COPYRIGHT AND CITATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR THIS THESIS/ DISSERTATION

- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

- NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

- ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

How to cite this thesis

Symbols of Death and Violence in Contemporary South African Art with Reference to Seventeenth-century Dutch *Vanitas* Art

by

Loreal Vos

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

**Magister Technologiae: Fine Art**

in the

Department of Fine Art

Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture

**University of Johannesburg**

Supervisor: Karen von Veh

July 2015
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation, which I herewith submit for the research qualification

………………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………………

to the University of Johannesburg, is, apart from the recognised assistance, my own work

and has not been previously submitted by me to another institution to obtain a research
diploma or degree.

Copyright © University of Johannesburg 2015
Acknowledgements

It is my privilege to thank and acknowledge the following individuals for their valuable support and contribution to this dissertation:

- My husband and mother for their continued support, motivation and understanding during the process of finalising the dissertation.

- My supervisor, Karen von Veh, for her patience and constant guidance in writing the dissertation.

- The support and guidance of all the staff, lecturers and MTech students in the Visual Art department for their constant feedback and support.
Abstract

From my observation, contemporary South African society is experiencing increasing levels of violence. I attribute these violent acts to an erosion of ethical values within South African society. In this dissertation, I analyse the way in which selected contemporary South African artists respond to this perceived social decay. My analyses consider the use of symbols of death and violence as a symptom of moral or ethical decay in society. These symbols are in turn analysed in the context of seventeenth-century Dutch still life conventions, which use symbols of death and transience in a similar manner. My exploration of both the seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings and the imagery used in the selected contemporary artworks are framed by iconographic and iconological analyses of the specific symbols used, to ascertain their social implications. For the purpose of my own artmaking practice, I make links between the approaches of seventeenth-century artists and contemporary artists in order to compare how symbols and imagery of death and violence are used, as well as why those specific symbols/images are used within their own historical and contemporary context. The visual findings are framed by discourse analysis of post-colonial and post-apartheid theory, which demonstrates the basis of social decay within contemporary society in South Africa. Much like the visual responses of the selected contemporary South African artists, my own work is a response to this perception of a moral erosion in South Africa embedded in the visual language of seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings.
Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical work</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of this dissertation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Transience and mortality: dichotomy of seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings and <em>Melancholia</em> by Penny Siopis.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/religious context</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyses of examples</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of <em>Melancholia</em> by Penny Siopis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One figures</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Contemporary approaches to versions of <em>vanitas</em> in South African artworks by Diane Victor, Conrad Botes and Jane Alexander.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social context and contemporary artistic responses</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of animal imagery as symbolism for victims of violence</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two figures</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: In memoriam: a South African dystopia (the exhibition).</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Delftware slaughter</em></td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vanitas</em></td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other objects used and their meaning</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The pig's riches</em></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Family portrait</em> series</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramic sculptures</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three figures</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of figures

Figure 1.1: Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533. Oil and tempera on oak panel, 207 x 209 cm.

Figure 1.2: Jacques De Gheyn, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1603. Oil on panel, 82.6 x 54 cm.

Figure 1.3: Harmen Steenwyck, *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*, 1640. Oil on canvas, 39 x 51 cm.

Figure 1.4: Cornelius Gijsbrechts, *Trompe l’Oeil with Studio Wall and Vanitas Still Life*, 1668. Oil on canvas, 152 x 118 cm.

Figure 1.5: Jan Davidsz De Heem, *Pronk Still Life*, 1648. Oil on canvas, 79.2 x 102.5 cm.

Figure 1.6: Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Nautilus Cup and a Wan Li Bowl*, 1662. Oil on canvas, 79 x 67 cm.

Figure 1.7: Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Game Fowl, Vegetables and Fruits*, 1602. Oil on canvas, 68 x 88.2 cm.

Figure 1.8: Jan Baptist Weenix, *Still Life with a Dead Swan*, 1651. Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 153.7 cm.

Figure 1.9: Penny Siopis, *Melancholia*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 197.5 x 175.5 cm.

Figure 2.1: Conrad Botes, *Cain and Abel*, 2008. Lithograph, 105 x 75 cm.

