. These stories, entangled in a dynamic universe of macro-forces and micro-interactions, form the leitmotif of this exhibition.

The interest in micro-organisms, space and scientific discourse is carried through the exhibition. There is, for instance, a prevalence of images of or references to the HIV virus. Despite their painstaking rendering, it is not always clear whether drawings are of macro or microscopic scenes. It becomes clear that, whether we look out or in, whether we see via the prosthesis of an electron microscope or a telescope, the world is comprised of uncannily alike forces. A drawing of an aids virus is virtually indistinguishable from surrounding drawings of moons and planets.

In one drawing, a supernova, carefully stitched in ink on its own grid, is overlaid with a cluster of viruses mapped on another representational grid. Despite the fact that the two grids are not aligned, they seamlessly amalgamate to form a mesmerising micro-macrocosm.

That the grid is, as Rosalind Krauss noted, one of the most prevalent ciphers of modernist art, is not coincidental to this exhibition, given Van der Wal's sustained critique of modernist discourse. In high modernist art, the grid served as a sign of the radical autonomy of art. Its presence denoted a tenacious modernist loyalty to the flatness of the picture plane, and a sustained hostility to narrative, history, discourse, and particularly, 'banal' matter, in favour of pure art and pure spirit. Here, however, the purity and autonomy of the grid is subverted, first by revealing it as the conveyor of three-dimensional illusion, and second by extracting from it a narrative about the hubris and prejudice underlying modernist discourses, whether artistic or scientific. Here the grid inextricably enmeshes human fortune with the lives of unicellular organisms and stellar formations.

Donna Haraway uses the term "semiotic materiality" to describe the signifying power of matter. The self-determining and self-organising capacity of matter (what Haraway calls autopoiesis), is not confined to organic matter, but also to inorganic materials, such as igneous rocks, with their array of complexly interlocking crystals that self-replicate and evolve with astonishing creativity. This is the poetry of planets, moons and supernovas. What matters is this vital materiality, this dynamic comingling of energy and mass that allows us to think stories and matter through each other. It is this semiotic materiality that dissolves even our most stubborn dichotomy: the distinction between animate and inanimate; organic and inorganic.

In this exhibition, we see this dissolution of the human-centered view of the cosmos magnificently celebrated.

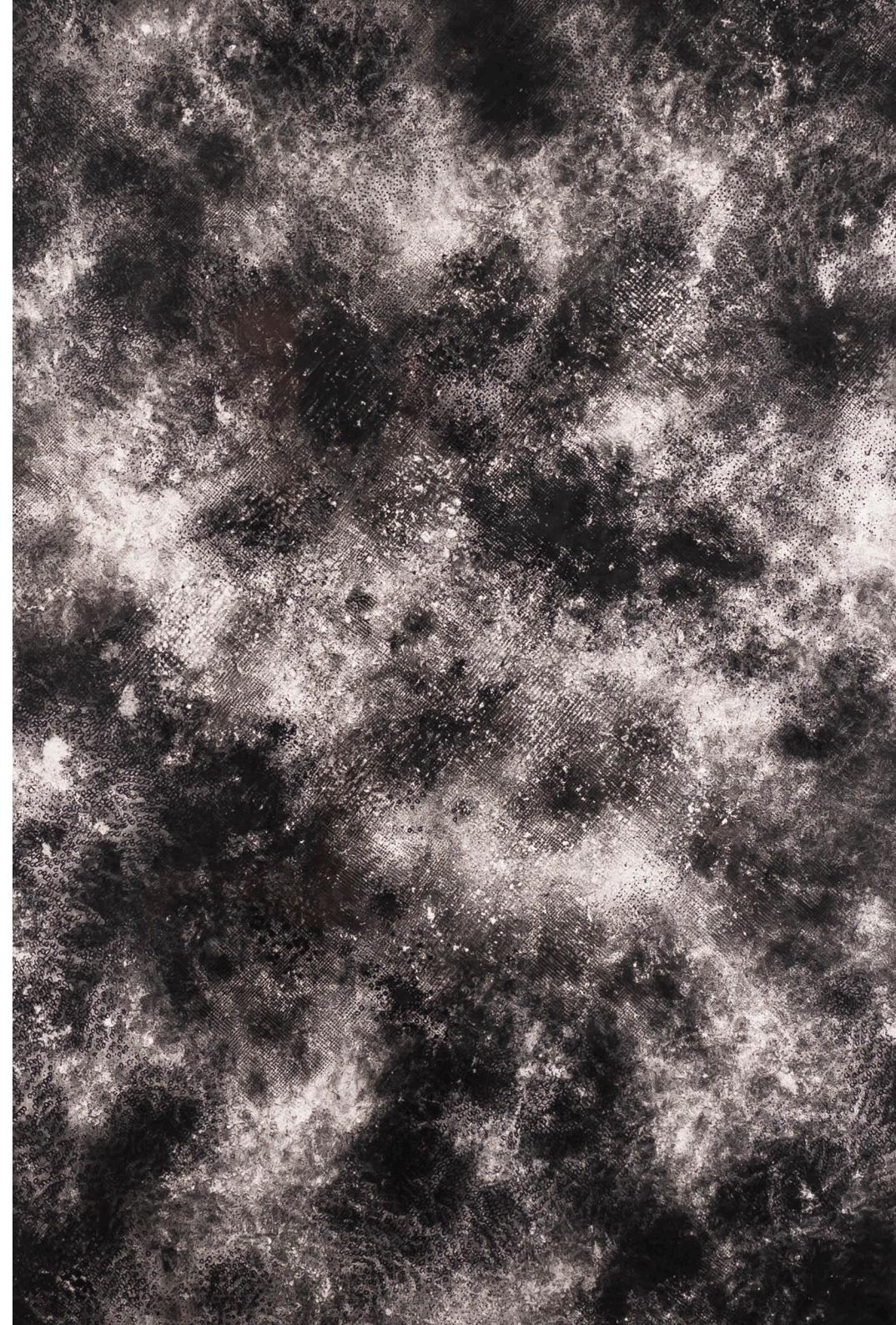
Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Krauss, R. 1979. Grids. *October* 9: 50-64.

Oppermann, S. 2013. Material Ecocriticism and the Creativity of Storied Matter. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 26.2 (Ecocriticism special issue), 55-69.

Text by Prof Lize van Robbroeck

Lize van Robbroeck is a NRF rated researcher and associate professor in Visual Studies at Stellenbosch University. Recently her research interests have expanded to include psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, which she is applying to postcolonial visual culture. She is currently collaborating with scholars from New Zealand, Canada and Australia on settler exhibitions.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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