



Virginia MacKenny

Strand/Shore

2019-2021

FIELD NOTES

The exhibition 'Strand/Shore' marks a liminal and uncertain space - a sensory threshold between land and water; a shifting edge, uncertainty. Beyond the implications of a geographical shoreline, the words 'strand' and 'shore' are verbs. To strand is to beach or run aground, while to 'shore up' is to bolster or prop up something in danger of collapse. These ideas conjoin in the time of COVID in and between Cape Town in the Western Cape – the site of the first Dutch settlers in South Africa, and Swakopmund on Namibia's Skeleton Coast – a notoriously dangerous and inhospitable coastline where death and loss are marked everywhere in the remains of animals, plants, and ships. At the end of a seven-year drought within this terrain, however, there are also extraordinary indicators of endurance, tenacity and adaptations for survival.

These notes reference experiences generated in and between the two coastal towns. They are a mix of disparate elements, both personal and factual, cohered not only by the time of the Corona virus pandemic in which they are produced, but by the understanding that all things are in conversation - that, as Feminist theoretical physicist Karen Barad's ideas of complex intra-active relationality posit, everything is always in the making. The work explores understandings of matter which narrow the divide between land/earth and human in a manner that is historically relational in two countries still haunted by the ghosts of colonisation.

The notes reflect on a time of confinement and expansion, of isolation and connection, of alienation and intimacy. They engage the possibilities of healing and rejuvenation.

Fragments from a notebook. A partial view.

A synopsis.

December 19, 2019: arrival Walvis Bay, Namibia, for a 10-day visit.

A 7-year drought has stripped an already lean land to the bone.

The space is overwhelming. So little and so much. The sparseness of the landscape. Horizontality dominates. The verticality of a pole on the horizon becomes something that snags the eye, that one hangs onto. The experience sears.

Gifted a woodrose (variously known as mistletoe or lighted candle) - a semi-parasite, *Tapinanthus oleifolius*. It reminds me of images of the Big Bang and other explosions.

Travel into the Namib Naukluft Park – the Namib is the oldest desert in the world, its dunes are the highest in the world.

The drought is interminable. Animals have to travel far to get water. An Oryx, attempting to jump a fence, gets its legs caught in the wires. Its death is slow. No-one checks the fences to release it.

A dune goes dark. A rainbow appears above it.

January 1, 2020 early hours: I awake from a nightmare. I dream the world is filled with an invisible presence on the wind. People cannot breathe. They are going to die. It is so intense I record it in my diary.

I learn later that on Dec. 31, 2019 the Chinese government gives its first international notice of a

'pneumonia' outbreak in Wuhan, China. Later identified by health authorities as a novel Corona virus the first death is reported in China on January 11, 2020.

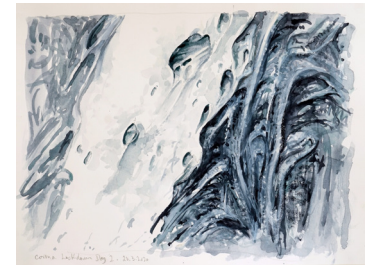
A planned return trip to Namibia in March 2020 is cancelled due to border closures between South Africa and Namibia.

Hard lockdown: March 27 – April 30, 2020.

We are told it will last three weeks. I start with the idea of making a work a day. I fail to make good on this thought. I do produce some work that speaks to this idea. The first is a watercolour painting of an oil painting I'm making, but abandon – the first work done in response to the pandemic – a sticky smeary abstraction of thick grey paint. It is the only equivalent I can generate to give form to the feeling of uncertainty I have – that I am walking into a heavy fog with no clear boundaries – a fog with a certain solidity, a certain stickiness. Translating an oil painting into a watercolour is counter-intuitive - on one level absurd – it's forcing watercolour to do what it is not really designed to do – treating it a bit like gouache, a bit like oil, but not watercolour. It has none of the transparency or fluency associated with the medium. It has a sort of 'stuck' feel. Which, I suppose, is what we all are.

April 2, 2020: a self-portrait – eyes above mask. What can I see? What can be seen?

