

AfTeR LiFe



KALI VAN DER MERWE

12 May - 14 October 2018



AfTeR LiFe

opens an aperture to the mysteries
of life through the lens of death

Kali van der Merwe

This exhibition speaks to a re-interpretation of the museum specimen guided by plays of my imagination rather than organised by any systematic reasoning.

My photographic explorations take place in the dark, with the night as my darkroom. I blur boundaries between painting and photography using long exposures and a technique termed 'light painting'. This enables my image creation to become an encounter that takes place over a period of time. I use a moveable light source to explore the external structure of inert, mostly dead form, in the hope of capturing an elusive "essence of being". I situate my individual photographs in imagined scenarios that unfold within celestial vistas of galaxies (courtesy of the Hubble telescope). **I navigate balances between the minuscule and cosmic, reality and theatricality.**

(cover image)

**Probing Fissures in Time
and Reason**

2018

archival inks on cotton rag
paper

Edition 1/9 + 2 AP

73 x 73cm

Mysterium Fascinans

2018

archival inks on cotton rag
paper

Edition 1/9 + 2 AP

73 x 73cm





Emerging from the Unknown

2018

archival inks on cotton rag paper

Edition 1/9 + 2 AP

73 x 73cm

My three dimensional art works are phantasmic, hybrid life forms composed of bones, insect remains, plant material, excreta and sections of animal corpses. The various elements are preserved and put together with alternative methods of taxidermy I have learned and developed. In this endeavour **I am re-imagining and re-imaging alternate paths that evolution could have taken.**

Enacting my **“God power in this world”**, (mythologist Joseph Campbell’s description of creativity), I re-animate road kill victims into perpetual motion films to honour of their lives and mourn their senseless deaths.

This “Theatre of the Deceased”, is the meeting place of the ordinary, the sublime, the unlikely and the impossible.

Photography, sculpture, video, animation, text, taxidermy, soundscapes and olfactory art offset each other in an immersive, interactive, tactile environment intended to stimulate wonder, curiosity and deeper connection to the creatures and plants we share our existence with. The natural world, robust, but in fragile balance, is incredibly vulnerable to human lifestyles and cultural projections.



Shadow Creator, Aberrant

Occurrence

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

120 x 80cm

Edition 1/5 + 2 AP

My fundamental search is for the ever metamorphosing unity present in all life.

I do not harm or kill in my creative process. Flowers are ethically picked or received, insects, are serendipitous finds and animals are mostly victims of road kill.

**Shadow Creator, Aberrant
Occurrence**

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

120 x 80cm

Edition 1/5 + 2 AP



**La Calavera Catrina /
Come to Mamma**

2018

glass, wood, wax, bones, bird,
plant specimens

34 x 34 x 58cm



The Kiss, Eternally Temporal
2017
archival inks on cotton rag paper
120 x 80cm
Edition 1/5 + 2 AP

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Art meets science taxidermy and magic

Dr. Danny Shorkend

Kali van der Merwe has created images of uncanny scientific, taxidermical and magical qualities. There is a sense of structure and order, yet one “imposed” beyond the assumed categories of the sciences. Her path therefore embraces both a desire to know nature and one that is in awe of – and complicit with – the unfolding of the natural and cosmological realms.





Known and Unknown

2018

glass, wood, wax, bones, bird, plant,
reptile, insect, kelp specimens

34 x 34 x 58cm

Her methods allow for a beautiful light that pervades her subjects. Her subjects – ranging from plant life to the world of animals – in fact is a life that has passed and yet the artist suggests that that body still somehow houses a spirit or life. In the macabre death of the image, one can intuit a life that was, an existence that was palpable and real. **In a Frankensteinian sense Kali almost breathes life back into these carcasses and remnants.**

In her photographs she contextualises the dead bees, flowers, snakes and snake skin, cats and birds to name a few, within galactic, interstellar space, images derived from the Hubble telescope. This gives such animal- forms an almost angelic and other-worldly meaning. It instils in them a sense of cosmic depth and meaning even after the spirit appears to have expired. At the very least, **the viewer may well sense a portal to other dimensions.**

In her installation work, she urges the viewer to touch and fondle the various broken and fragmented bodies and relics. It is an experience that precedes any kind of knowing or categorisation of the mysteries of the created world; it is a primitive sense of awe and wonder.