Figure 2.2: Diane Victor, Sasol Art Wax Awards: *In Smoke and Stain - The Recent Dead*, 2006. Etchings and smoke drawings on paper, various dimensions.

Figure 2.3: Diane Victor, *No Country for Old Women*, 2013. Smoke drawings on glass panels, 4 x 6 meters.

Figure 2.4: Diane Victor, *Disasters of Peace: In Sheep’s Clothing*, 2005 – 2010. Etching, 30 x 35 cm.

Figure 2.5: Diane Victor, *Disasters of Peace: She was killed like a goat*, 2005 – 2010. Etching, 30 x 35 cm.

Figure 2.6: Diane Victor, detail of *Brief Lives*, 2011. Smoke drawings on glass panels, 123 x 80 cm.

Figure 2.7: Jane Alexander, *Butcher Boys*, 1985-86. Plaster, oil paint, horns and animal bones, 128.5 x 213.5 x 88.5 cm.
Figure 2.8: Jane Alexander, *Bom Boys*, 1998. Fibre glass, acrylic paint, clothing, wood, 105 x 360 x 360 cm.

Figure 2.9: Jane Alexander, *Bom Boys* detail, 1998.

Figure 2.10: Jane Alexander, *African Adventure*, 1999-2002. Reinforced plaster, oil and acrylic paint, fibreglass, synthetic clay, ammunition boxes, clothing, venetian gloves, jackal skin, machetes, sickles, toy tractor, child’s car, child’s push chair, oil drum, wood, steel and Bushmanland’s earth, dimensions variable.

Figure 2.11: Jane Alexander, detail of *African Adventure*, 1999-2002.

Figure 2.12: Jane Alexander, detail of *African Adventure*, 1999-2002.

Figure 2.13: Jane Alexander, detail of *African Adventure: Girl with gold and diamonds*, 1999-2002.

Figure 2.14: Jane Alexander, *Survey: Cape of Good Hope* series, 2005-09. Slideshow projections, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.1: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 1*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.2: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 2*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.3: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 3*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.4: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 4*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.5: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 5*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.6: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 6*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.7: Loreal Vos, *Grandmother’s tin* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.8: Loreal Vos, *Grandmother’s tin* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 90 x 74cm.

Figure 3.9: Loreal Vos, *Grandmother’s tin* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 90 x 74cm.
Figure 3.10: Loreal Vos, *Lucky cat* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.11: Loreal Vos, *Lucky cat* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 110 x 75cm.

Figure 3.12: Loreal Vos, *Lucky cat* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 110 x 75cm.

Figure 3.13: Loreal Vos, *Whimsical rabbit* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.14: Loreal Vos, *Whimsical rabbit* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 105 x 74cm.

Figure 3.15: Loreal Vos, *Whimsical rabbit* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 105 x 74cm.

Figure 3.16: Loreal Vos, *Delft blue with shell* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.17: Loreal Vos, *Delft blue with shell* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 106 x 74cm.

Figure 3.18: Loreal Vos, *Delft blue with shell* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 106 x 74cm.

Figure 3.19: Loreal Vos, *Red wine* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.20: Loreal Vos, *Red wine* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 100 x 82cm.

Figure 3.21: Loreal Vos, detail of *Red Wine* digital print, 2015. Digital print on canvas.

Figure 3.22: Loreal Vos, *The pig’s riches* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.23: Loreal Vos, *The pig’s riches* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 180 x 174cm.

Figure 3.24: Loreal Vos, detail of *The pig’s riches* digital print, 2015. Digital print on canvas.

Figure 3.25: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 1*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.
Figure 3.26: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 2*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.

Figure 3.27: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 3*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.

Figure 3.28: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 4*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.

Figure 3.29: Loreal Vos, *Sondebok*, 2015. Ceramic sculpture, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.30: Loreal Vos, *Sondebok* detail, 2015.

Figure 3.31: Loreal Vos, *Soos water op ’n eend se rug*, 2015. Ceramic sculpture, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.32: Loreal Vos, *Soos water op ’n eend se rug* detail, 2015.

Figure 3.33: Loreal Vos, *Die kalf is in die pit 1*, 2015. Ceramic sculpture, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.34: Loreal Vos, *Die kalf is in die pit 1* detail, 2015.
Introduction to the study.