April 12, 2020: Easter Mass, online, direct from Rome in a nearly empty St Peters. Italy has the highest number of cases in Europe - 156,353 and nearly 20 000





deaths. The army are called in to help move the dead. A few attendant clergy and accompanying choristers are gathered for the mass, but no crowds pack the building, no-one within the embrace of Bernini's piazza. Pope Francis - a man carrying so much for others. I sit in front of my computer screen making watercolours of the mass. Listening to the sermon on compassion for the homeless. So many more now knocking on my front door which is directly onto the street. I see the place of Faith evacuated. The Pope alone on his balcony. Intimate. Distant. I see the solitary man. I see us all although we are not there. The streets are empty.



April 30, 2020 6-9am: a door opens onto a couple of hours into the open air. It is winter and the days are short; the fear of that which might lurk in the dark cuts our outside time to an hour or so. But the park and the beauty of the grass, its greenness so green, and the lush wetlands sweep of the Liesbeek River, rejuvenates. Home to the Cape Rain Frog, the endangered Leopard Toad, the Cape Clawless Otter. The Cape Lion once roamed here. Now herons, sunrise on mists, spiders' webs glistening in the early light, pink buds poking their morning heads through the green, dogs, walkers. Those who had not been out for weeks. Homeless people by the river – those who had not been in for years. It is near here that Jan van Riebeeck builds his first fort in 1652 and the first settler farms are granted in 1657 - here the first "free burghers" of the Dutch East India Company are created.

Once in flood the river washes right through the shacks. Shoes float while mattresses are heavy and soggy with

wetness. A sign asking for donations – mentioning that suicide is being considered – noting "I don't do drugs".

Communication is thin. Closeness distant.

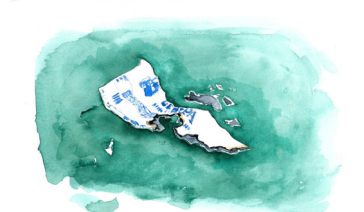
A homeless man knocks on my door. He asks for a book. "A book?" I query. "What kind of book?", afraid I will have nothing on my shelves, loaded with art history and theory, to suit his needs. "A thesaurus" he says. "I want to find more words for things" ...

The windows into people's lives – seeing others.

Windows online. I meet my friends digitally. My colleagues too. Greeting. I meet my students online. It's tentative, and frustrating, but surprisingly a fair amount can be achieved. Interminable Zoom staff meetings. I doodle. I do a lot of little portraits as I sit and watch in meetings. I am not a portrait painter. Over time, as people realise the cost of bandwidth - that less video gives better audio - the windows onto others go blank – replaced by black circles with people's initials. No way to tell how the group is responding - how what you say has been received. Utterly alienating.

June 8, 2020 I sit through a long meeting.

I develop a headache. I take a headache powder. I scrunch up the paper. I play with matches. I set the paper alight. I make a watercolour of the half-burnt headache paper.



Communicating. Visually.

The sharing of photographs. Conversations with a photographer.

Working with Namibian photographer Margaret Courtney-Clarke on her book: *When Tears Don't Matter*. Finding ways to engage with the sequencing of images of Namibia's most benighted people – those who call themselves Bushmen; a people caught between worlds. I am writing the foreword.



August/September 2020: I escape my home. I escape the door onto the street which has become fraught with the needs of others. I escape the ragged lurching city. I escape my incapacity. I go to a smallholding and live in a house in the trees. I paint chickens. I paint artificial buck – targets for hunting with red circles painted on their sides. Singular plastic representations that stand in for the herds that once roamed there.

I think of the youth who still hunt porcupine in Namibia. I think of the photographs of their mimicking Hip Hop; the moves of city life, learnt not from real experience, but from Smart phones. So too young girls, taught the age-less rituals of rain prayers, pantomiming the language of the catwalk.

Images of dust and heat while it rains where I sit.

Trying to get it right without being in the same room.
without being in the same place.

Getting it wrong. Getting it right. Maybe.

I note a curious habit in many of Courtney-Clarke's photographic compositions: she often aligns elements that are close to the viewer to those in the background - disturbingly flattening space. When queried on this Courtney-Clarke ripostes visually, unrepentantly, with a photograph taken in her backyard in Swakopmund. It contains a perfect conjunction of points – the tip of a burial stone marking her dogs' graves aligning both with an aloe growing behind it and a paint line on the building in the background. I respond with a watercolour: converting the aloe to a tree on a rock with the sea in the distance. Unwittingly I paint the first image of what is to become the NearandFar Tree.

