



Catching Ghosts and Consecrating the Forgotten: The Seen and Unseen in the Work of Diane Victor¹

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Abstract

Since pre-history, humankind has relied on archetypes and myths to describe the ineffable and has made use of fictional and mythological narratives to understand the meaning of life and death. Dying and death are topics reluctantly discussed in open society. Yet, the global COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the process of dying and death, and hence the survival of humankind. By embracing their finitude, humans attempt to create meaningful experiences in life and, therefore, attain “freedom towards death” (Heidegger, 1962: 311).

This paper investigates how South African artist Diane Victor uses universally known myths and symbols of Christian iconography within a South African context to create meaning, as well as how she uses medium and exhibition sites to evoke intense emotions within viewers urging them to consider their finitude. By recognising how fragile and vulnerable life is, the artist captures the ephemeral in a poignant way. In this paper, I argue that Victor embraces the challenge of consecrating the forgotten or lost. Through incorporating religious icons, signs, and symbols in her work, Victor ‘catches ghosts’ of the ‘seen’ and ‘unseen’ in, about, of and from South Africa. Her works are understood through a contemporary reading of religious (Christian) iconography and interpreted in the symbolic and fragile mediums of smoke, stain, ash, charcoal, light and shadow, emphasising the ephemerality and impermanence of the human condition.

Key words: Christian iconography, Diane Victor, finitude, intertextuality, South African art

Introduction

Ghastly, ghostly figures slowly move into and out of existence. Projected onto a cold concrete wall of the North West University’s Hennie Bingle auditorium at the 2018 *Aardklop* National festival, fourteen stained shadows of murdered South African women are temporarily captured (**Figure 1a**). Created in smoke on glass, images of these women, sourced from local news media, lead viewers up a stairwell. Similar to the Stations of the Cross pilgrimage undertaken by Catholic believers, viewers are invited to stop at each station and ponder the suffering and loss, grief and killing of women in South African society. Only when the top of the stairwell is reached, and one looks down, does it become clear that the female figure drawn in fly ash at the bottom of the stairs, is entwined with her male partner, and is in fact dead (**Figure 1b**). She and all the other nameless femicide victims ‘on display’ were killed by their intimate partners.

¹ This article is based on research conducted for my Masters in Fine Art degree in 2015, titled ‘The fusion of horizons: Interpreting the archetype of the resurrection myth in contemporary visual art’. This article contains condensed arguments and sections of text as they appear in my dissertation. In-depth analyses of most works discussed in this paper can be found in my dissertation.



Figure 1a and 1b: Details: *The Fourteen Stations*, 2018. Close-ups of the installation at the Henni Bingle auditorium, North West University. Photographs: courtesy of Johan Thom and Diane Victor.

In line with German philosopher Martin Heidegger's notion of 'Being in the world', South African artist Diane Victor's *The Fourteen Stations* (2018) (**Figure 1a and 1b**) requires the viewer's entire Being, body and mind, to be immersed in the environment. Although expressive lines and forms through printmaking² and drawing were Victor's early artistic processes of choice, she later broke away from tradition and continues to challenge restrictions, such as scale, offered by a conventional printing press (Rankin, 2008: 4; Victor, 2013a; Human, 2015: 4). Her works are generally understood through a contemporary reading of Christian iconography and in a South African socio-political context. They are interpreted through the fragile mediums of candle smoke, stain, charcoal, ash, shadows, and glass to evoke "the emotional or physical vulnerability of [her] subjects" (Von Veh, 2012: 10) and emphasise the ephemerality and impermanence of the human condition. The hermeneutical framework in which her works are understood throughout this article is, therefore, not only defined as "an inquiry into the psychological intentions [of the artist] [-the unseen-] which are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the 'being-in-the-world' displayed by the text [artwork] [-the seen]" (Ricoeur, 1981: 112).

In this article, I explore how Victor uses universally known myths and symbols of Christian iconography within a South African context to create meaning, as well as medium and exhibition site, to evoke intense emotions within viewers. By wrestling with the metaphorical angels and demons of a broken society, Victor triumphs in catching ghosts and in consecrating the otherwise forgotten. Her feat is, however, anything but a victory. Instead, it is a burden that

² Victor prefers the traditional printmaking methods of etching, embossing and drypoint prints. Etching requires the artist to expose a mark on an Etching plate and thereafter to soak the plate in acid. Depending on the effects the artist wants to achieve, this process is repeated to create tonal variations. Throughout her career, Victor has developed her own techniques to layer the work and integrate alternative materials in the printing process.



very few people are willing to carry. Victor's quest as a contemporary South African artist, I argue, is to show society its own flaws and misgivings by drawing attention to that which is otherwise ignored, lost or forgotten.

