

Cutis et Ossium



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ABSTRACT

Inspired by my nostalgia for my home country's diminishing natural wildlife and the fragmented memories of observing them as a child in the rural landscape of South Africa, *Cutis et Ossium* is an investigation on the symbolic metamorphosis of collected animal bones and remnants of skin, transformed into object specimens, contextualised in objects and jewellery pieces. I aim to preserve the delicate details and sense of wonder I encountered upon finding these remnants in nature, portraying them as cherished artefacts. Their fragility and impermanence are conveyed through the use of glass as the main material, while further symbolism and emotion are captured through the discerning use of colour and form.

The result is a contemporary cabinet of curiosities titled *Cutis et Ossium* i.e. *Skin and Bones*, questioning the possibility of the human body to function as a cabinet for these artificial curiosities when worn. Through a novel fusion of bio-morphic abstracted forms in glass with replicated organic remnants in metal, I seek to create a form of visual fiction that delivers a moment of introspection, attraction and repulsion. The forms can be described as slightly recognisable, yet simultaneously unidentifiable, because they are abstracted derivatives of reality. In my work there is a strong symbiosis between the artificial and the natural, representing the human interference with nature, when I transform natural found objects into artefacts. The jewellery depicts curious specimens of exaggerated mutations, envisaging what could happen to fauna in the future, if humans continue with practices that pollute and alter the environment.

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Figure 1: Selected works from *Cutis et Ossium*, M Viljoen, 2020

INTRODUCTION

This study mainly focuses on the symbolic metamorphosis of collected animal bones and remnants of skin, transformed through bio-morphic abstraction into abject specimens, contextualised in a contemporary cabinet of curiosities of artefacts and jewellery pieces.

My contemporary cabinet of curiosities *Cutis et Ossium* is an arrangement of peculiar specimens, much like the scientifically accurate flowers and sea creatures made by Rudolf and Leopold Blashka (ASTRID, N and Van Giffen, R, 2015) in the 19th century, exquisitely replicated in glass, but in contrast, entirely fictional.

My artistry and nature should be inextricably bound, as stated by Maria Sibylla Merian, naturalist and artist (TODD, K, 2007): “Art and nature shall always be wrestling until they eventually conquer one another so that the victory is the same stroke and line: that which is conquered, conquers at the same time”.

I aim to transform organic found objects, combining glass and metal into new mutated forms, some wearable as contemporary jewellery pieces. Thus, questioning the possibility of the human body to function as the display cabinet for the curiosities when worn.

Symbolism is captured through the selective use of colour, form and the material. The jewellery voices my nostalgia for my home country’s diminishing natural wildlife and fragmented memories of observing them as a child in the rural landscape. I have an impulse to preserve the delicate details and sense of wonder I encountered upon finding these capriciously attractive remnants in nature, portraying them as cherished artefacts, to reveal to the world.

Their fragility and impermanence are conveyed by visualising fictionally distorted specimens through a fusion of the natural fragments with fluid, biomorphic forms in glass. Accordingly, this process forms a strong symbiosis between the artificial and the natural, representing the human interference with nature, when I transform natural found objects into artefacts.



Figure 2: Organic objects collected (by means of photography) in South African landscape by the artist, Eland skin and bones, M Viljoen

BACKGROUND AND KEY TERMS

The symbolism is a vehicle of my emotions, memories and nostalgia of my birthplace from which I have collected most of the found objects and organic material for the pieces produced from this study. The act of collecting is a contemplative experience which brings forth my memories of care-free days spent exploring the South African landscape on a wildlife farm as a young child. Circumstances have changed, and I am unable to return to that specific landscape. Concurrently, the world has become less natural and more plastic, causing possible mutations in natural wildlife and I feel an urge to express my concern and thoughts about these environmental oddities.

Through a meticulous combination of bio-morphic abstraction with realism, I seek to create a form of visual fiction that delivers a moment of introspection, attraction and repulsion.

As a collector of natural found objects, specimens, fragments and remnants of once-living fauna subjects, I have been gathering these matters (Organic material, 2015) from nature since a young age, inspired by their peculiar nostalgic attraction and intrigued by their mysterious auras, their transition from living to inanimate objects. Certain materials and motifs approach emotion, channelling natural forces through organic materials, summoning animal rawness with weapon-like teeth, claws, horns and quills (RAMLJAK, S, 2014, p.8).

Moreover, it can be proclaimed that jewellery pieces are truly powerful bearers of messages, as we can attach symbolism and memories to it. Although it can be representative of an artwork, it is rather more intimate, as it can be worn and touched (TAY, M, 2015). Therefore, by transforming organic remnants into wearable adornments, I can express my nostalgia, concerns and emotions to the wearer or observer.

Collecting these symbolic rich remnants also entails seeking them out, locating, organising, cataloguing, displaying, storing and maintaining them. Interaction with these objects out of their natural habitat and original context stimulates me to create new art forms from them, as if they were transitioning to a new phase in their life-cycle, metamorphosing.

By placing all of these organic found objects alongside replicas, experimental materials and new creations together in a novel setting, I am juxtaposing the fictitious with true resemblances. Consequently, I hope to evoke a sense of my own contained parallel world - my own contemporary cabinet of curiosities (MACGREGOR, A and Impey, O, 2018).

Thematically, the work will concentrate on the combination of bio-morphic abstraction and naturalism (replication), to illustrate the new metamorphoses, symbolising the transcendence from the abject to art.



Figure 3: Myself, the artist, collecting animal bones in South African landscape (Photo JM Viljoen)

FOUND OBJECTS

Denoted by the French as *objets trouvés*, found objects can be shelved and treated as an artwork in themselves, or used to provide inspiration to the artist. Displayed in the Tate museum (Found objects, 2015), sculptor Henry Moore collected bones which he seems to have treated as natural sculptures as well as sources for his own work. Yet, found objects may also be adapted and reworked by the artist to be presented either intact or as part of an assembled piece of art (Found objects, 2015).

Natural found objects were not always given a symbolic value. For example, in the Victorian era, they were merely seen as curiosities or novelties to display in cabinets and were also used in jewellery (Figure 4) for such purposes (GERE, C and Rudoie, J, 2010).



Figure 4: Victorian Earrings made from head of a male red legged blue Creeper, circa 1875 © V&A, London

When the objects are found by the artist, they are taken out of their original context or habitat. They “metamorphose” to a new stage when they are put together with other objects, displayed in a collection, rearranged or grouped with certain objects or attached to the body as jewellery.

Collecting or gathering may imply having carefully selected and orderly arranged the found objects described earlier. If too many items are collected for the collector to keep track of or arrange, it turns into hoarding, which can be a more negative or a destructive form of collecting. Keeping this in mind,

I have made a selection criterion for myself when out in the veld collecting, detailed in the section on “Collecting”. I collect mostly the remnants (Figure 5) of small rodent and bird skulls and bones (Ossium), beetle shells and traces of skins (Cutis).



Figure 5: Organic found objects collected in South African landscape by the artist, M Viljoen

SKIN (CUTIS)

An animal's skin is its first contact with its environment and also the first organic remnant to decay and dissolve when the animal dies in the veld. Often only a trace of it remains by the time I find the specimen, delicate and beautiful in its fragility.