In this study, I explore the way in which symbols and/or images of death, violence and transience are used in selected artworks from the seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* tradition and from contemporary South Africa. My analysis of these works and their social contexts creates a framework for the discussion of my own art production, which comprises the practical component of my degree.

It is my contention that South African society is experiencing moral decay that leads to pervasive expressions of violence and crime which occur on a daily basis. As a society we daily observe a decline of social values and little consideration for the sanctity of life, often leading to a form of desensitisation and/or apathy within society. In this desensitised society, I do not consider myself desensitized, but am constantly disturbed at the relentless bombardment of images and reports of death and violence within the media and around me. Both my theoretical research and my practical work therefore function as a form of catharsis, a strategy for engaging with my emotional response to the flawed society in which I live, in order to control these intrusive thoughts.

I substantiate my observation of moral decay in chapter two of this study, but my stated contention underpins the choice of contemporary artworks by Conrad Botes, Diane Victor and Jane Alexander, in which the imagery they use also appears to suggest a fundamental decay in the fabric of our society. My observation of moral decay is underpinned by my religious background through Christianity. Therefore my world view, which is central to this study, is viewed through my religious beliefs. Despite the different approaches to artmaking by each artist, the themes engaged with in each selected example are shown to critique the current state of South African society clearly, and thus a close iconographic analysis of these works supports my topic for this study. For Victor, I focus on: *In Smoke and Stain – The Recent Dead* (2006), *In Sheep’s Clothing* (2001), *She was killed like a goat* (2008), *No country for old women* (2013) and *Brief Lives* (2011). For Botes, I analyse his artwork *Cain and Abel* (2008) and I refer to Alexander’s artworks that were made during apartheid (*Butcher Boys*...
1985-86), as well as more recent examples: Bom Boys (1998) and African Adventure (1999 – 2002). To contextualise and frame the study of these contemporary artworks, I make reference to seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings that are particularly part of the vanitas genre and also refer to a contemporary example of a vanitas still life in Penny Siopis’ painting Melancholia. Melancholia serves as an introduction and link between the seventeenth-century artworks and those of the contemporary South Africa artworks. I have chosen these local artists because they incorporate imagery portraying death and social violence in South Africa and I propose that their underlying reasons are similar to the moral purpose of seventeenth-century Dutch painters: to reflect the erosion of social values in their society.

Vanitas art refers to artworks created during the 16th and 17th centuries in Flanders and the Netherlands. These artworks mainly consist of oil paintings that depict still life as subject matter. Vanitas paintings display material possessions, which were often intended to depict luxury, opulent wealth and pleasure. According to Fred S. Kleiner (2010:568), vanitas paintings set out not only to remind viewers of their mortality, but also to remind them that such selfish luxury was of no use, since we are all fated to die. It is this juxtaposition between earthly luxury and death that I wish to investigate. Much as the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings reflected the excesses of society and the futility of seeking riches at the expense of the soul, I intend to investigate how contemporary South African artists use imagery and metaphors of death as a reflection of our current South African society and what I perceive to be its ethical collapse.

My exploration of seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas paintings is framed by iconographic and iconological analyses of the specific symbols used within the

1 Kleiner (2010:557) describes the period of the seventeenth-century in the Dutch Republic as largely owing its ascendance to its economic prosperity. He states that the Dutch economy also benefitted enormously from the country’s expertise on the open seas, which facilitated establishing far-flung colonies and by 1650, Dutch trade routes extended to North America, South America, the west coast of Africa, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and much of the Pacific.

2 Kleiner (2010:558) explains that even though the Dutch middle class was steeped in the morality and propriety central to the Calvinist ethic, they sought ways to announce their success and newly acquired status. Items that were collected and displayed in their homes included house furnishings, paintings, tapestries, and porcelain. Kleiner states that Dutch collectors tended to favour small, low-key works such as portraits, still-lifes, genre scenes and landscapes because of the Dutch disdain for excessive ostentation that is attributable to Calvinism.
paintings to ascertain the social implications for the Dutch. Similarly, visual analyses of the imagery used in the selected contemporary artworks investigate the artists' responses to the highly problematic social and political currents found in South Africa today. Links are made between seventeenth-century approaches and those of the contemporary artists in order to compare how symbols and imagery of death and violence are used, as well as why those specific symbols/images are used within their own historical and contemporary context. The visual findings are framed by discourse analysis of post-colonial and post-apartheid theory which supports the premise that contemporary society in South Africa is in fact experiencing a social decay, as indicated in the responses of the three selected artists. My own work is, similarly, a response to this perception of an ethical turpitude in South Africa, couched in the aesthetic language of seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings.