This article, informed by, amongst others, texts by Gadamer (1960; 1989), Genette (1982), Heidegger (1927; 1962), Kristeva (1980), Ricoeur (1981) and Von Veh (2005; 2008; 2012; 2020), comprises a fusion of Victor's (the artist) and my own (the viewer's) horizons. Each horizon is influenced by the person's background, upbringing, beliefs and contextual standing in society. Interviews with the artist aided in identifying hidden messages (whether consciously or unconsciously, seen or unseen) within her works. Intentionally incorporated semiology, as discussed below, contributes to how the works are read. Nonetheless, Victor works intuitively and supposes that interpretations should not be dependent on the artist's intentions. She notes that preconceived ideas and expectations limit readings. Instead, she hopes that her works invite open dialogue (Victor, 2021). Consequently, her subject matter is not necessarily pre-conceptualised, but rather an emotive response to a specific event or person, and to a large extent relies on formalistic nuances and extraordinary artistic skill.

Freedom towards death / embracing human finitude

Diane Veronique Victor was born in 1964 on a coal mine near Witbank (now Emalahleni), and grew up on a farm in Apartheid South Africa. Her subject matter mainly focuses on identity, loss, and moral, socio-cultural and political injustices encountered in her immediate environment. In her most recent exhibition, titled *Folly, Frailty and Fear*, which opened in April 2021 at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery and shown online as The Moving Cube, Victor explores the foolishness, fragility and fearful nature of humankind. Her work considers the actions and reactions of humans, especially during uncertain times. Even though, as I contend, her work has always included some references to death and loss, her more recent work makes a conscious shift to emphasize human frailty, and to some extent human finitude. Dying and death are topics rarely discussed in everyday conversations. In many Western societies, it seems to be something humans are ashamed of, because of its appalling nature. The outbreak of the 2019/2020 Corona-virus world-pandemic and related events have, however, refocused our collective attention on our human mortality.

Dermot Moran (2000: 224), professor of Philosophy, explains that "human existence is pre-occupied with meaning". In societies where war, criminal violence, injustice, illness, abuse, pain, torment, and natural disasters serve as reminders of death, individuals continuously search for meaning and hope. In various ways, art-making included, humankind attempts to deal with the inevitability of death. This notion is validated by Heidegger (1962: 296-311), who explains that it is necessary for humans to embrace their finitude, in order to have meaningful experiences in life to attain "freedom towards death". However, especially Western contemporary societies, rooted in puritan perspectives, live in a death-denying culture. Moran (2000: 226) clarifies this in the following manner:

Death, for instance, is a feature of factual life, but one which gets covered up in our everyday "world-laden-concerns". Nevertheless, death is also the phenomenon which makes the *temporality* (*Zeitlichkeit*) of our human existence manifest to us...making one's individual life fully one's own.

Heidegger (1962: 47, 238, 282) holds that every action, and the meanings of those actions, are influenced by our *Sein-zum-Tode* (Being-towards-death). The very action of death can only be authentically experienced once by ourselves, and thus the death or pending death of others can never be experienced in the truest sense. Heidegger (1962: 304) continues that "authentic Being-towards-death signifies an existential possibility of *Dasein*". In other words, the human understanding of existence and of being alive, can only be validated if humans

accept that death is unavoidable. These notions are explored in Victor's work created during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

A balancing act



Figure 2a (left): *Covid dance, a balancing act*, 2020. Ash and charcoal, 195 x 140 cm.
Photograph: courtesy of Diane Victor.



Figure 2b (right): *Dancing with the Dr*, 2020. Working proof, stained drypoint print, ca. 30 x 20 cm.
Photograph: courtesy of Diane Victor and *Atelier le Grand Village* studio.

Communal fears and universal symbols of panic are emphasized in *Covid dance, a balancing act* (2020) (**Figure 2a**), which is an approximately 140 cm x 195 cm ash and charcoal drawing and in *Dancing with the Dr* (2020) (**Figure 2b**), a working proof of a small scale drypoint etching created in collaboration with *Atelier le Grand Village* studio in France. Both works, created during the initial lockdown in South Africa during 2020, depict figures on a tightrope, dangerously caught in the balancing act of staying alive while negotiating their way over the skyline of no specific city. The city far below (not a specific place) makes reference to public panic, disruption and disquiet caused by the effects of disinformation, which include unfounded rumours of the Corona-virus's generation, outbreak and spread through 5G towers, wetmarkets or Chinese laboratories (Victor, 2020; Victor, 2021). A contrast between high-tech and primitive survival strategies is observed. Modern medical gloves and masks are juxtaposed with adaptations of medieval plague doctors' masks, which were infused with herbs to mask the smell of death. Reference is possibly made to the miasma medical theory, which is an obsolete theory holding that diseases are caused by bad and unhealthy odours in the air. Miasma was often blamed for the cause of epidemics, such as cholera or the Black Death. Furthermore, strings of garlic and bells around the woman's foot and a braided corset with protective texts represent good luck charms that serve to deter death.