Skin often reveals age, wear and tear, a life lived. It carries memories, in the form of scars and wrinkles. It is versatile, as it can change from super soft to crackling hard and has many functions – protection, regulation and sensation. It has many symbolic meanings as well. Bare skin can show vulnerability, fragility or openness. A Beetle's skin, its hard shell i.e. exoskeleton, is by contrast associated with armour. The shell protects the delicate insides and can therefore symbolise resistance or strength.

Emotional expressions can be made detectable to others by the physical transformations of the skin, for example shown in goose bumps (cold, awestruck), blushing (shy, overwhelmed) and perspiration (warm, stress). Jewellery is also traditionally worn close to the skin.



Figure 6: Brooch by Martina Pont from the 'Asepsia' collection, organic tissue pieces, blown glass, 925 silver, brass, 18kt gold, 2012

Artist, Martina Pont aims to show the difference between exposing and exhibiting with her jewellery. She believes that in order to “make emotion visible, to unfold a sight to the inside, requires a work of balance, the sort of nakedness that becomes a coating.” (PONT, M, 2012). In Figure 6 she wraps animal innards (gut cords) over clear blown glass as a kind of new skin and barrier. Thereby exposing the usually hidden guts, now vulnerable and out of place, exhibited over the clean glass, which normally would have been the focal point of the art piece.

Artist jeweller Sanna Svedestedt’s work is focused on leather craft, thus she uses animal skin as a medium to communicate a connection between identity, heritage and culture. As an example in Figure 7 she is exploring how far she can push the boundaries of the material and of her time.



Figure 7: Sanna Svedestedt, Collier: Moments 2011, Leather, silver, pearls 3×3 cm, length on cord 60 cm

BONES (OSSIUM)

An animal’s bones, the skull and skeleton, are frequently the only intact parts to remain in the veld, long after it has died. Yet, I regard the bone remnants rather as symbols for life, as it is evidence of a life lived. The bones are the core of an animal’s body. It gives the animal its unique shape and protects and supports its vital organs. Contrary to skin, most of the functions of bones are hidden whilst the animal is living, yet when these crucial functions are no longer needed, due to the death of the animal, the bones are revealed.

Additionally, bones can be seen as vessels, because important minerals such as calcium and lipids are stored and carried in them. Symbolically the skeleton can also represent the true-self, as skin and flesh layers needs to be removed to reveal the bones.

Christoph Zellweger concurs that “bones are reminders of the living” (ZELLWEGER, C, 2019) and that their morphology tells stories that are crucial in finding meaning. By showcasing a collection in the last remaining cabinet that endured the destructive fire in 1978 at the Natural History Museum, his installation (Figure 8) refers to the convention of the Museum archive, where the unwritten memory of objects are stored.

To explore this evidence, Zellweger covered hundreds of bones with a second, artificial pink velvety skin and displayed them together as curiosities. Inside the showcase, the artefacts were orderly classified and illuminated under a cold light, bringing the mediated view on nature up for discussion.



Figure 8: Christoph Zellweger , *Ossarium Rose* installation (various materials), 2005

With closer inspection, these curious objects start to raise more questions, as they seem repulsive yet seductive at the same time. The same questions will be encountered when viewing my work. Their velvety surface and pink colour copy the morbidity of flesh or skin, yet velvet is a luxury

material associated with richness and seduction. Also noticeable is his alteration to the natural shapes of some bones in order to transform them into new ones of imaginary function. A tension between the fake and original, the natural and the artificial and the constructed and the grown is triggered in this way. Each bone can represent a fossil from the future (ZELLWEGER, C, 2019), an interesting concept which I am exploring in my own work.



Figure 9: Plastic mould examples of new specimens for making ‘future fossils’ in metal, M Viljoen

When discovering a fossil of an unknown creature, it is assumed that this creature lived in a time long ago and that it is now extinct. By combining slightly recognisable remnants of animal specimens with bio-morphed shapes or fragmented pieces of unrelated specimens (Figure 9), I am creating new fictional specimens and fossils (Figure 10). In a fast changing world, future generations might believe that these fictitious fossils may have existed in the past. To them, mutated specimens will perhaps not be such a mysterious or foreign concept as it still is today.



Figure 10: Wax models of 'future fossils' to be casted in Bronze, M Viljoen

Yet another artist, Jennifer Trask (TRASK, J, 2011) states that she is fascinated by the Victorian cabinets of curiosities which inspire her to create delicate, yet lavish objects and jewellery from found materials including shells, feathers, antlers, wood and bones. Her piece (Figure 11) made from carved bones, acts as a reminder of the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures and the impermanence of life, enthused by the tradition of Dutch *Vanitas* (TRASK, J, 2011). "What we carry with us in our bones" both metaphorically and physically, is the main subject Trask questions through her body of work (TAY, M, 2015). Trask adds that "bones are evidence of a life lived" (DUPON, O, 2012, p.265).

Trask did not want the focus on traditional expensive jewellery material, but rather bring out the meaning and symbolism of the natural found bone. She prefers to work with unconventional materials over diamonds, for the specific meanings which they can convey. In this instance, bones are used as it represents both life and death (TAY, M, 2015). Her jewellery expresses a romanticised vision of nature as opposed to the Victorian romanticised vision of death (DUPON, O, 2012, p.265).

As my eye catches the broken, fragmented specimens in the veld, admiring their fragility and delicacy, so Trask also attempts to address the familiar museum practice of isolating perfect examples of natural beauty and as a result - killing the imperfect, the individual. Thus, this object intends to reflect the viewer's complex relationship with his own raw intrinsic nature, being dominated by an ornamental, domesticated nature (TAY, M, 2015).



Figure 11: Jennifer Trask, *Germinate* necklace, 2010, Steel, brass, diamonds, mule deer antlers, cow bones, nutria teeth, pigeon skull, plastic, 14"x22", (TRASK, J, 2011)

“Grasping at permanence in a material that reinforces the reality of impermanence” (TRASK, J, 2011). Just like any cell with an assigned function, bones will break down and re-form even though they give the impression of being permanent. They will integrate the evidence of diet, lifestyle, genetics, trauma, illnesses as well as environmental circumstances through metals such as copper, iron and lead that cling to the bones as obscure memories of the creature’s life (TRASK, J, 2011) (DUPON, O, 2012, p.264).

This symbolism carried in the materials of the jewellery piece will be used correspondingly in my work, where I incorporate naturally deceased animal remnants and bones as a medium to carry through the evidence of a life lived. Similar to Trask, I am preserving and transforming imperfect specimens, rather stressing their flaws, enigmatic character and uneven textures to make them more individual when displayed as curiosities.

METAMORPHOSIS

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Metamorphosis, 2020), in biology “metamorphosis is the abrupt change of form or structure in an individual after birth”. In a complete metamorphosis, usually insects such as flies, butterflies, and beetles, the lifecycle consists of four stages – eggs, larvae, pupa and adult. Each different form adapts to a new environment and mode in life. “It is easy to imagine human life is like that of an insect, a linear transformation from stage to stage, but so often it seems circular. Shooting off in one direction, only to wheel back and touch on an earlier phase, one inhabited before” (TODD, K, 2007, p.141). Transformation takes place between every new stage of metamorphosis, symbolising a possibility for programmed and unprogrammed change, i.e. the changes within species and the changes within individuals.