**Aims of the study:**

My primary research question asks: how are symbols and imagery of death and violence used in artworks to convey or comment on a state of social decay in society? A secondary research question enquires: how can I use imagery of death and violence in my own artwork to convey my sense of such a decline in present-day society?

The study thus explores symbols of death and violence in artworks created by selected South African artists as a possible response to perceived social decay in society. In order to achieve my aim, my objectives are firstly to conduct a historical review of selected seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings and a thorough analysis of Penny Siopis' painting titled *Melancholia*. Secondly to undertake a visual analysis of selected South African artworks in which symbols of death and violence reflect aspects of perceived social decay in contemporary South African society, and compare them to related themes in seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings. Finally to create a body of artworks that allude to the historical *vanitas* aesthetic as it links to my perceptions of social decay in South Africa.
Methodology:

I employ qualitative research methods, in which I focus on critical and comparative analyses in order to collect my information. I carry out a critical literature survey of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings in which I conduct visual iconographic and iconological investigations of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings that fall under the *vanitas* genre. This allows me to identify the various visual symbols used within these paintings that refer to death, as well as why those specific symbols were used. I also complete a literature survey of post-apartheid and post-colonial writings to contextualise my study.

Secondly, I carry out visual iconographic and iconological analyses of selected artworks by contemporary South African artists couched within the theoretical context of a post-colonial, post-apartheid framework. My focus falls on Victor, supported by selected examples by Alexander and Botes, as these artists use images or symbols of death and violence in response to perceived social injustice found in contemporary South African society. Links are made between seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings and the contemporary works to indicate similarities in the motivation for these approaches. I suggest that the *vanitas* paintings were also intended to be a commentary on the moral aspects of their society and that these particular South African artists are creating their art for similar reasons.

Lastly, I have created artworks to accompany this study in the form of oil paintings, digital prints, drawings and ceramic sculptures. I refer to personal imagery and metaphors, as well as those found in society that relate to death and violence within South Africa. These visual metaphors and imagery are translated into contemporary *vanitas* paintings, digital prints, drawings and ceramic sculptures, which allude to traditional Dutch paintings and ornaments. These artworks will be exhibited as an installation.

The context of the study is based on my personal background and experiences. I am a young, white South African woman from a conservative Afrikaans background, living
in post-apartheid South Africa. Afrikaans culture, especially the more traditional variety, has a specific aesthetic, arising from an amalgamation of European cultures. *South Africa’s diverse peoples: a reference sourcebook* (Frankental and Sichone 2005:57) describes Afrikaners as “white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans of European decent, mainly of Dutch ancestry”.³ From this European heritage, and for the purposes of this study, I focus on traditional aesthetics of seventeenth-century Dutch culture as I experience a nostalgic response to my visual heritage, particularly the traditional objects found within my home. These include Delftware, comprising traditional blue and white Dutch ceramic items, as well as traditional Dutch silverware, crochet work, furniture and paintings. For this reason, I am particularly drawn to historical Dutch paintings of the *vanitas* genre with their depiction of such traditional objects which they use for the purposes of allegory and metaphor.

Thus far there has not been any art historical study that specifically compares contemporary South African art with seventeenth-century Dutch *Vanitas* paintings. This study will therefore contribute to the knowledge and scholarship of contemporary South African art.