**Relativistic Time Dilation in the
Ocean of Existence**

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

120 x 80cm

Edition 1/5 + 2 AP

At the same time, as the artist communicated in her speech at the opening, the observer effects the observed. Thus, one cannot pierce and know reality as such as being kinds of biological organisms ourselves we effect and change the experimental set up. In simple terms, one can only know with reference to the framework of human knowing, and that framework is necessarily limited. Yet, Kali suggests an alternative taxidermy that considers an artistic vision.





One is not simply looking in on nature, for humans are stardust and of the earth (hence her juxtaposition of both space and animal). Kali gathers, connects with, and then via an artistic process has over a period, developed a language. **It is a kind of post science, post history, post (post) modern vantage point where mind, heart and senses coalesce.**

Playing her alter-ego, Dr Kali, her work appears to straddle the line between painting and photography, the sculptural and the installation or found-object. **It is a taxidermy, a secular enterprise and yet a holy place of worship.**

Published Cape Times Monday, July 31
2017

They may Stridulate or Vibrate

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

120 x 80cm

Edition 1/5 + 2 AP



Dark Twin, Dragonfly 44

2018
archival inks on cotton rag paper
Edition 1/9 + 2 AP
73 x 73cm



Call of the Void

2018
archival inks on cotton rag paper
Edition 1/9 + 2 AP
73 x 73cm



Excursions to Unspecified Destinations

2018
archival inks on cotton rag paper
Edition 1/9 + 2 AP
73 x 73cm

Lithops Dialogues in the Diaspora
2018
archival inks on cotton rag paper
Edition 1/9 + 2 AP
73 x 73cm





cryptid on last tree

2017

glass, wood, wax, kelp,
insect and reptile specimens

30 x 30 x 44cm

Art at Iziko brings Earth's wonders to light in darkness

Lucinda Jolly

Science was artist Kali van der Merwe's first love, but she was put off by the idea of wearing a white lab coat, and this aversion pushed her in the direction of the arts.

Her love of science, however, particularly in relation to the natural world, remains intact and underpins all her artistic output.

There is a popular misconception that science and the art are, at best, uncomfortable bedfellows and, at worst, occupy separate, sealed silos.

However, master painter and polymath Leonardo da Vinci is considered to be the first western scientist.

Without science there would have been no deep perspective or profound understanding of proportion. Another Renaissance man, Albrecht Durer, influenced anatomy and map making with his drawings. He was responsible for the creation of a perspectival map considered to be the very first perspectival interpretation of a “terrestrial hemisphere”.

Contemporary artists such as conceptual painter Gerhard Richter show how art can be hugely influenced by science. His series of paintings titled Silicate were influenced by an article he read, illustrated by photographs taken through a microscope that showed silicates in the carapaces of insects, which create an iridescent effect.

van der Merwe’s exhibition, *After Life*, is housed in the Iziko South African Museum.

The positioning of exhibitions in this space indicates the shifting role of museums, reflecting the trend of interfacing disciplines. She writes that “this exhibition speaks to a reinterpretation of the museum specimen guided by plays of my imagination rather than organised by any systematic reasoning”.

Hunt my Tongue

2018

archival inks on cotton rag paper

Edition 1/9 + 2 AP

73 x 73cm





Source of all That is to Be

2017

archival inks on cotton rag
paper

120 x 80cm

Edition 1/5 + 2 AP

To create her composite photographs of creatures, she uses a photographic technique called light painting or drawing. It's a process executed in the dark and depends on long exposures and a moveable, hand-held light source.

Unlike a specimen seen by the human eye, it provides incredible detail. Every pore, each scale, every hair gives her images a hyper-real or three-dimensional pop-out effect.

AfterLife provides a clue to van der Merwe's approach, which also hints at her adopted name. The Hindu mother goddess Kali was empowered with the twin poles of creation and destruction.

van der Merwe refrains from any form of killing. Instead, she waits for the creatures she uses in her art to come to the end of their natural life span, or she collects road kill. The images in AfterLife "open an aperture on the mysteries of life through the lens of death", she says.

Her intention is "to stimulate wonder, curiosity and deeper connection to the creatures and plants we share our existence with". van der Merwe's imagination may be fantastical, but it draws inspiration from the natural world. "I am re-imagining and re-imaging alternate paths that evolution could have taken," she says.