Even though metamorphosis is a natural process of change in nature, it may present the artificial in my work. To visualise the human interference with nature, the metamorphosis may show unintended or unprogrammed transformations due to a fictional mutation. Mutation is an anomaly occurring more and more often in animals as a result of the human interference on the ecology. Deviations in the genetic sequence are classified as mutations, which cause diversity among animal species. At low frequency, mutations arise spontaneously owing to errors during DNA reproduction and to the chemical instability of purine and pyrimidine bases. However, mutations in organisms are also caused by exposure to ultraviolet light, heavy metals and chemical carcinogens that people discard in their natural habitats (LOEWE, L, 2008).

In my work (Figure 12) I exaggerate these mutations, envisaging what could happen to specimens in the future if humans continue with practices that pollute the natural environment.



Figure 12: Staging of a programmed metamorphosis cycle consisting of individual unprogrammed transformations (mutated specimens), modelling clay, hide glue, scarab fragment, bird skulls, borosilicate glass, black and red coloured hide glue, M Viljoen

SYMBOLISM

The symbolic, visual and tactile appeal of an object is equally valued, or often more important than its material worth for found object jewellers and artists such as myself. For example, a broken, stained bird skull which I found in the veld, is of greater significance to me than a perfect, white cleaned bird skull from the butcher or taxidermy shop. This is because of the symbolic value which found objects possess, as well as the specific memory attached to the collection of these objects.

As stated by Le Van (2005, p.6), although good design, sophistication and style are prerequisites, found object jewellery can also be humorous, poignant, enlightening and even shocking. According to Olver (2005, p.73), there is a growing awareness of nature and ecology because of the great expendability of the current transient society. Therefore, although the found objects do not comprise of only traditionally precious materials, the quality of a fine piece of jewellery can still exude from them, and by combining them with other objects or materials, they can be used to tell a story (OLVER, E, 2005, p.73).

Symbolist artists sought to express individual emotional experience through the subtle and suggestive use of highly symbolized language, re-creating emotional experiences in the viewer through their use of colour, line, and composition. They believed that art should reflect an emotion or idea rather than represent the natural world in the objective, almost scientific manner embodied by Realism.



Figure 13: Mielle Harvey, Representing dead-found bird ring, Silver 925

The most pervasive themes in Symbolist art were love, fear, anguish, death, sexual awakening, and unrequited desire. The symbols used by symbolist movement artists are not the familiar emblems of mainstream iconography, but intensely personal, private, obscure and ambiguous references, thus more a philosophy than an actual style of art, to express mystical ideas, emotions and states of the mind (LUCIE-SMITH, E, 2001).

Investigating techniques, colour usage and aesthetics of artists such as Mielle Harvey, also inspires as a guide for my own practice. She uses art to ardently express the tension she experiences between life, mortality and the fragility of existence. Nature, with its beauty and harsh realities, inspires her work. By combining elements and sometimes materials which both attract and repulse (Figure 13), she aims to challenge the viewer to question the traditional values associated with beauty and adornment. Thus, she also touches the subject matter of abjection art, as I will do in my research and artistic practice, discussed in the next section. While birds and insects often feature in her work, she essentially uses them as symbols for issues she wants to raise. In reality, they are a starting point from which she creates objects that challenge expectation and provoke emotion (HARVEY, M, 2020).

ABJECTION

"The abject, understood as this undifferentiable maternal lining--a kind of feminine sublime, albeit composed of the infinite unspeakableness of bodily disgust: of blood, of excreta, of mucous membranes--is ultimately cast, within the theorization of abject art, as multiple forms of the womb. Because, whether or not the feminine subject is actually at stake in a given work, it is the character of being wounded, victimized, traumatized, marginalized, that is seen as what is at play within this domain" (KRAUSS, R and Bois, Y, 1997).

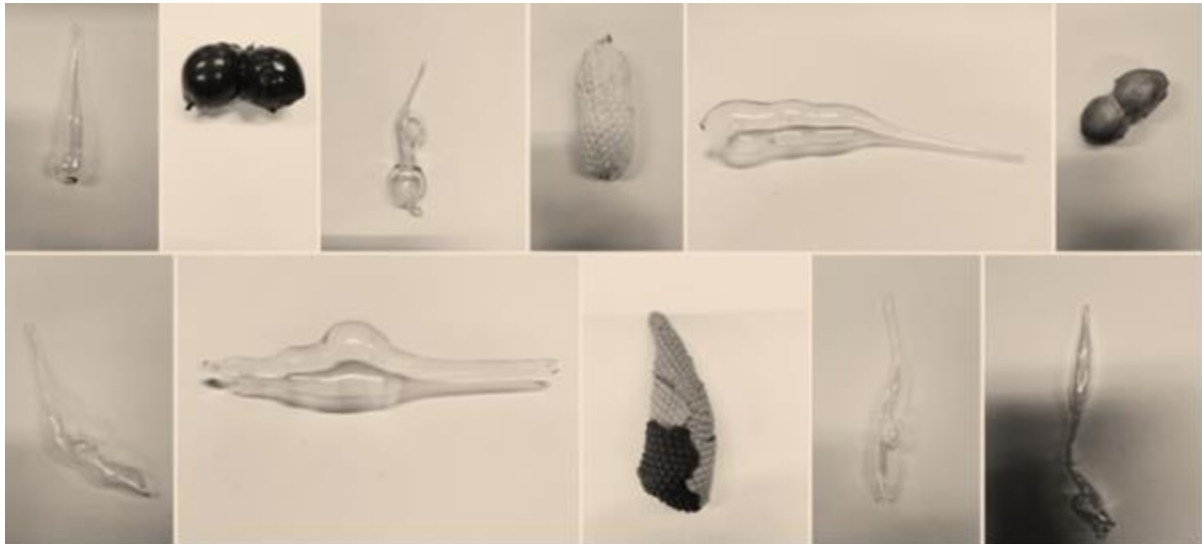


Figure 14: Abject bio-morphic abstracted forms created in glass, hide glue and wax, M Viljoen

As explained in Krauss & Bois (1997), these theorists re-introduced the notion of formlessness when they used Bataille's notion of 'l'informe' in a presentation in France titled *Formless: A User's Guide*. Formlessness has been used as an instrument for creativity from post-modern artists through to abstract expressionists and will be a central operational tool in the domain of my artist practise (Figure 14), instead of being suppressed to the thematics of my art. It is in stark contrast with the accurately replicated form of the found objects. Yet, by combining the two concepts, I aim to create a new style of visual expression. The abject, represents the indescribable, the formless and similar to Bataille, part of my creativity is "in the process, it is supposed to be dirty, mixed-up with ashes, mud and disgrace".