The NearandFar Tree

A story about a tree on a rock on the edge of a desert shore. A story of aloneness and resilience and rootedness.

A story of distance and proximity.

A conversation bridging the gap - about intimacy across the divide, connecting with where one isn't, and where one is.

A children's story for adults. An adult story for children. Flattening space.





Conversations across Borders

Walks along beaches provide glimpses into crevices licked by spume. Photographs received become prompts for watercolours. A watery edge along a desert terrain. Wetness in dry lands. A glistening protrusion. Softening rocks. Intimations of closeness along the boundaries of intimacy. Ripples across sand dunes. Reverberations traverse the skin of the earth.

November 2020: Spitzkoppe – its malleable orange mounds mount up like body recumbent, breasts to the sky.

Spitzkoppe – iron bearing oxides and red ochre mark rocks where others used to live.

My palette changes. Every ground on every canvas is red orange rust. Raw Sienna. Burnt Sienna.

I have been given Cecil Skotnes' box of oils. He is known for his use of earth pigments. I use its colours. Venetian Red. Mars Red. Alien terrain.

Namibia – an open space, a fraught space, a demanding space.



January 2021: A road trip up the west coast of Southern Africa.

We see the rain on the horizon. It sweeps in, greying out the mountains.

A four-day stop at the Vioolsdrift South Africa/Namibian border to procure a negative COVID-19 PCR test.

White rabbits and springbok meet in the garden.

A succulent tree in the car park is pinioned in the night by the white glare of a security light.

We cross. We have our test. If we stay we will have to quarantine. We cross back. We wait.

It rains. It floods.

We cross again. Borders and boundaries dissolve.

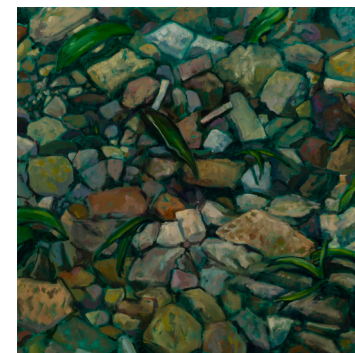
The land is empty of tourists. The roads are open. The Fish River Canyon car park designed for towering tour busses is bare. The canyon pitches us over its edge.

The ground is stony. As far as the eye can see. Tesserae of browns and greys, ochres, rusts, blue whites and creams, lilacs. Between the stones surprises - small green points thrust through. From a distance a mist of green hovers over the ground's surface.

The Naute Dam is 120% full. Its edge brims over. All four sluice gates are opened. The farmlands below are flooded. They shine like silver in the eve of the day.

The Nama genocide occurred here.

The Nama Herero San genocides waged by the German



Empire in 1904-08. These were the first genocides of the 20th century.

In 1915 the South African secretary for South West Africa's administration banned "Bushman hunting" with explicit instructions: "The farmers must be told that shooting of Bushmen will no longer be permitted and will be prosecuted with all the rigour of the law". (Gordon)



Red runs across this land. Red runs deep in this land.

Namibia has no perennial rivers. It rains. The roads wash away. The rivers run. We wash in the red brown running water.

Quiver trees (*Aloidendron dichotomum*) grow here. The Quiver Tree Forest, near Keetmanshoop, is a National Heritage site. Protected. Quiver trees are climate indicators. They are highly sensitive to temperature. Their branches, exceptionally light and easily hollowed, were used by the San to make quivers for their arrows – hence the name.

Sometimes known as the upside down tree because its branches look like roots.

February 2020: San leaders petition to stop ReConAfrica, a Canadian mining company, in its plans to frack and drill for oil in the shale rock basin in the Okavango Delta.

February 14, 2021: Brandberg near Uis: Elephant Cave: - a walk at sunset to see the 'pools' in an area that has been dry for the last seven years. Hollows in the rock filled by recent rains. The gift within is greater than anticipated. Yellow waterlilies float on the surface - the water plant *Aponogeton Desertorum*. In Namibia some plants are called Resurrection plants because they can survive extreme degrees of desiccation. This may be one of them. The man who shows us the pool has never seen them before. It hasn't rained for years after all. They are like small miracles in the orange-pink of the evening sun.