Further recognisable symbolism is evident in the inclusion of birds. In *Dancing with the Dr*, crows, generally viewed as omens of death, surround the figure masquerading as a medical doctor, who both protects and urges the nurse forward. In contrast, in *Covid Dance, a balancing act*, what first seems like a Dove, universal symbol of peace, is in fact, a sea-gull. These birds, and other wild animals, were regularly noticed in cities during lockdown. Even though perhaps unintended by the artist, the birds convey opposing and conflicting messages of hope and death: crows and doves alike awaken connotations of death and peace respectively within the viewers. Similarly, feelings of hope and hopelessness were experienced in flux throughout the world during the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Victor (2021) observes that her work is not always pre-conceptualised, but instead, information, images and daily experiences infiltrate the artworks and manifest in certain objects and symbols as the works develop. The meaning of the work is further determined by the context of and the interpretation by the viewer. When interpreting a contemporary artwork, it is vital to consider what Heidegger (1927; 1962) refers to as 'pre-understanding', or what Gadamer (1960; 1989) later describes as 'prejudice'. This supposes that each person has a unique background, history, experience and belief system, hence different 'life-world' (Gadamer, 1989: 300-306). These culturally and socially attributed characteristics cause individuals to have pre-supposed connotations about everything in life. During analysis these prejudices – the unseen – influence the way meaning is perceived. They reside in both viewer and artist, creating a unique horizon for each. A horizon, in this context, refers to the situatedness of a person, including their background, experiences, and beliefs. Understanding and meaning emanate from the overlapping of horizons (Human, 2015). In other words, the point where the artist's intentions and the viewer's pre-conceived understandings intersect, is the point where meaning is created.

Because both artist and viewer (interpreter) are living beings, who are continuously influenced by their surroundings, a constant shift in horizons is taking place and hence repeated testing of prejudices, i.e. perceived 'truths' and world-views, is vital (Human, 2015). Possibilities of multiple interpretations, i.e. a hermeneutic circle, are opened up by cultural texts: thus "contexts condition perspectives and perspectives condition contexts" (Gallagher, 1992: 5). In line with this, I acknowledge that insight often comes with hindsight, and only upon reflection does the individual appreciate and understand the present. Hence, interpretations might shift and meanings change when re-evaluating works from the past, or when considering Victor's 'new' Corona-virus related artwork in years to come.

In *Covid dance, a balancing act*, for example, the artist's intentions overlap with my interpretation of the work, and hence a fusion of her and my own horizons exists. *Covid dance* depicts a breadwinner carrying the burdens of protecting his family and staying alive on his back, while navigating an unknown and unsafe situation (Victor, 2020). The medical mask covering the man's eyes makes this task physically daunting. This depiction conceptually reflects that the surge in disinformation circulating in contemporary society is blinding. This notion is not only observed in the ignorance of American politicians regarding the significance of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (Victor, 2020), but I infer, is also captured by parodying the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who covered his eyes instead of his mouth during a press-conference in 2020, which led to national mockery. A life jacket worn by the female figure merges with a traveller's neck-rest, both utterly useless in the current pandemic context. Allusions are made to travel restrictions during the lockdown period, while also perpetuating the belief that various obscure home-remedies can save and protect one from the Corona-virus and impending death. The imagery of the tightrope and titles of the artworks, together with references to contemporary and historic semiology (such as the plague doctor's mask, strings of garlic or crows and doves), indicates that the figures are in a dangerously precarious dance of staying alive and from falling off the edge. The only conceivable outcome seems to be the acceptance and unpredictability of possible death.



Similarly, Victor's current series, *A Dance of Death* (2020-ongoing), depicts the fickleness of death (Victor, 2020). This series, anticipated to comprise 30 small panels, are based on the 1520s woodblock printing series, *The Dance of Death* by German artist Hans Holbein. In her series, which was still in progress at the time of writing, Victor returns to the format of small-scale prints, referencing the scale of the original series by Holbein. Both artists consider Death as the great leveller, who spares no human and treats everyone, regardless of their socio-economic status, in the same unpredictable manner (Victor, 2020). Victor's parodies are critical of the church and government in scenes of 'normal' everyday life and cunningly incorporate both South African and internationally known myths and symbols to situate the work in a contemporary context. Victor is known for relying on classical mythology and purposefully embracing universal Christian iconography, adapting them through a unique and personal reading to ensure a point of departure for her viewers. Consequently, Victor is able not only to speak of "fragility, transience, liminality, uncertainty, vulnerability, change and loss" (Von Veh, 2012: 6), but I argue, also to force viewers to contemplate their own mortality.

Intertextuality and socially constructed truths

In *Sein und Zeit* (1927) (later translated to *Being and Time* in 1962), Heidegger aims to "call the whole Western metaphysical tradition into question", by explicating that *Being* refers not only to one's own ideology, but also to a complete historicity and temporality of *Being-in-the-world* (Palmer, 1969: 124-125). Gadamer (1989: xxxi) agrees with the above but elucidates that it is not only the *Lebenswelt* (life-world) or *Sitz-im-Leben* (site-in-the-world) of the interpreter that needs to be taken into consideration, but also that of the creator/ artist. In other words, the interpretation of a text (written or pictorial) relies on the lived experiences of the interpreter and creator, together with those of the society in which they respectively reside. These unseen contributions are what make each interpretation unique. Culturally and mythically preconceived meanings and so-called 'socially constructed truths' are intertextually layered and attached to religious symbols – the seen – predicating universal understanding, global and public accessibility and surpassing language barriers.