Illusory Truth

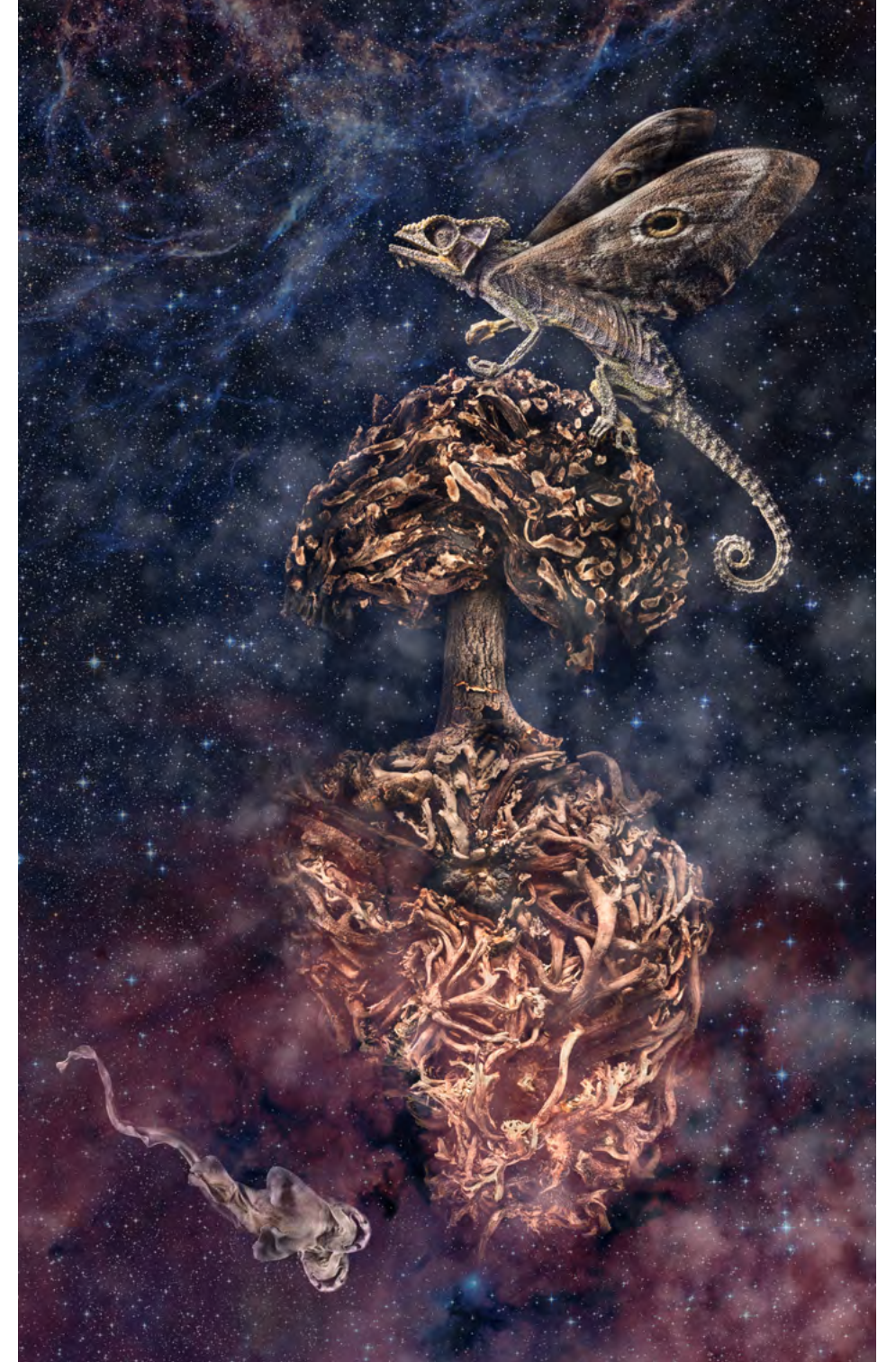
2017

archival inks on

cotton rag paper

Edition 1/5 + 2 AP

120 x 80cm





Spirit of Disorder

2017
 archival inks on cotton rag
 paper
 90 x 60cm
 Edition 1/8 + 2 AP



Into Being from the Shadow

2017
 archival inks on cotton rag
 paper
 60 x 90cm
 Edition 1/8 + 2 AP

The Heinous Chain of Being
2017
glass, wood, wax, bones,
mammal and reptile specimens
30 x 30 x 44cm

Through her animations and composite photographs, she invests her creatures — including a genet, raptor and bee — with a virtual immortality. “I reanimate road-kill victims into perpetual motion films to honour their lives and mourn their senseless deaths.”