**Theoretical framework:**

I have identified three main fields of literature within which I undertake this study beginning with a historical review focusing on seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings. Hanneke Grootenboer’s *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth Century Dutch Still Life Painting* (2006), Mariet Westermann’s *The Art of the Dutch Republic, 1585-1718* (2004) and Norbert Schneider’s *Still Life* (2003) all analyse seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings by dissecting the symbols and imagery found within these paintings. Grootenboer writes about the symbolism of *vanitas* paintings in relation to Walter Benjamin’s (2004:46) concepts of allegory. Grootenboer states (2006:137): “In making the skull an emblem of decay, *vanitas* images thematize precisely those characteristics that

---

³ However, many Afrikaners have names easily recognised as French, English, German, and Scandinavian (Frankental and Sichone 2005:57).
allegory uses as its structuring principles.” She also proceeds to comment, noting that vanitas images are therefore seen as allegories of allegories. What she means by this is that even though vanitas paintings express the concept of life being fleeting, the painting itself is an object that is able to survive its maker. This concept is extended, since the paintings can capture a moment in time forever, often freezing objects such as fruit or flowers in that moment, maintaining their beauty despite the meaning behind the painting. This research is valuable to my study in that I will be able to understand fully, as well as analyse the metaphors and allegories within these paintings.

Westermann (2004) provides historical background on seventeenth-century Dutch society in order to understand the context of the metaphors used within the artworks better. She also analyses specific paintings, focusing on the objects used within them. Schneider discusses the historical background of the still life genre as a whole, focusing on the religious aspects of the seventeenth-century Dutch culture to inform one about the concepts used within the vanitas paintings.

The second field of literature for my study is positioned within a post-colonial framework, where I consider Africa’s colonisation from the seventeenth-century onwards and the effects of this on society both in the past and in the present. The impact of apartheid on post-apartheid society is directly influential in the levels of violence we experience due to the racial hatred that was experienced, while the current effects of moral decay stem from this past. My theoretical approach in considering my selected contemporary artworks is therefore framed by a critical literature survey in which post-colonial theory is the dominant discourse as found in the writings of Achille Mbembe and John Keane. Mbembe (2001) considers the complexities that Africans face in our current post-colonial and post-apartheid society. He focuses specifically on cases of violence and death and also makes links between acts of violence and death and political issues that he identifies as catalysts for extreme reaction. Keane (2004) provides a study into the origins of violence and its consequences, as well as the relationship between violence and democracy and how this relationship affects social interactions. With regard to my practical work, the theoretical framework that underpins my art practice is also largely related to the post-apartheid context in which I find myself. In order to contextualise current South African society within the writings
of Mbembe and Keane, I refer to various authors that include case studies and statistics which define the social implications and underlying reasons for violence: David Bruce (2002, 2010), Steven Hunt (2003), Bronwyn Harris (2003) and R.W Johnston (2009).

Thirdly I also consider writings that contextualise the selected contemporary artists. As I have chosen to investigate works by well-known South African artists, there are sufficient texts available for background information, although not all texts are specifically aimed at discussing the images of death and violence in each work. The information available is, however, sufficient to formulate a framework for my iconographic and iconological analyses of their artworks. Victor’s works are often discussed in relation to Christian iconography which forms a pertinent link with my discussion of death and morality. The following texts are helpful in this regard: Transgressive Christian Iconography in Post-Apartheid South African Art (2011) by Karen von Veh, Diane Victor (TAXI 013) (2008) by Elizabeth Rankin and Karen von Veh and Diane Victor: Burning the Candle at Both Ends (2012) by Karen von Veh which includes discussions of the specific artworks that form part of my study. For Alexander I have chosen the following texts: Jane Alexander Surveys (from the Cape of Good Hope) (2011) by Pep Subiros and Jane Alexander (2002) with text written by Akiko Miki. These books provide in-depth analyses of Alexander’s artworks and include many articles written by various authors which create a helpful context from which to apply my analyses. For Botes I have selected an unpublished text particularly pertinent to my theme, written and presented by Karen von Veh, titled The How and Why of Responding to social Injustice in South African Art Now (2013). In this text, von Veh provides an analysis of Botes’ artwork Cain and Abel (2008) within the context of contemporary South African society.

Practical work:

For my practical component, I have created a body of works to accompany this theoretical research dissertation. The body of work responds directly to the issues that are explored in this study and consists of oil/mixed media paintings, digital prints,
drawings and sculptures. The sculptures relate to the paintings in that they are represented as a three-dimensional extension of the paintings. The reciprocal nature of these practical works allows them to be exhibited as an installation rather than as individual artworks. I have created artworks which juxtapose the seventeenth-century Dutch art aesthetic with that of imagery which relates to death and violence in contemporary South Africa.