The notion of intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva in 1969, in relation to Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. The process of applying intertextuality when interpreting is something never-ending (Allen, 2000: 129). It is the interpreter's decision as to when to stop this process. The choice of where to draw the line when interpreting is usually not spontaneous but is determined by the hermeneutical background and life-world or experience of the interpreter. In this regard, intertextuality can be described as:

a theory that conceives of every text as a set of relations between texts, an intersection of texts that are themselves intersections of other texts, and so on. Every text is a locus of intersections, overlaps and collisions between other texts. Every text is an *intertext*, that is, a between-text, a paradoxical locus of dislocation, without centre and without boundaries. (Allen, 2000: 128)

The interpretation and analysis of symbols in the selected artworks can, therefore, be broadened when read intertextually. Not only determining the new and current meaning that symbols carry but also investigating texts (images and symbols) from varying cultures and societies across many time periods, is helpful in understanding the use and origin of certain contemporary myths and symbols, as is evident in Victor's work. The concept of intertextuality "... has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another..." explains Kristeva (1980: 15); it is rather defined as "the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position". French philosopher, Gérard Genette (1982: 30), explains that "the ability to constitute a system is precisely the characteristic of any set of signs, and it is this constitution that marks the passage from pure symbolism to the strictly semiological state". Genette, therefore, believes

that a reader, and hence interpreter, creates new structures out of already existing structures and rearranges elements in this new structure, which are already arranged in the pre-existing structure (Human, 2015: 18-19). The new structure is thus not identical to the pre-existing structure, but instead describes and explains the original structure (Allen, 2000: 96). Genette (1982) refers to this process as *palimpsest*, a term that describes how an interpreter can read one text with an underlying earlier version erased or obliterated, with the original text (or architext) still visible in some form. Therefore, palimpsest is the act of reading one text in relationship to at least one other text (Champagne, 1983: 243). Furthermore, the latest text is always influenced and affected by the earlier text (Dillon, 2007: 332). Thus, “the architext is, then, everywhere – above, beneath, around the text, which spins its web only by hooking here and there onto that network of architexture”, explains Genette (cited in Allen, 2000: 100).

Victor’s work is “densely intertextual, interweaving signs and symbols that reach back into art history but also reverberate throughout Victor’s own oeuvre. This makes analysis a complex procedure since Victor’s images are replete with meaning and reference” (Von Veh, 2008: 50). Because religious iconography, especially Christian, is a widely used tool and accessible globally, preconceived meanings have attached themselves to certain signs and symbols, and hence predicate the interpretation of Victor’s visual representations. Victor (2013b; Victor, 2015) explains that biblical narratives are useful sources of departure in the art-making process. She depicts universally familiar semiology, such as the Mary icon, lambs and halos, within a uniquely South African context, allowing viewers to rely on their own lived experiences and preconceived connotations of these symbols to create meaning. She, for example, relies on the classical Greek and Roman myths of Leda and the Swan, Apollo and Daphne, Romulus and Remus and the ferryman, Charon, within a South African context to communicate her observations of a contemporary South African society (selected examples in **Figure 3a and 3b**). Furthermore, distinctive ethereal moods are created through space and accentuate the importance of the relationship between medium and subject matter in the representation of human finitude. Hermeneutics, in this instance, is defined not only as “an inquiry into the psychological intentions [of the artist] [–the unseen–] which are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the ‘being-in-the-world’ displayed by the text [artwork] [–the seen]” (Ricoeur, 1981: 112). As Gadamer (1989: xxi) explains, “in understanding tradition not only are texts understood, but insights are acquired, and truths known”. Ricoeur (1981: 106-107) extends this notion by stating that “...if interpretation were only an historic-hermeneutical concept, it would remain as regional as the human sciences themselves... [instead it] is only the anchoring point for a universal concept of interpretation which has the same extension as that of understanding and, in the end, as that of belonging”.



Figure 3a (left): *Birth of a Nation*: ‘Leda and the White Backed Vulture’, 2008. Drypoint, 47.4 x 36.5 cm. Edition of 30. Photograph: courtesy of Diane Victor and David Krut Publishing.

Figure 3b (right): *Birth of a Nation*: ‘Romulus and Remus’, 2008. Drypoint, 47.4 x 36.5 cm. Edition of 30. Photograph: courtesy of Diane Victor and David Krut Publishing.