The abject is that "which is cast-off", the bodily functions or parts which are deemed inappropriate and impure for civic display. Abject art is a term that will describe or explain a certain aesthetic in my work. Abjection, a concept borrowed from Julie Kristeva, is the feeling of repulsion or disgust when the margins we use to categorize the world, such as outside/inside, human/animal and life/death are transgressed. Thus, there are no clear boundaries between what is human and which part is animal

(ARTSPACE, 2019). This aesthetic acts as a link between my work, inspired by animal remains, and the connection to the human body and emotions. Jan Swammerdam (TODD, K, 2007, p.52), defends abjection in found objects, stating “the glint of an elegant prettiness might be encountered anywhere, even in the excrement of the hornet larva, where fragments of flies it had eaten raw, shone like gold”.

BIO-MORPHIC ABSTRACTION

Organic or Bio-morphic abstraction is an idiom that is associated with Henri Bergson’s philosophy that art and evolutionary processes come from the same source. In short, the term describes the rounded abstract forms, the fluid forms based on those found in nature. These forms (Figure 15) can be described as slightly recognisable, yet simultaneously unidentifiable, because they are abstracted derivatives of reality. It is thus a powerful tool for the artist to evoke associations, inviting symbolic meaning, while escaping identification. Bio-morphic abstraction in comparison to other forms of abstraction for example Cubism, allows me to exemplify the human-animal connection in my work. Furthermore, it allows a fluid way of creating art from emotion and it permits the material (glass) to inform an intuitive flow of expression, perhaps connecting the viewer/wearer and my own essence.



Figure 15: Fluid Bio-morphic abstracted forms in clear and coloured glass, blown and flameworked by M Viljoen

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

The Cabinet of curiosities or Wunderkammer (Figure 16) was the precursor of the museum, and it was commonplace among scholars from the 16th century onwards to acquire unusual items for their cabinets or wonder rooms. According to Gabriel Kaltemarckt, the three necessities for wonder rooms was sculptures/paintings, curios from home or abroad and things belonging to strange animals.



Figure 16: Ole worm, Most prominent Wunderkammer in 17th century, (SEBA, A, 1734:20)

Thus, it acted as a microcosmos, a theatre of the world, a memory theatre. “The Wunderkammer conveyed symbolically the patron’s control of the world through its indoor, microscopic reproduction” (MACGREGOR, A and Impey, O, 2018). Frederick Ruysch (TODD, K, 2007), was famous for his cabinet of curiosities, which he created as art, arranging them for beauty, with their scientific purpose coming in second.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND QUESTIONS

After looking at what other artists have done within the themes of my work, certain questions and thought-provoking problems arise, which I aim to answer through my practice.

Is it possible to contextualise the symbolic metamorphosis of collected animal bones and remnants of skin, transformed into abject specimens (Figure 17) i.e. artefacts and jewellery pieces, by the process of combining bio-morphic abstracted forms with the organic objects, in a contemporary cabinet of curiosities?

Can the fragility, emotional value and preciousness of the original found remnants be conveyed through a metamorphosis with new material and a mutated form?

Whilst growing up in South Africa where wild life used to be more abundant in earlier years, I feel fortunate and in a sense responsible to embody their beautiful details, to be appreciated as curiosities in new forms and materials, before they may become extinct.

Sub-questions regarding the material and form:

Can the symbiosis between the natural and the artificial in my work represent the human interference with nature?

How significant is the use of the actual fauna remnants which I have collected, would it make a symbolic difference if I replace them with replicas or even abstract resemblances?

What makes the observer curious about the new specimens? – Repulsion? Attraction? Materials? Form? Symbolism? Narrative?

Why would people choose to wear organic departed specimens, often seen as repulsive or taboo, an abject, on their body or be attracted to such art?

Den Besten (2011), states that nowadays meaning and content are only partially controlled by the maker, and at the same time significantly influenced, imposed and constructed by the wearer, having to connect with it. This can be a great challenge or pitfall, when the maker of the piece of jewellery is an author, because the work will be loaded with meaning, even if the work is an abstract piece of jewellery. Different viewers read images, text and events in different ways, and it is through this agency that jewellery or art can gain narrative and associative meaning that goes beyond art history's usual search for facts of origin, materiality and iconography.



Figure 17 Transitioned specimens, with glass and natural bone fragments covered in new pearlescent skins (hide glue), M Viljoen

Sub-questions regarding the artistic practice:

Which colours, forms and materials will be best suitable to symbolise fragility, nostalgia and a fleeting existence?

In what different ways can one collect objects? Perhaps there are more ways – through taking photos, imprints, sketching, preserving, fossilising, copying, replicating, capturing marks, traces and remnants?

What techniques or combinations of techniques can be used that is best suitable for attaining bio-morphic abstraction and which for achieving exact replication of natural objects?

Can the human body act as a 'cabinet' to exhibit and safeguard the fragile 'curiosities' (jewellery)?

CUTIS ET OSSIUM

METHODOLOGY AND ARTIST PRACTICE

My work grows out of the observation, experimental application, and transcription of all the elements involved. For the creation of a full cabinet of curiosities, I also aim to fulfil Kaltemarckt's 3 requirements.

Therefore, I will include sketches as field observations of the specimens, recording of experiments (photography), sculptural objects which are wearable as jewellery pieces, experimental material (Figure 18) and the original found objects that made the journey from South Africa to Belgium, in the final presentation.



Figure 18: Artists Practice: Experiments with capturing, preserving remnants and impressions and traces (silver casting, hide glue, scarab, black and red coloured hide glue), M Viljoen

COLLECTION

I have a collection of natural found objects, fragments and remnants which have naturally departed in nature as pictured in Figure 19. I prefer natural organic objects, as I have an aversion for artificial, destructive, manmade materials such as plastics and toxic resins. I see a possibility to 'give new life' to the organic objects, yet plastic found objects have never had life in them before. Furthermore, my longing to collect these organic objects are driven by my love of their earthy colours, intricate shapes and the symbolism and nostalgia connected to them.



Figure 19: Collected found objects of the researcher, bone fragments of skulls, beetles, wax supports added, M Viljoen

While collecting in the veld, I do not simply pick up every remnant observed. Firstly, it needs to be from a naturally departed animal, to my knowledge. I prefer small pieces with aesthetic details (Figure 19), knowing that I will make a piece of jewellery with it. If it is too fragile, I collect it only by means of photography, and leave it behind in the veld. The organic objects which I find are mostly already in the process of decay, and often only the bones of the specimen remain intact. The skin is withered away or too delicate to preserve. Therefore I collect the bones and in my artistic practise I aim to replace the lost skin with a new, stronger skin. I achieve this through covering the found bones in hide glue (Figure 20) made from dissolved rabbit/cow skin.

PRESERVATION

I can replace the lost skin in another way by capturing imprints and replicating traces of the original skins. This relationship between the artificial and the natural is a recurring theme in my work, where the bones represent the natural and the self-made skins represent the artificial. This asymmetry is apparent in the title *Cutis et Ossium* when compared to my art pieces. My human intervention, which changes the organic remnants into artefacts (Figure 38), through the use of bio-morphic abstraction (natural) in glass (artificial) or replicating remnants (natural) in metal (artificial), is another link between the natural and artificial.