There are other flower species in Namibia which evoke the biblical; the *Commiphora*: Corkwood (Eng) or *kanniedood* (Afr.) - a plant known for providing healing balms and myrrh fragrance.

Welwitschia mirabilis, endemic to the Namib desert, sprawls across a ferric red rocky land. Welwitschias have only two leaves which they never shed throughout their long lives - these tear and become tattered ribbons, but always remain. A Welwitschia 500 years old is still young.



Sand and rocks dominate. Near the Messum Crater, a collapsed volcano in the Goboboseb Mountains, I pick up a rock with an orange rust stripe running through it. Strata of time compressed into one body. Holding place, holding time.





Salt on the coastline. Every coastline in every land. Here chunks of pink crystal glistening in fractured facets on boards of weathered wood are displayed for sale with an 'honesty' jar for tourists who have not passed through for nearly a year. Salt, from which the word salary comes. Here it is for the taking. The human body can't live without salt. We need sodium as an electrolyte to contract and relax muscle fibres, maintain fluid balance, transmit nerve impulses - to make connections.

The body does not exist independently. It is vulnerable on its own.

February 23, 2021: sight drops out of my one eye. That's the only way I can describe it. Gaps in vision - like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. I have lost my focal point - I can't see the tip of my brush. I try to paint and can only jab vaguely in the direction of the canvas. Macular degeneration as a term rears large. I print Amsler grids - the tool that ophthalmologists use to detect vision problems resulting from damage to the macula (the central part of the retina) or the optic nerve, to check whether areas of the visual field are missing.

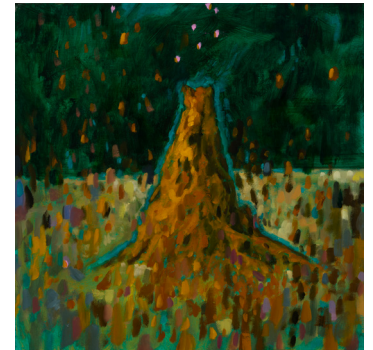
I track what I can and can't see over the days that follow. The little dot in the middle hovers in greyneess, in and out of view. The topography of sight changes on the grid - unfixed. Its contours ebb and flow. The grid - that all controlling standard of regularity - stands firm, beyond my grasp.

I see the optometrist. Who recommends a retinal specialist. I go to the Windhoek Eye Centre. I get to see inside the sphere of my eye - orange red it evokes the terrain of Mars. The scans do not pick up the problem. As he says; "high myopes are difficult". I have been wearing glasses since the age of 6. My myopia is now such that every optometrist comments on it. He advises an injection - into the eye. I panic, but have it. Psychologically far more difficult than the actual discomfort. My eye weeps for 5 hours afterwards. On the drive back to Swakopmund I distract myself by counting anthills along the road in the Okahandja region. I photograph some of them. Orange towers thrusting up in the landscape. High energy efficient ventilation towers, that 'breathe'. The earth made home.

Home, too, to giant mushrooms - the *Omajova* (*Termitomyces shimperi*) that grow from the base of the termite mound after the rainy season. Mycelium - the great communication connecting channel of the plant world is cultivated by the termites into a fungal comb within the mound. A symbiotic relationship. The mushrooms sprout through the mud walls of the mound.

They are a delicacy. A friend brings some round. We grill them on the coals.

March 25, 2021: I return to Cape Town to have a second injection in the eye.



April 18, 2021: I hear the helicopters. A fire on Cape Town's Table Mountain spreads to the University of Cape Town. The call goes out to evacuate. Students stream past my door carrying bags, wheeling trolley cases. Trees on Main Road below the university burst into flame. Sirens. I douse the roof of my house. Spray the trees. I leave my home. I watch the smoke plume into the sky on the mountain from a distance.

The fire destroys the Jagger Reading Room, part of the UCT Libraries' Special Collections. The African Studies collection of irreplaceable archival documents goes up in flames.

The knowledge so long ignored, but kept safe, turns to ash. The call goes out to anyone with a photograph or copy to send it in. To help piece it together again.

