

## A State of Nature

Kali van der Merwe

With this new body of work, Kali van der Merwe advances her ongoing project exploring the animate proximity between human beings and other life forms through threshold moments within the natural world. Photographed in an ancient indigenous coastal forest on the slopes of the Baviaanspoort Hills, the presence of the artist's naked body in these fiercely intimate self-portraits signals the immersive, self-reflexive nature of her investigation.

'The forest where these images were created is a remnant forest, a fragment of the once majestic forests that populated Southern Africa millions of years ago before being subsumed by the more hardy and fire-resistant fynbos,' she writes. 'It is situated within a coastal belt of the Southern tip of the African continent, an area that is being recognised as the birthplace of humankind's ancestry and cultural modernity. The world's oldest abstract art dating back 70 000 years has been discovered within this belt at Blombos Cave. This precious sliver of forest survives precariously as an endangered eco system, threatened by irregular rainfall, scorching summers, fires from neighbouring farms, quad-bike enthusiasts and invasions from alien vegetation.'

Here, van der Merwe presents an alternate vision of wilderness. Recalling ecstatic pagan scenes from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she enters the fertile shape-shifting realm of the forest, a world that features prominently in folktales and legends across time and cultures. In this dark, mysterious terrain, heroes can lose their way, face perilous challenges, and stumble on previously unfathomable secrets. From fairies, to nymphs, sprites, dryads and goddesses, tree deities are present in many cultures, from Indian and Thai folklore, to Greek mythology and ancient Northern European lore.

'I insert myself into this delicate balance giving authorship and agency to my naked female body. Vulnerable in my stripped state, I call attention to the forest's fragility. Yet I also intend my female flesh to honour the forest's longevity and ability to survive,' writes Van der Merwe, recalling the spirit of the Dryads and Hamadryads, two types of wood nymphs that feature in Greek mythology. These female nature spirits were thought to inhabit trees and forests, and were believed to be especially fond of oak trees. According to legend, Eurydice, the beautiful, but ill-fated wife of Orpheus, was killed by

a snake when she tried to escape from the unwelcome amorous advances of Aristaeus, demonstrating the idea that these nymphs were not immortal. On the contrary, they were believed to be vulnerable beings – the hamadryads even more so, their lives depending on the health and well being of the trees they inhabited. Visually recalling legend, these images obliquely draw attention to the vulnerability of trees in an age of mass deforestation.

The mythology of early India, preserved in the Upanishads, a collection of Vedic texts which contain the earliest instances of some of the central concepts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, includes a cosmic tree called Ashvattha (the Sacred Fig). Its roots are in the sky, and its branches grow downward to cover the earth, these connected realms constituting Brahman, the world spirit, beyond which there is nothing else. The tree emerges as a symbol of wisdom in Buddhist texts, which narrate the tale of Gautam Buddha meditating and gaining spiritual enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree.

Similarly, in Norse cosmology, the world tree, Yggdrasil – with its roots buried deep in the earth, its trunk above ground, and its branches stretching toward the sky – runs like an axis, or pole, through this world, connecting the realms above and below it. Yggdrasil was an immense ash tree that nourished gods, humans, and animals, connecting all living things and all phases of existence.

Conjuring a primordial, magical spirit, the images in van der Merwe's *State of Nature* series recall elements from all these age-old narratives, actively resuscitating the shared ideas that people have had about trees across time and geography. In one image, a naked man and woman navigate a tangle of trees in a state of anguish or disgrace. The woman hides her face and the man covers his body, as if in shame, recalling the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden from the book of Genesis. In this Biblical tale, God orders the first man and woman not to eat the fruit of two sacred trees – the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Disobeying him, they eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and become aware of guilt, shame, and sin. God casts them out of the garden before they can eat the fruit of the Tree of Life, which would make them immortal. From then on, they and their descendants have to live in a world that includes sin and death.

As a medium, photography was initially hailed for its mimetic capacities of verisimilitude or exactitude, its ability to mechanically reproduce an image, faithfully recording the immediate documentary realities of the everyday. Since photography's invention in the early decades of the 19th century,

using a camera has given people the ability to capture more detail and information than traditional media, like painting and sculpture. Yet, with the strange and unpredictable effects of the play of light on a light-sensitive surface, photography also has the capacity to capture ghostly presences and fleeting moods, inscribing the medium's equally long history of entanglement in the realm of metaphysics. From the daguerreotype post-mortem portraits favoured by the Victorians, to the paranormal research instigated by the discovery of Kirlian photography (thought to show a life force or energy field that reflected the physical and emotional states of living subjects), to the controversy surrounding the photographs of the Cottingley Fairies, which came to the attention of writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who used them to illustrate an article on fairies he had been commissioned to write for the Christmas 1920 edition of *The Strand Magazine*, photographs have been bound up in beliefs in magic and the supernatural. As a spiritualist, Doyle eagerly interpreted the Cottingley Fairy photographs as clear evidence of psychic phenomena. It only emerged much later, in the early 1980s that the photographs were faked, but their hold on the public imagination endures.

Similarly, the stripped human bodies in these photographs have an incorporeal aspect, hovering in the atmosphere around them, as they echo the shapes of the leaves, trunks and gnarled roots of the forest around them, never quite fully merging with the trees. van der Merwe eschews digital manipulation relying purely on the mysterious interplay of time and light to capture some aspect of her intuitive performances within the shifting, dappled illumination of the forest. 'My presence is translucent,' she writes. 'I find ecstatic communion with the arboreal world, allowing it to penetrate me. Visual osmosis occurs through permeable skin. I merge and boundaries are blurred in intimate co-mingling.' In this sense, this body of work can be seen to contribute to a long lineage of photography that explores the mystic and supernatural aspects of the human psyche in relation to the natural world.

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