The embodiment of these subtleties driven by Western influences became first prominent in Victor's work, after visiting European galleries and museums in the late 1980s. Her work, for example, resembles the dramatic elements found in the work of Goya, as is apparent in her on-going *Disasters of Peace* series (2001–ongoing), derived from Goya's *Disasters of war* etchings (1810–1820). Here, Victor depicts daily horrors and commonplace events that relate to acts of violence resulting in unnecessary deaths, as reported in contemporary media. These occurrences of violence and injustices are exceptionally frequent and seldom receive much public attention, disappearing from headlines within days. Influences from other European artists are also evident. The strong light and shadowy contrasts in Rembrandt's paintings and the skilful technical approach characteristic of Dürer are evident in her *101 uses of Electrical Current* (1989), which resembles the dimly lit and sinister spaces found in Rembrandt's work. Her *Inglorious Bastards: study of the four riders- after Dürer* (2010), conceptually refers to Dürer's four horsemen of the apocalypse. Similarly, her *Birth of a Nation* series (2008–2010) (**Figure 3a and 3b**), influenced by a historically proud Roman culture, subversively parody known myths, informed by a South African context to indicate how little South Africa as a nation can be proud of (Von Veh, 2020: 383). An example of a contemporary South African take on the myth is seen in the inclusion of predatory scavenger animals, such as the hyena, in *Birth of a Nation*, which replaces the mythic wolf, and that embodies implied political or religious figureheads in Victor's works.

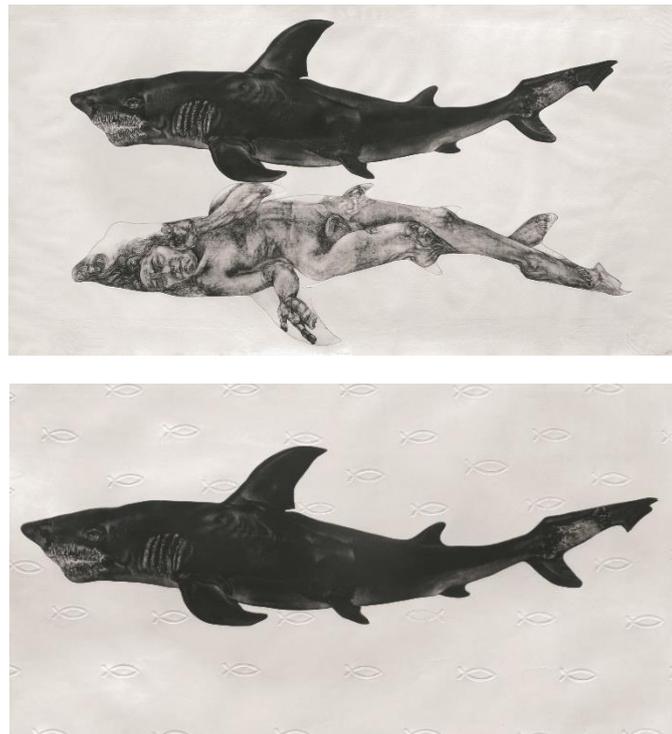


Figure 4a (top): *Scavenger*, 2002. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint, 100 x 200 cm. Edition of 10.

Figure 4b (bottom): *Upstream*, 2002. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing, 100 x 200 cm. Edition of 10. Photographs: courtesy of Diane Victor and David Krut Publishing.

References are also made to biblical narratives, such as the story of Jonah and the whale, depicted in *Scavenger* (2002) (**Figure 4a**). This work reflects a female figure (self-portrait of the artist) caught within the inverted contour lines of a shark. Juxtaposed is a second shark, revealing hints of a human figure inside. Just like Jonah, the figure (possibly the artist herself) is stuck in the belly of the 'big fish'. Victor (2015) explains that she considers sharks as "perfect killers". They are predators driven by society. Similar to people, they are slick, polite, fast and,

just like death, can kill you unexpectedly. The reference to the Zambezi Tiger Shark lends itself to drawing analogies and to representing conversations with people with a predatory instinct (Victor 2013a; Victor 2015). The inclusion of a repeated pattern of the emblematic embossed fish, a symbol of Christianity, in her work *Upstream* (2002) (**Figure 4b**), which surrounds the shark, could be indicative of predatory religious practices or institutions preying on faithful followers. Therefore, “destabilising such symbols and signs, drawn from, but also critiquing Christian narratives, pagan myths and African beliefs, social stereotypes and popular media, creates open-ended iconographies that invite imaginative interpretations of these uneasy partnerships of spirituality and satire, lust and laughter” (Rankin, 2008: 38). Thus, it is clear that Victor employs symbolism and iconographies in her work as a strategy to evoke various interpretations by different viewers. Evidently, the interpretation of certain symbols depends on the *Lebenswelt* and *Being-in-the-world* of the individual viewer.

By incorporating “elements of shock through the subversive re-presentations of familiar icons” and religious authority, viewers are urged to re-evaluate unconsciously accepted meanings of familiar imagery (Von Veh, 2008: 66). These are often incorporated with fleeting earthly embodiments of power, both mortal and divine, as seen for example in *Stained Gods* (2004). This series comprise traditional iconography of full body portraits of God (the father), the son and the Virgin Mary (the mother), who “represent a support system that has failed and are therefore stained and smudged with charcoal and water” (Von Veh, 2008: 66). *Minder, Mater, Martyr* (2004) (**Figure 5**) and *The Eight Marys* (2004) (cropped view in **Figure 6**), in which women from various ages and stages of life are portrayed as religious icons, capture the fragility and impermanence of physical life and earthly power. These works are once again replete with Christian iconography, such as the inclusion of a lamb or the physical martyr pose of the mythical Saint Sebastian (**Figure 5**).