Figure 20: Metamorphosed specimen, in blown glass and pearlescent hide glue covered organic skull remnant, M Viljoen

Starting with as many types of animal skins I can acquire (Figure 21), I use this as an experimental material to try to capture the impressions, imprints, traces and marks that the objects can leave behind. I specifically use animal skins for the symbolism imbedded in skin and its ability to stretch or mould to a new shape. I use store-bought or ethically obtained animal skins in the form of rabbit and cowhide glue, snake moulting, parchment, chamois, different leathers, vellum and lizard skin.

I conduct practical experimentation to find various methods of conserving and working with the fragile natural found objects, different techniques and materials to preserve, capture or represent these remains in the jewellery or art pieces. Most natural specimens are prone to decay and require cleaning (Figure 22) and treatment with various methods to halt the decaying process.



Figure 21: Animal skins: vellum, parchment, hide glue granules, Komodo dragon skin, snake moulting, chamois, M Viljoen

The process is morbid, time-consuming and confronting – 3 adjectives that doesn't go with modern times. Yet as an artist, this is my silent rebellion to show my disapproval of the fast-paced, artificial existence. While in a state of melancholy, I find it easier to capture true emotions in these specimens. While contemplating the ephemeral, realising the transience of life, I find it a meditative experience to transform these fragile remnants into everlasting artefacts. In a way I feel privileged to capture their attractive details, to be cherished as curiosities in new materials and forms, before they disappear.



Figure 22: The artist cleaning the found objects, M Viljoen

CATALOGUING

Subsequently, I categorise, group or order the souvenirs of my exploration, my found objects such as animal types – birds, small mammals, reptiles and the different types of insects. I also distinguish between the remnants. Some are just pieces of skin or hide left behind, pieces of skulls, pieces of vertebrae, membranes, teeth, fragments of shells and ‘second skins’ such as beehives and cocoons. Arranging these objects in patterns and groups plays an important part in my artistic practice. It is a contemplative process in which I am interacting with the specimens and aids me in my design creativity.



Figure 23: Ernst Haeckel - *Kunstformen der Natur* (1904), plate 98: Trachomedusae, (HEACKELL, E, 1904)

Ernst Haeckel was a naturalist, philosopher, physician, biologist and perhaps more significant – an artist from Germany who similarly recorded his findings of fascinating forms in fauna with illustrations. His collection of colour plates, where specimens are aesthetically arranged (Figure 23) and somewhat exaggerated or hypothetically rendered, is like a summation of his view of the world, in which he favoured perfect symmetry and organisation. These scientific plates can be considered as a precursor of surrealism, having a peculiar emotional charm, they narrow the gap between science and art. Haeckel's spatial composition and imaginative use of colour in the plates, were more an aesthetic choice than an accurate reproduction of nature, making him a true artist (HEACKELL, E, 1904).

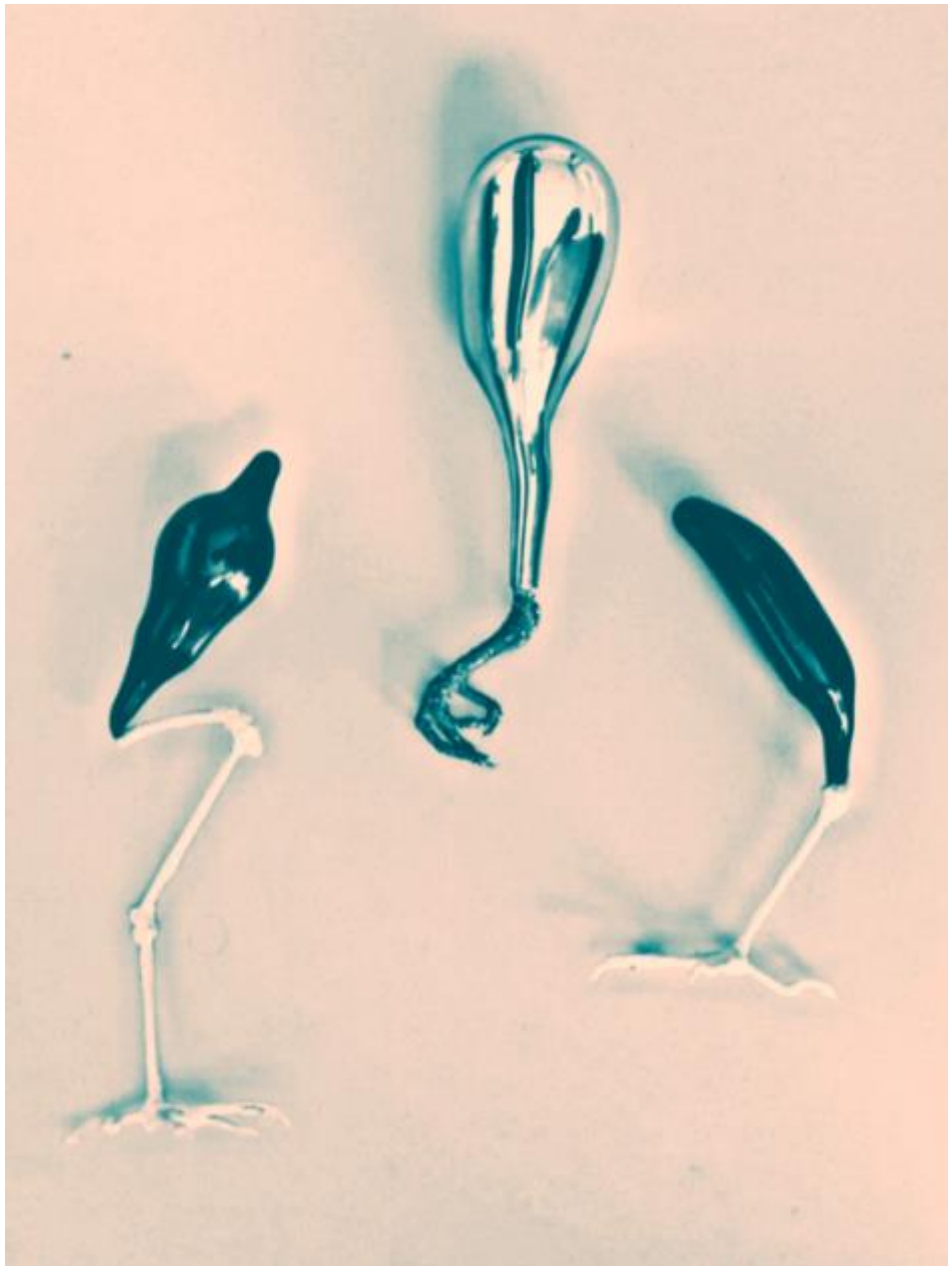


Figure 24: Colour plate from the catalogue *Cutis et Ossium* with a group of my metamorphosed specimens, M Viljoen

A catalogue with my own plates of the found objects and sculptures in their categories, photographed and digitally edited in colours inspired by Haeckel's use of colour, accompanies this study as visual aid in the Appendix: *Cutis et Ossium – Photographic art plates*, the example plate in (Figure 24).