As if dipped in a metallic glitter, her supersized fynbos flowers and coiled serpents, gleaned from Baardskeerdersbos in the Overberg where she lives, have set her home ablaze with a swirling cosmos background of fizzing stars, courtesy of the Hubble telescope. Bell jars precariously perched on tyre towers contain the waxed remains of creatures in strange constellations that can be closely eyeballed with magnifying glasses.



Fatal Resurrection ii

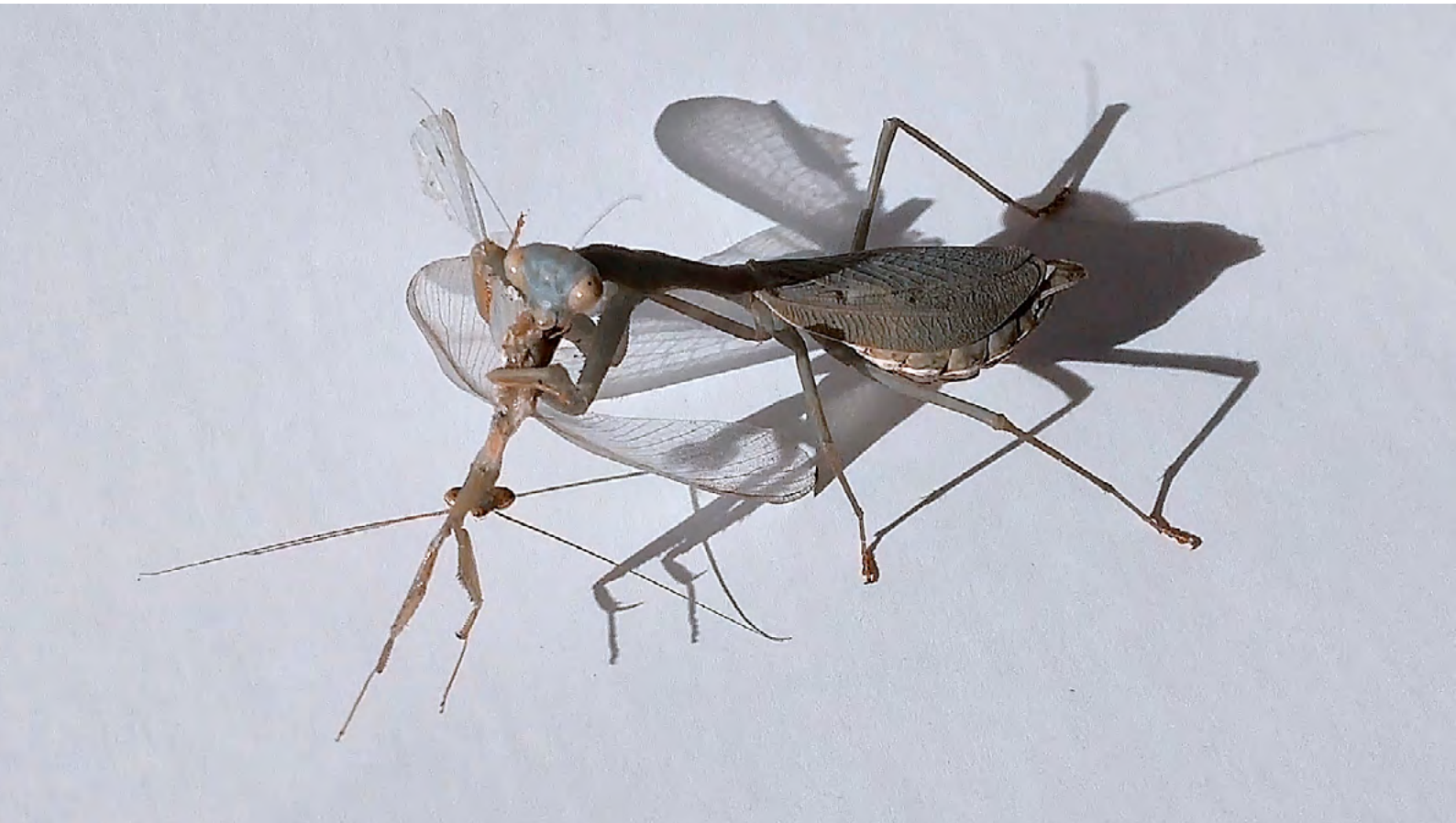
2018

One Channel Video Installation

Conitinous Cycle 37 min 16s

Dimensions Variable

Edition unlimited



Her drawers are filled with natural wonders that can be handled. Visitors can stroke the soft fur of a stuffed genet or marvel at the cascade of a butterscotch-coloured moulted skin of a six-metre Burmese python. An animation shows a female praying mantis noisily chomping her way through a male from the head down.