Figure 5: *Minder, Mater, Martyr*, 2004. Etching, aquatint, mezzotint and embossing. Edition of 10. 200 x 100 cm each. Photographs: John Hodgkiss, courtesy of Diane Victor and David Krut Publishing.



Figure 6: Detail: *The Eight Marys*, 2004. Charcoal and pastel drawings, 170 x 51 cm each. Installation, Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York. Photograph: courtesy of Diane Victor.

The Eight Marys, were exhibited at the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York,³ “a setting that allowed Victor to demythologise a religious icon from within the institutional framework that maintains such myths” (Von Veh, 2008: 59). The cathedral is known for its commitment to the arts and support of cultural expression. Victor was able to insert a female into a space that has historically been reserved for men. In this work, Victor incarnates herself as the religious Mary icon. Mary is represented as being sexually aware, in various stages of life – young, as well as aging, as being rebellious and aware of her own body. This may cause the viewer who deems the space and the icon as holy and divine, to be shocked, and filled with anger and anxiety. To some viewers this work might even be interpreted as blasphemous. It can be said that “religious imagery found in Western Christianity has ... been largely responsible for reinforcing an image of women that is subservient to the dominant patriarchal hegemony in church politics. Woman’s ability to attain this ideal renders her forever unworthy” (Von Veh, 2005: 48). With no intentions to appease, Victor creates discomfort in a space, which by social definition intends to permeate peace. The use of a symbolic venue and the preconceived ideologies and meanings that accompany such a site-specific space play a large part in the understanding and interpretation of the work. The work forces introspection regarding fragile and impermanent individual social standing. A form of rebirth in traditional values is experienced here: by altering the viewer’s horizon, a new understanding and empowerment is established.

³ The exhibition *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art* was exhibited at the Cathedral Church of St John the Divine in 2004. This exhibition showcased a number of contemporary South African Artists, including Jane Alexander, Wim Botha, Steven Cohen, Churchill Madikida, Mustafa Maluka, Thando Mama, Samson Mudzungu, Jay Pather, Johannes Phokela, Robin Rhode, Claudette Schreuders, Berni Searle, Doreen Southwood, Clive van den Berg, Minnette Vari, Diane Victor and Sandile Zulu.



Figure 7: *No Country for Old Women*, 2013. Installation: Wood, glass and smoke drawings, ca. 420 x 600 cm. KKNK Oudtshoorn, Private collection. Photograph by author, 2013.

The use of Christian iconography and its adapted meanings are further evident in the subject matter of the four-meter-high *No Country for Old Women*, (2013) (**Figure 7**), that completely engulfs the viewer. *No Country for Old Women* was created for the 2013 annual Klein Karoo National Art festival (KKNK) held in the conservative Karoo town of Oudtshoorn. The triptych comprises a large glass, steel and wooden altarpiece installation, in the local Victoria Memorial church hall, Oudtshoorn, rendering the space sacred by adopting preconceived religious connotations. By re-appropriating known Christian symbols, such as the Mary and Christ figures, sheep, halo, heart, and arched windows, Victor emphasizes the effect accumulated meanings can have on the perception of a work.

Catching ghosts

No Country for Old Women was driven by Victor's abhorrence of the manner in which the murder of her elderly aunt, Angela Reardon, was handled by the South African police and the insensitivity shown by both the killers and community. Her aunt is captured in the first panel of the installation piece. Reardon worked at her local church and was murdered and buried in her own vegetable garden. The way in which the body was disposed of revealed the killers' disregard for and ignorance towards the role and importance of an elderly woman in contemporary society (Human, 2013: 10-11; Victor, 2013a; Human, 2015: 45;). The remaining six panels are dedicated to the rape, murder and disembowelment of Anene Booyens; the stoning of 'witches'; the "therapeutic rape" of lesbians; the abuse and rape of children, and the imminent danger women, as mothers, face when raising their children (Victor, 2013a). By employing candle smoke on glass panels, Victor emphasises the violence and unnecessary deaths, and the fragility and vulnerability of the lives of women and children living in South Africa. Similar to *The Fourteen Stations*, a synthesis is drawn between the lives depicted and the legacy these women leave behind.

The carbon deposit of candle smoke, a natural, yet temporary element (used to draw the images on glass), symbolises the fleeting nature of human life. The glass panels protect the work from disintegrating yet encapsulate a fragile medium that is susceptible to damage and

destruction much like the human body. When placed as an altar piece, the figures become bodies placed on coffin-shaped glass panels much like a reliquary. The heavy wooden framework becomes a restriction or barrier, elevating the women on the one hand, while binding them to the stigma imposed on them by society on the other. The manner in which Victor stores and transports these panels, namely in wooden coffin shaped crates (**Figure 8**), adds to the conceptual foundation of the works (Human, 2015: 46). Each panel is carefully placed inside a wooden crate reminiscent of the shape and size of a coffin in which a body is buried. The inevitability of human death is something we all wish to ignore. On multiple levels, however, *No Country for Old Women* draws attention to the harsh reality of human mortality. Victor honours and consecrates the forgotten. By making reference to the tradition of gothic stained-glass windows, often commemorating martyrs of a faith, Victor captures the ghosts of women, keeping a part of them alive by elevating them to the status of saints, where they are regarded as sacred, holy and divine. Realising how fragile and vulnerable life is, the artist has found a way to capture the ephemeral in a poignant way. Victor highlights the relationship between the ephemerality of the material she uses, how these works are transported and exhibited and how fleeting and vulnerable the lives of these women were.