Another example of such historic plates of a well-known collector and naturalist, Albertus Seba, who brought out a thesaurus with hundreds of plates with illustrations of his collection of curiosities, can be seen in the Figure 25. The specimens were often packed in a pattern for visual pleasure. The plates are frequently titled with their Latin names and classifications of the specimens (SEBA, A, 1734).



Figure 25: Plates from A. Seba's Thesaurus, (SEBA, A, 1734)

EXPERIMENTATION

FORM

The contrast of form, an interplay between realism and bio-morphic abstraction, also manifests symbolism. Recognisable and familiar parts, combined with mysterious, strange forms invites

curiosity and questions, mostly unanswerable. Through alterations and transformation by adding new fluid forms to the original found objects, I separate them from reality.



Figure 26: Artists Practice: Bio-morphic abstraction experiments (bone, hide glue), M Viljoen

Continuously I also experiment (Figure 26) with bio-morphic abstracted shapes with volume as well as skin-like textures in all of the above-mentioned materials. I then combine it with the natural specimen replicas as sculptural objects and jewellery pieces. Their hybrid character makes the new objects both attractive and repulsive.



Figure 27: Bio-morphic abstraction experiments (hide glue, modelling clay), M Viljoen

These bio-morphic abstracted pieces (Figure 27), yet more simple in shape, material and form, appear as being perhaps from a different stage of transition of a metamorphosis and may, therefore, refer to the cocoons of insects or womb of a mammal. Yet, they can also represent what comes after the final transition, a return to the non-existing. Symbolising the ephemeral.

French artist Hubert Duprat cooperates with Caddisfly larvae to form gold and gemstone jewels from their cocoons (Figure 28). Displayed out of context, these shells may look as if it was constructed by an artist jeweller (JOBSON, C, 2014).



Figure 28: Trichoptera (caddis larva) case on pedestal. Photographer: Fabrice Gousset. (JOBSON, C. 2014)

-MATERIALITY

In my work, specific symbolism can be found in the material – the use of mostly natural materials such as glass, metal, animal skin and bones.

I use borosilicate glass tubes (extremely versatile as it has very low coefficients of thermal expansion, making them more resilient than any other common glass to thermal shock) in translucent, pink and black, formed into abstract shapes via bio-morphic abstraction. The process happens through heating targeted spots on the glass tube, taking advantage of the elegant, free-flowing properties of the glass, and controlling the shape to an extent by blowing into the tube. On the other hand, I make

solid glass specimens, casted from Bulls Eye glass powder. This glass working process has a more pre-determined outcome, yet the final object in glass still echoes fragility, freedom and change as symbolism.

By using metals such as silver and bronze to cast facsimiles of the found remnants in, I integrate my traditional goldsmithing background with contemporary techniques. The metal is strong in contrast with the glass to which it is attached. The tiniest details are replicated in the silver and bronze, a property unique to these metals. This allows for true simulations of the organic remnants, but in a material resistant to decay and breakage. In this case the material is symbolising tradition, strength and eternity.

In some of the metamorphosed specimens, i.e. artefacts, some form of animal skin or bones are incorporated. Even though skin in the form of leather, vellum or wet skin is very fragile to work with, reconstructed skin made from hydrated hide glue granules is very strong and versatile in contrast. I add natural pearl pigments to the hide glue to visually enhance its reconstructed appearance and use it to cover blown glass pieces or bone remnants. This strengthens the specimen and also highlights the symbolic connotations of skin such as protection, preservation, sensation and beauty.

Lastly animal bones such as skulls and claws are also added to some transformations, yet they are always covered with a new self-made skin from the hide glue to strengthen them and to add an illusion that it might not be the original found remnant. This again refers to the relationship of the natural and the artificial as themes in my work. Bones symbolise the memories, nostalgia and transience of my childhood in the South African bush veld.

-TECHNIQUE

Alongside this practice, I use traditional goldsmithing and jewellery techniques from my technical educational background such as chasing, soldering and mould-making. I also develop new processes such as sculpting with hide glue, borosilicate glassblowing and glass kiln casting of small animal remnant replicas. I make moulds to capture the found objects which I select, in order to replicate and duplicate them in glass and metal.



Figure 29: Organic found objects in mould frames, M Viljoen

-COLOUR

The small selection of colours - sepia, white, black, translucent, grey and other earthy/bodily tones also add a certain sentiment and symbolic meaning. The frequent use of pink symbolises the flesh which is the missing part between the skin and the bone in my work. Flesh is only present when there is life, yet bones and traces of skin remain.

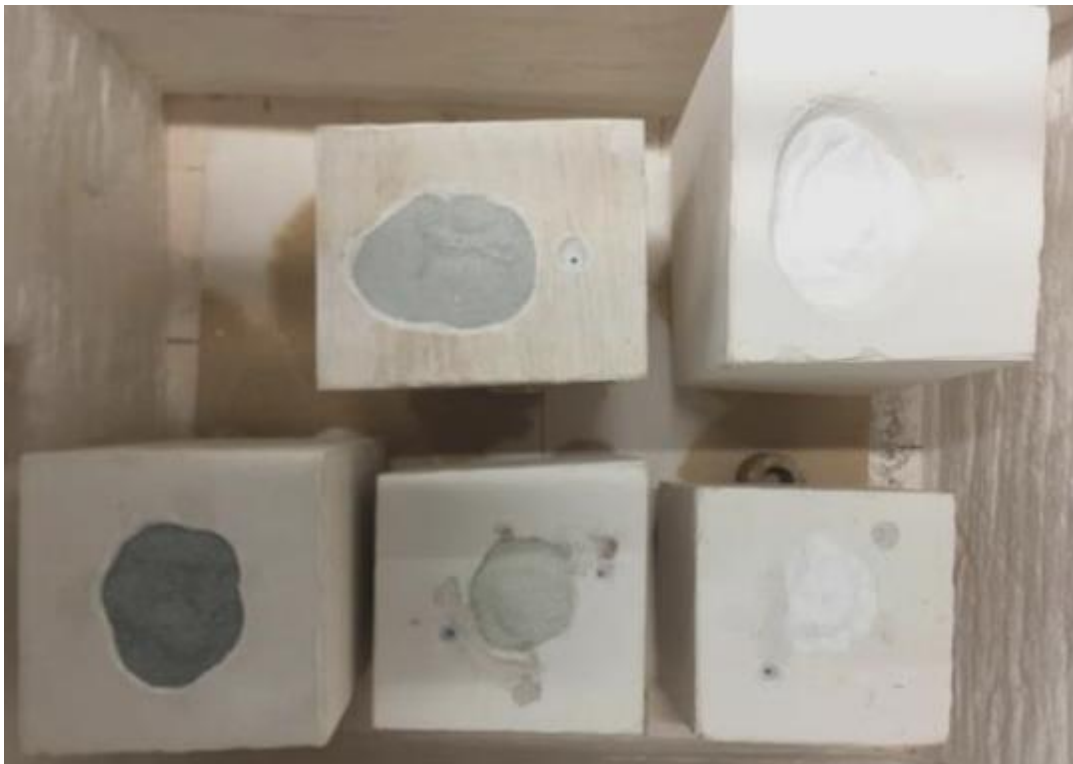


Figure 30: Moulds of new specimens filled with earthy colours of Bullseye glass granules, M Viljoen

DOCUMENTATION

In the traditional Wunderkammern, every natural collection also consisted of accompanying books to document the specimens and to serve as commentary on them (SEBA, A, 1734). Likewise, in my contemporary cabinet of curiosities, I include my Sketchbook with designs, specimen sketches, digital renderings and photos of my technical process of manufacturing the metamorphosed specimens.