The praying mantis spent her eight-month lifespan in van der Merwe's company. A ferocious hunter, when presented with van der Merwe's finger she would alight and allow herself to be carried to the windows to harvest flies. The artist wept when the mantis died.

Circular stickers on the floor of her home exhibit the extinct plant species that human footprints have erased.



The Burden
 2017
 glass, wood, stone, string, bird specimen
 53 x 53cm



Emptiness is Form
 2017
 glass, wood, snakeskin
 53 x 53cm



The Threat
 2017
 glass, wood, metal, bird specimen
 53 x 53cm



We are Connected
 2017
 glass, wood, shark specimen, thread, pills
 53 x 53cm



In and Out of Existence

2018

glass, wood, wax, bones,
insect, fish, bird, reptile
specimens, buck scat
34 x 34 x 53cm

At a time when Earth is in ecological peril, the images in After Life give pause for reflection, bringing to attention the natural beauty on the planet, ignored by many because of the frantic pace of urban lives.

The exhibition is a celebration of the magnificence of the natural world and a reminder of humans' responsibility as stewards of the earth rather than its conquerors.

It underlines the fact that without the natural world, we humans cannot exist.

Published Business Day June 7 2018

Impossible Unity Beyond All

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

40 x 60cm

Edition 1/15 + 2 AP



Improbable Unreality of Reality is Obvious

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

40 x 57,5cm

Edition 1/15 + 2 AP





Divine Nemesis

2018

archival inks on cotton rag paper

Edition 1/9 + 2 AP

73 x 73cm

Fragments of Divine Light

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

40 x 57,5cm

Edition 1/15 + 2 AP



Everywhere Within

2017

archival inks on cotton rag paper

40 x 60cm

Edition 1/15 + 2 AP





Not yet to be Non Being
2017
archival inks on cotton rag
paper
120 x 80cm
Edition 1/5 + 2 AP



Installation of After Life in Kings Map Room at Iziko South African Museum
photo credit: Niels Bastiaansen



Installation of After Life in Kings Map Room at Iziko South African Museum
photo credit: Niels Bastiaansen

B I O G R A P H Y

KALI VAN DER MERWE (b. Johannesburg 1964) re-named herself after the fierce Indian goddess of creation and destruction.

Kali graduated with an honours degree majoring in sculpture from Michaelis School of Fine Arts, University of Cape Town. Post formal study, she worked in the mediums of ceramics, printmaking and sculpture, exhibiting at galleries nationally and internationally.

Kali unpicked her formal art school education living an experimental lifestyle in Berlin in the early nineties. She began working with sound, filmed images, slides, photographs, light sculptures and serigraphs, collaborating with various underground collectives of the time.

Returning to a democratic South Africa she extended her interest in filmmaking to become a documentary filmmaker. Based in Cape Town, her work combined social issue filmmaking with creative social development and her collaborative documentaries won multiple local and international best film and jury awards at film festivals.

Seven years ago, a series of entheogen awakenings made it no longer possible to live in the noise and bustle of the city. Kali found creative refuge on a farm near the remote village of Baardskeerdersbos, in the Western Cape. In this rural space and silence, she embarked on an intense, three year series of archetypal, mythological, photographic self-portraits using light painting as a transformative technique. During this time she lost her eyesight and had it dramatically restored via cataract eye operations.

Concurrent to self exploration, *fynbos*, indigenous forests, wildlife and insects in her immediate surroundings became subjects of inspiration, gradually devleoping into her main focus. Kali sees herself as a visual advocate on behalf of wild, fragile indigenous flora and fauna, encouraging people to observe and connect.

www.kali.co.za

After Life

2018

3 Channel Video Installation
with Lazer Projection
Conitinous Cycle 25s
Dimensions Variable
Edition unlimited



A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Astronomy photographic credits:

STScI (Space Telescope Science Institute) / NASA / ESA / Hubble (European Space Agency) / ESO (European Southern Observatory)

Contributors to the exhibition:

ArtLab, Iziko Museums of South Africa, ORMS, Suzi Holtzhausen of Salt Coast Fine Foods and Inn, Rupert Koopman from Cape Nature, Gerhard van Deventer from

C O N T A C T D E T A I L S

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