Figure 8: Crates in which the panels for Diane Victor’s *No Country for Old Women* (2013) are stored and transported. Photograph by author, 2013.

With the representations of loss of life in Victor’s ghostly figures, come notions of the loss of time, individuality and knowledge. A disregard of the elderly is a common occurrence in many societies and is explored in Victor’s series titled *Transcend* (2010) (**Figure 9**) and *Lost Words* (2010). In these works, she creates ash portraits of old age pensioners and white-male Afrikaans literary personages, by using the ashes of burned books that had an impact on their lives or were written by these men. Not only is the obvious loss of books stressed, but also the “loss of a lifetime’s accumulated wisdom, understanding, knowledge” (Von Veh, 2012: 34). Furthermore, the historical importance of the Afrikaner male is contrasted here with “the failing of white male hegemony in the post-apartheid corporate milieu” (Von Veh, 2012: 31). Each *Being* of the sitters⁴ in Victor’s work, has a unique story, which will simply be lost, together with their lives (Allara, 2012: 3). As Victor’s medium suggests, they will simply return to ashes, but are afforded a measure of remembrance through the artworks. The carbon deposit in itself is a fragile material, yet will last beyond the meagre lifespan of a human being. Victor hence

⁴ It is interesting to note that the sitters are mainly White males. Due to limited space in this paper, it suffices to say that the works also strongly allude to the vanishing status of previously dominant and privileged groups in South African society. This can be seen in the series *Lost Words*, 2010, which depict four portraits of White male Afrikaans literary leaders. The ashes used to create the works, are books written by, or have had a profound impact on these men. On a much more personal level, Victor burns away the knowledge and history of the Afrikaans-speaking male (Human, 2015: 51).

suggests that the life of a human is even more fleeting and vulnerable than an already poignant material.



Figure 9: *Adam's Wife*, *Transcend* series, 2010. Ash and charcoal dust drawing, 200 x 115 cm. Goodman gallery, Johannesburg. Photograph: John Hodgkiss, courtesy of Diane Victor.

This notion is further enhanced through the title of Victor's 2012 exhibition, *Ashes to ashes and Smoke to dust* at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery. It alludes to a well-known phrase 'Ashes to ashes', with a slight twist through the addition of 'smoke to dust'.⁵ This exhibition was presented in two parts. First, it focused on smoke portraits, which according to Von Veh (2012: 36) symbolise life and the burdens carried by the figures through the process of burning. Second, the ash drawings, which symbolise "death or the afterlife, the remains of the burning process... [which] define the length of a person's life, as the starting point".

The portraits found in both the *Transcend* (2010) and *Lost Words* (2010) series do not provide hope, but instead compel viewers to confront the process of dying. They comment on how society attempts to hide and store away the elderly, in an attempt to disregard the inevitable demise of each society. Similar to cosmetic surgeries, anti-aging creams, health spas and gym memberships, the society in which the artist finds herself attempts to hide away signs of death by 'concealing' the elderly in old age homes. It is easier to pretend that death and dying do not affect us, than to deal with reality. Furthermore, Victor highlights the loss of knowledge and wisdom when an older person passes from life to death. The figures appear lonely and ghostly, having lost their identity and individuality, and it seems as if they are floating in mid-air or hovering in limbo. They are neither here (amongst the living) nor there (dead); this implies the temporality that accompanies human decay, as well as the ineffable 'image' of a

⁵ The phrase originates from the biblical text in Genesis 3:19, which reads "In the sweat of thy face shalt though eat bread, till though return unto the ground; for out of it wasn't though taken; for dust though art, and unto dust though shalt return". It was further adapted as part of a burial service by the Anglican Church, as found in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer stating that "...we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life..." (Oxford Reference, 2021).



lost loved-one that remains in the memories of those left behind. Parts of the bodies are wrapped in flimsy and loose linen or hospital garments as if covered up in preparation for burial (Allara, 2012: 2). This visual connotation of death and loss has been reinforced during recent months, during which imagery surrounding Corona-virus related deaths and burials are frequently circulated in both social and news media.

Death, according to Heidegger (1962: 298), is a “social inconvenience, if not even a downright tactlessness”, and is often considered as a sign of weakness. Similarly, Daniel Mendelsohn (2010: 158) discusses the cultural practise of denying death, as it represents the unknown and that dying is often seen as a mistake, and should thus be avoided. Despite being a natural process, the cultural practise of denying death is still prominent. Hence, the naked, aging body and battered femicide victims are experienced in the context of profound silence and through visual shock. However, true death can only be individually experienced. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, an American psychiatrist and a pioneer in near-death studies, David Loy (1996: 69), and Peter Koestenbaum (1971: 26) postulate that “the reality of the death of myself” initially creates anxiety, however, the acceptance thereof “leads to courage, integrity, and individuality”.