-PHOTOGRAPHY

I take photos of every step in the working process, as it is a way to capture temporary sculptures that gets lost while producing the final transformed specimens for my cabinet of curiosities. For example the Figure 31 shows a casted glass skull extracted from its plaster mould, still attached to its sprue and uncleaned, making it appear as if a creature or fossil was unearthed from a rock.



Figure 31: Bullseye casted glass skull, M Viljoen

-SKETCH/PAINT

I do technical sketches of designs and mood paintings which aid in the process of the metamorphoses of the specimens. For natural explorers, owners of Wunderkammern and biologists in bygone times, cameras weren't always available. Sketches were made, often on parchment paper, in the field while observing novel species. Sketches of Natural collections were also frequently composed in a catalogue or thesaurus to keep inventory of the collection or to reveal the classification of the specimens.

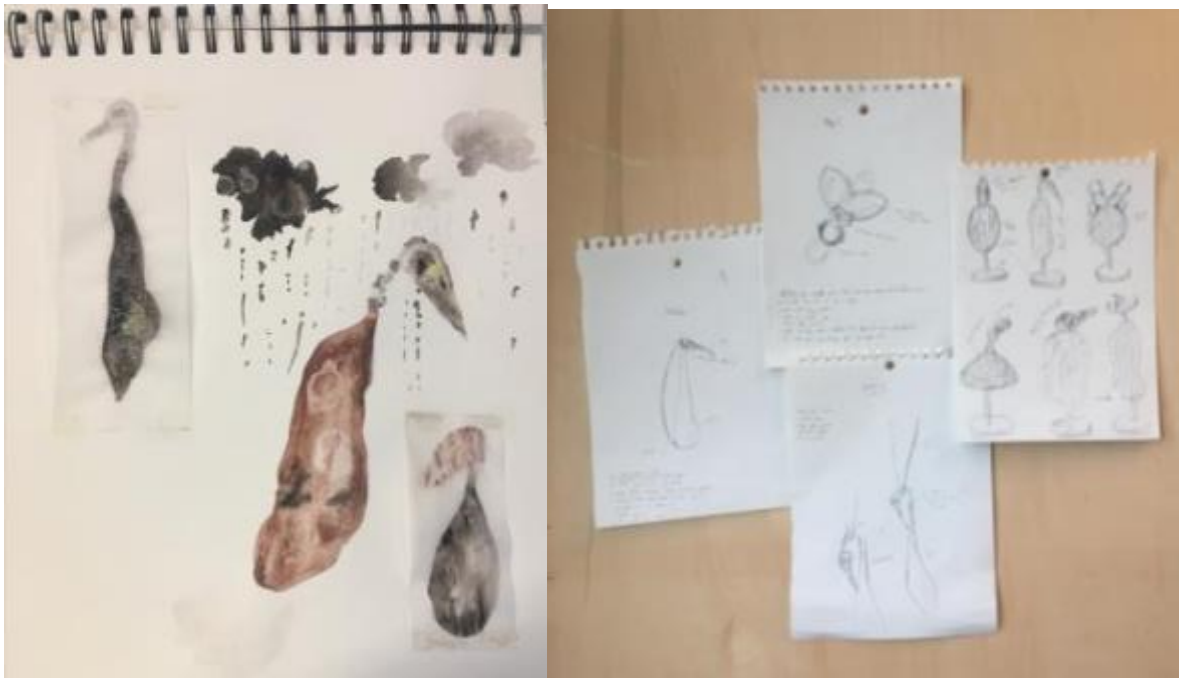


Figure 32: Moodboard, sketches and design ideas

-DIGITAL EDITING

I often use photography and digital editing as a means to make design decisions, based on the nostalgia and emotion that a certain combination of the found object, the new form, material and colours evoke in me as the artist.



Figure 33: Artists Practice: sketching of imagined metamorphoses (watercolour, paper, pencil), M Viljoen

OBJECT SCULPTURE

“Transparent and broken, an empty shell, holding a shape that no longer existed, a memory of an earlier life.” (TODD, 2007). The inspiration for the piece in Figure 34 is made in casted glass, moulded from fragments of Komodo dragon skin into the shape of a hatched pupa and attached to a copper replica of a beetle backend to show a metamorphosis into a new curiosity.



Figure 34: Metamorphosed sculpture, Casted glass, patinated bronze, M Viljoen

JEWELLERY

Most of the jewellery pieces made for the collection can shift between object and jewellery piece. When displayed in the cabinet, they look like specimens, yet they are designed with easily attachable or hidden mechanisms in order to freely transform into jewellery pieces when taken out of the cabinet to be placed on the human body. Since the specimens are not attached to foot pieces that hold them in a certain pose like art sculptures, they are rather classified as curiosities. They need to be seen from all angles and therefore 'invite' the observer to take them out of the cabinet and interact with them.

The mechanisms and attachments to the jewellery pieces are minimal and inspired by the mechanical attachments/props used in the traditional taxidermy workshops, museum displays of pinned down insects and Wunderkammers of the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, in the Figure 35 a plate from Albertus Seba depicts specimens prompted in place and hung with rope to display them adequately.

Labelling the specimens in a natural history display or cabinet of curiosities is crucial, as they contain vital information about the different specimens and makes them easily identifiable in the accompanying catalogue. Pins are extensively used to fasten labels to entomological specimens. Specimens with labels tied to them with strings are also frequently found in the vertebrate zoology collections, both wet and some dry specimens. These strings should be 100% linen or 100% cotton, because this means they will be strong and acid-free. Minimal abrasion to the specimen will be caused, as they are soft and no glues are needed, eliminating any risk to the specimen.