April 30, 2021: Pippa Skotnes, curator of the Bleek and Lloyd archive at the University of Cape Town, heads up the rescue of documents. She notes on her Facebook page "on top of the pile of rescued drawings in the Bleek and Lloyd collection, is one by !Nanni a boy from the northern border of Namibia with Angola made on the 18th April 1880, showing the sticks used to make fire".

141 years later to the day.

Time and place collide. Layered strata collapse into one moment.

The Living Language Land project is working for COP – the UN Climate Change Conference to be held in Britain this year. They aim to collate words from minority language groups. Seeking to voice other ways of being in the world.

I am asked to participate. I am an English dominant speaker. I cannot speak in this terrain. I ask assistance. Sylvia Vollenhoven speaks with the San elders in Cape Town. She presents a word.

/xau or /xaun

To go on a magical expedition. To shoot with magic arrows.

From 'A Bushman Dictionary' by Dorothea Frances Bleek - a South African-born German philologist. Bleek was born in Mowbray, where I live.

May 6, 2021 3.45 am: I am awake. I hear the trains. At least I think I hear the trains, their sound coming in on the East Wind. I see a flash in the night sky – it's lightning. It rains in Swakopmund – I photograph the drops on the window pane as proof. It rains. In the 0% rain belt.

Wonder and miracles.

I keep joining the dots.... making pictures, following Paul Klee's famous dictum – "A line is a dot that went for a walk" ...making connections. Constellations whirl.



May 25, 2021: Africa Day. I visit the Swakopmund cemetery. The section known as the Genocide graveyard. Many small mounds in the sand – unmarked. I meet Laidlaw Peringanda who heads up the Namibian Genocide Society. They are cleaning the graves. Not only Herero lie here, but Nama and San.

May 27, 2021: Germany acknowledges the Nama-Herero genocide. Officially. It agrees to pay €1.1 billion. It asks for forgiveness.

The debate about reparations continues.

June 2021: I visit Twyfelfontein (a doubtful or unreliable spring). Proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage it is home to some 2500 San petroglyphs or rock engravings. They are made by pitting the rockface with a stone. Clustering the resultant dots forms tones or makes an outline. The engravings include a section for teaching children how to identify animals and read spoor. How to follow the dots in the sand. How to make sense of the world. How to know one's world. How to survive.

The Namib Skeleton Coast National Park stretches along the entire Atlantic coast of Namibia. Along its northern border is the Red Line, a veterinary cordon fence or pest-exclusion fence created in 1896 by the German Empire hoping to contain a Rinderpest outbreak. The boundary has maintained its politics. To its south farms are demarcated by fences. To the north they are communal.

The lines that divide. The lines that connect.

The wrecks of ships dot the coastline. The wrecks of lives. The graves of many.

Lichen, barely visible except as a mauvish brown haze, survives by unfurling when the morning fog rolls in across the Skeleton Coast. The small demands attention.

Sand particles. The grains that make up the shore. Trillions of shining dots. Upon which we beach.

The land here is dominated by sand and rocks. Rocks – the building blocks of most forms of life when rendered down to soil.

Taking that in.

An in-breath.

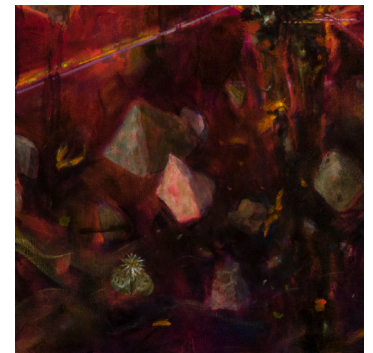
An inspiration.

We are the Earth Walking

Flattening space. It matters. In the history of western painting centuries were spent investing the canvas with illusions of space. Separating out. Creating distinctions between things. The painting a window onto the world. Observing from a distance.

We have trained ourselves well in separation. Now we are learning, must relearn, to reconnect.

Flattening space. Everything becomes one.



Details: *Of Holes and Things*



Of Holes and Things, 2021, oil on acrylic on canvas 160 x 200 cm

References

Gordon, Robert (2021) The Forgotten Bushman Genocide
<https://www.namibian.com.na/102659/read/The-Forgotten-Bushman-Genocide> 18.06.2021

Cover photograph © M.Courtney-Clarke