It is possible to imagine that the subject matter and manner in which Victor portrays her work are rooted in the realisation of her own impending death. In 2008 Victor was diagnosed with an inherited and potentially fatal kidney disease. Even though Victor received a transplant in 2014, and the immediate danger of her impending death faded, Victor is aware of the pressing nature of human mortality. It could be argued that after her diagnosis, her work has adapted a conscious and serious reference to the fleetingness of time. Through the depiction of ephemerality in her subjects, Victor grapples with the fragility of the human condition. Perhaps unconsciously, her work wrestles with her own experience of *Being-towards-the-end* to create understanding of life and death. Conceivably, her choice of artistic media and art-making process informs her acceptance of her own mortality. By “relinquishing control over her medium” (Law-Viljoen, 2012: 97), Victor admits that she accepts the lack of power we as humans have over the mortality and frailty of the flesh and the impending death that we face. Only when we accept this lack of power, we will truly experience what Heidegger (1962: 311) expresses as “freedom towards death” and appreciate life.

This lack of power and agency is perhaps epitomised in these concluding examples, namely *Sleep No More* (2012) (**Figure 10a**), created for her *Ashes to Ashes and Smoke to Dust* (2012) exhibition; *There’s no waiting for a ship of fools* (2020) (**Figure 10b**), which formed part of the 2020 UJ The Pandemic Project; and *Recalculating* (2021) (**Figure 10c**), currently part of the *Folly, Frailty and Fear* exhibition. These works, to some extent products of a subconscious process and accidental marks, include distinct references to the Greek myth of Charon carrying the dead across the river to Hades. *Sleep No More* is grounded in the myth of the Angel of History, who turns around to look at times gone by, yet cannot change anything or save anyone. *Recalculating*, depicting a boat filled with people stranded on the Alps mountain range, points in a humorous and satirical manner to some of the foolish and strange things manifested in our society. The only water visible is inside the boat, defeating the purpose of a boat. This work, inspired by Plato and Dürer, as well as Desiderius Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly* (1509), refers to foolish people, poor governance, and the follies of the church. Victor notes how fools can say and to some extent do whatever they like in a silly manner, without serious consequences for themselves, while in actuality “speaking truth to power” (Victor & Von Veh, 2021). Yet, in contemporary society one needs to be very careful of what and how one says something. These works are a stark reminder to take cognisance of our surroundings and fellow humans.



Figure 10a (top left): *Sleep No More*, 2012. Detail: Ash and charcoal drawing, 167 x 259 cm. Photograph by author.

Figure 10b (top right): *There's no waiting for a ship of fools*, 2020. Ash drawing on paper. Photograph: courtesy of Diane Victor.

Figure 10c (bottom): *Recalculating*, 2021. Charcoal, pastel and acrylic on digital print, 99,5 x 172 cm. Photograph by author.

Victor's figures, and essentially the viewer too, thus, become both perpetrator and victim: they are confronted with both the "misery of the human condition and the burden of moral responsibility" (Grenier, 2010: 130). Our predatory nature is manifested in how we treat those weaker than ourselves. We are victims: victims of wars, catastrophes or victims of simply being human. The artist makes us aware of the existence of both of these aspects within all of humanity. Punishment remains the same: inescapable death. Victor does not pretend to judge the viewer, but instead confronts them with the eschatological dilemma of human existence.

Conclusion

It is understandable that humankind wants to know more, achieve more and reach further into the unknown. Myths are evidently employed as coping-mechanisms and may serve as guidelines on the journey to reaching a transcendental state of *Being* and accepting human finitude. Through various means, humans try to explain the inexpressible and understand the inexplicable. Artworks usually contain mythical elements, and it appears that art-making



serves as a device to grapple with issues surrounding death. Because of the realisation of the inevitability of death, each human needs to find a way to understand and accept their own mortality.

It is possible to conclude that Diane Victor uses her intuitive and unique art-making processes to confront viewers with the inevitability of impending death. A uniquely South African framework induces connotations of commemoration, lamentation and remembrance. The artist contrasts life with death and portrays the sombre, sorrowful and melancholic truths of human finitude. Her ghostly ephemeral figures serve as *memento mori*, reminders of death, and the temporality of any given moment. They only capture a slice of a life, a moment frozen in time. These moments and hence memories are all that remain after death. Even the artworks will eventually perish and cease to exist. Victor refers to the human struggle against time, essentially 'catching ghosts' and consecrating the otherwise forgotten. Her works transform into *memento vitae*, i.e. reminders of life, and urge everyone to embrace every given moment of life.

The seen and unseen in the work of Diane Victor rely on images from Christian iconography and myths and symbols to convey notions of human frailty and finitude. In an often darkly humorous, yet always serious tone, Victor reminds us of the fact that death spares no one. Irrespective of individual beliefs, most humans cling to the hope that eventual death gives meaning to life.

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