I extract certain motifs and visual conventions that are used metaphorically in seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas paintings and combine them with my own metaphorical imagery referring to death and violence. My artworks incorporate animal forms that are combined with human forms, evoking the bestial behaviour of perpetrators and the helplessness of victims. Animal metaphors also suggest the way humanity is regressing towards primal animalistic behaviour by committing such atrocious acts.

The paintings and objects that I have made form an installation, where the imagery used occurs in both the sculptural objects as well as the paintings and digital prints. The sculptures are ceramic objects that allude to Dutch ceramic and porcelain ornaments and the drawings are drawn in the style of blue and white crockery, particularly referencing the blue and white Delftware made for the Dutch East India Trading Company. The patterns and images painted on the ceramic crockery reference the paintings, while the ceramic ornaments serve as three-dimensional representations of the animal/human figures within the paintings. In order to create an installation or environment within which the viewer can enter, I combine certain sculptural elements with the two-dimensional paintings. I have created the overall effect of a room, which the viewer can enter and explore, which alludes to the interior of a traditional Afrikaans dining room or lounge. The purpose of this type of installation is to create a feeling of familiarity on entering the room but then, on closer inspection, allows the viewer to take in all the imagery to reveal the more sinister undertones.
Structure of this dissertation:

Chapter One includes visual analyses of symbols and imagery in seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings and a visual analysis of *Melancholia* by Penny Siopis. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a historic framework from which to consider visual imagery as a metaphor for moral or social decay. The works discussed here also provide visual references for the paintings that form part of my practical component.

Chapter Two provides an analysis of the post-colonial situation and the reasons for a prevalence of violence in contemporary South Africa. This chapter also includes visual analyses of symbols and imagery in selected South African contemporary artworks by Diane Victor, Jane Alexander and Conrad Botes, in response to such violence.

Chapter Three explicates my own work in context of the study. I analyse my artworks in detail in relation to my response to the post-colonial violence in contemporary South Africa. The influence of seventeenth-century style *vanitas* imagery, as well as the types of symbols used by the contemporary South African artists, are used as inspiration and are evident in my exhibition. This is followed by the conclusion to the study
Chapter One: Transience and mortality: dichotomy of seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings and *Melancholia* by Penny Siopis.

Introduction

As mentioned in my introduction, *vanitas* art refers to artworks created during the 16th and 17th centuries in Flanders and the Netherlands. The main themes that are present within these paintings are death, transience, mortality and their relationship to earthly luxury. In 1533, when he was official painter at the court of Henry the Eighth, Hans Holbein the Younger painted the famous still life and portrait *The Ambassadors* (Figure 1.1), which can be considered one of the earliest examples of a *vanitas* still life painting. In this image you can see two men, namely Jean de Dinteville, who was the French ambassador to the court of Henry VIII of England and his friend George de Selve, the Bishop of Lavaur. The painting exhibits intricate details and realism, with the men wearing extravagant clothing and surrounded by luxurious fabrics and cloth that is naturalistically depicted. Between the men are objects laid on a table, ranging from musical instruments and books to instruments of science. John Berger (1972:90) describes the painting as being painted with “great skill to create the illusion in the spectator that he is looking at real objects and materials.” The surfaces of the objects are painted in such a way that allow the viewer to experience the illusion in a visual way which then transcends the visual experience into that of touch. Berger (1972:90) explains that every part of this painting appeals to the sense of touch in its rendering of the illusion of reality and the various surfaces of each object. Appealing to the sense of touch is important since it adds feelings of sensuous pleasure.