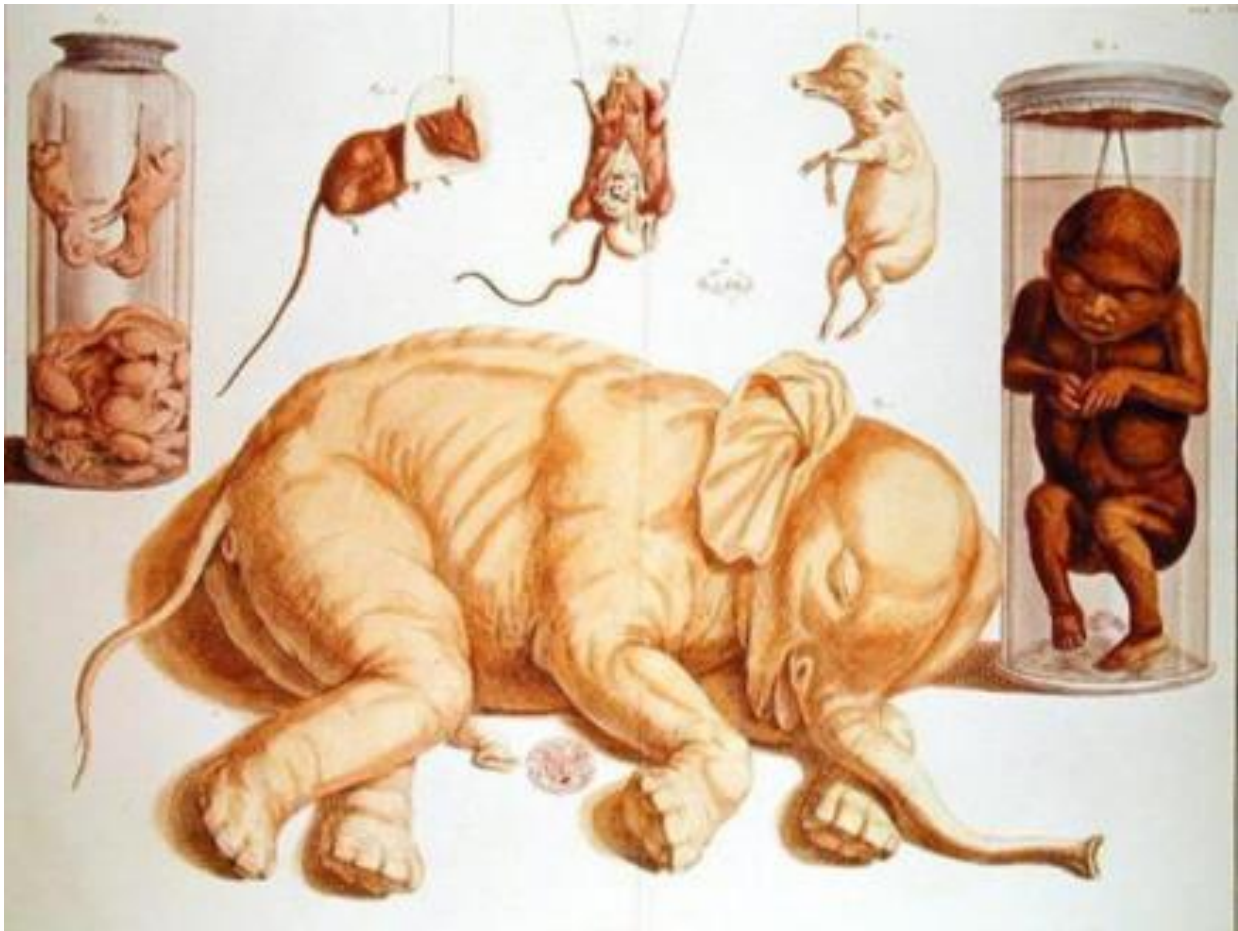


Figure 35: Albertus Seba Plate XCI, (LEMAITRE, J, 2016)

Therefore, inspired by these basic supplies (Figure 36) used to display specimens and specimen information, the jewellery pieces are designed with these mechanisms in mind.



Figure 36: Entomology pins and linen thread

Neckpieces in the *Cutis et Ossium* collection, for example, are simply hung around the neck from a cotton, linen, leather or other natural fibre string, tied around a suitable part of the object (Figure 37).



Figure 37: Neckpiece, Bullseye casted glass, leather, 13x5cm, M Viljoen, 2020

For the brooches, the pin mechanism is kept minimalistic, made in stainless steel and is not a design element. The pin resembles the entomology pins as shown in Figure 38 as if it were stuck into the specimen to keep it in place and functions under tension.



Figure 38: Brooch, Sterling silver, black borosilicate glass, stainless steel, 7x4cm, M Viljoen, 2020

In a similar manner, the earrings are made with only stud pins in metal attached to the metal part of the curiosity, also playing on the inspiration of entomology pins stuck through the specimen as shown in Figure 39. The body of the specimen is made from blown borosilicate glass which has been shaped with a flame to fit the sterling silver cast bird skull.



Figure 39: Earrings, Sterling silver, black borosilicate glass, 9x3cm, worn by the artist, M viljoen, 2020

Other types of jewellery pieces such as rings are also made with the ring in metal attached to the specimen by soldering a minimalistic wire band to the metal part of the curiosity. The ring itself has minimal design elements, as the focus is on the specimen that will rest on top of multiple fingers when worn as seen in Figure 40.



Figure 40: Ring, Sterling silver, black borosilicate glass, 7x3cm, M Viljoen, 2020

DISPLAY

To enable one to display a collection artistically, whilst still protecting the curiosities from damage and dirt, the dedicated collector's cabinet developed in the 16th century (SEBA, A, 1734, p.12).

I aim to display my curiosities similarly, in a vintage styled second-hand cabinet and drawers, reinforcing the age-old tradition of Curiosity Cabinets and emphasising the theme of nature awareness through reusing old furniture.

The selection and arrangement of objects tell a story through their symbolic language. My cabinet will also consist of four categories, as was the convention in the Wunderkammern of the past. Thus, a cabinet comprised of *Artificialia*, *Naturalia*, *Exotica* and *Scientifica* (SEBA, A, 1734, p.13).

Under *Artificialia* (precious art works) I will place the jewellery pieces. In the *Naturalia* (Natural wonders) section, I place the original found organic remnants. The *Exotica* (Etnography) section will contain the transformed creatures and sculptures and lastly the *Scientifica* (scientific instruments) section of my cabinet will showcase the raw materials and tools I used in my process such as the moulds of the replicas.

CONCLUSION

When the artefacts are taken out of my cabinet of curiosities where they are stored and kept safe, the wearer/observer are immediately placed in a situation to react when they attach these artefacts to the body to wear as jewellery pieces. Either accepting and normalising the fact that fauna are mutating on account of our intervention with nature, or displaying their awareness about this phenomenon.

Rather than approving, my work is merely highlighting the human habit of adapting and accepting strange things and environments as their new distorted reality, normalising the abject. As humans, we are inclined to a selfish, destructive nature, sometimes unknowingly poisoning and polluting the natural environment. This has an effect on the transformation of animals into new strange creatures - Mutations. In my work, my human intervention creates an artefact by transforming an organic remnant through the addition of bio-morphic abstraction. The visualisation of the unintended transformations compared to the intended transformations due to human intervention, are displayed in a cabinet of (these) curiosities.

With my art, I am envisioning the metamorphosis that might become a reality in the future, and by wearing these strange objects on the body, it acts as a constant reminder of these changes. Since the jewellery pieces have elements of beauty such as flowing, lustrous glass shapes, pearlescent colours and smooth polished metal surfaces the reception can be ambiguous – ethereal, but confronting at the same time. Because the precious pieces are so fragile, made partly of glass, it echoes the vulnerability of Mother Nature, prompting us as humans to handle her with care. It also reveals how our actions can cause destruction when the glass breaks and shatters. Yet the metal parts represent the opposite, the strength and everlasting, the capability of nature and animals to adapt, even by transmutation, if required. They will continue to be everlasting, becoming the fossils of the future, even though in another stage, through metamorphosis.

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