Alexander Sturgis (2000:162) explains that the objects act as symbols to represent each man’s respective accomplishments but, in the *vanitas* genre, these accomplishments or achievements are understood as futile because of the inevitable passage of time and the mortality of the two men. To reinforce this point, an anamorphic skull has been placed at the bottom of the picture – highly distorted in such a way that it can only be seen correctly when viewing the painting from the right hand side. The skull is an obvious symbol of death (memento mori), used in many *vanitas*
still-lifes. Hanneke Grootenboer (2005:135) explains that the distortion of the skull is a “shift in perspective” that can only be ‘seen’ or understood when looking at it from a different perspective and states that death “cannot be grasped within the limits of our regular field of vision”. Therefore, the distortion of the skull is used as an allegory to describe death and our perception of it. Berger (1972:91) emphasises this point by stating that the skull is not painted like the rest of the painting, because if it were “its metaphysical implication would have disappeared”. What Berger means by this is that the skull would have become yet another object to be owned – perhaps a curiosity to be contemplated like all the other objects within the painting, had it been painted in the same perspective.

One might ask – why does there need to be a reminder of mortality in this work? What is the point? What is the social or religious impetus for the inclusion of such an unusual symbol in a portrait of two wealthy and accomplished men? While The Ambassadors is a sixteenth-century work, the use of vanitas imagery here raises similar questions to those pertaining to seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas art that will be addressed in this chapter: Who were these images created for? Why do they contain this particular subject matter and aesthetic? What does it signify?

To answer these questions, I begin with a contextual investigation of seventeenth-century Dutch society and an explanation of the vanitas genre and its popularity at the time. This is followed by close iconographic and iconological analyses of selected seventeenth-century vanitas paintings, to ascertain how the symbols function within the paintings and to evaluate their wider social and moral implications. Finally, I analyse a selected artwork by South African artist Penny Siopis that has been inspired by the seventeenth-century Dutch still life genre in which the artist makes use of objects as a metaphor to comment on South African society in relation to death, violence and transience.
Social/religious context

In order to understand how symbols and imagery of death and violence are used in artworks to convey or comment on a state of social decay in society, I first discuss the social and religious context at the time in which these paintings were created. During the seventeenth-century the Dutch Republic experienced what is now known as a Golden Age. This was due to the new found independence\(^1\) of the Northern Netherlands, which resulted in immense economic growth. As a result, the Dutch Republic gained much wealth and prospered through their extensive trade routes.\(^2\) These financial successes lead to the growing merchant class being able to surround themselves with luxury. Mariet Westermann (2004:116) explains that contemporaries took pride in global trade and colonial endeavours, and the still life paintings reflect this national pride.

Not only did the Dutch Republic gain wealth; there was also a rise in Calvinism\(^3\), which is a strict form of Protestant religion. Slive (1995:5) explains that at the start of the seventeenth-century, the percentage of Calvinists was small, but by the middle of the century most of the people in the Dutch Republic had converted to Calvinism. This steady rise in Calvinism made for significant changes in the subject matter and aesthetic of the art created because, as Mari Griffith (2000:222) states, religious imagery was banned by the Calvinist church.\(^4\) The combination of this growth in trade

---

\(^1\) Kleiner (2010:557) explains that the Dutch secured their independence from Spain in the late sixteenth-century. In 1648, the northern Netherlands gained official recognition as the United Provinces of the Netherlands.

\(^2\) Seymour Slive (1995:4) states that the Republic traded many goods, ranging from textiles, soap, salt, tar and rope to sugar, tobacco, fish, cheese, timber, stone, iron and minerals.

\(^3\) The reformation of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth-century gave rise to Calvinism within Europe. This reformation was attributed to the flaws within Catholicism according to the educated European public. Andrew Pettegree (1996:22) describes Calvinism as a form of religious practice that seeks to use discipline and control within human behavior. Calvinism is a strict religion with a harsh God who “demanded unquestioning obedience and a political system in line with His laws” (Rose-Marie Hagen and Rainer Hagen 2003:244). Therefore, the moralizing nature of Calvinism, where sin and temptation was to be found everywhere and should be guarded against, impacted on daily life.

\(^4\) Angela Vanhaelen (2012:35) explains that Calvinism censored religious imagery due to iconoclasm: the belief that imagery which depicts God leads to idolatry. The images themselves are not unlawful, but the veneration of such religious imagery, which is considered sinful, is what resulted in them being banned.
and financial success, along with the rise in Calvinism, thus favoured the development of still life painting along with other non-religious genres of painting including portraits, genre paintings (scenes of everyday life) and landscape paintings. According to Westermann (1996:112-113, 116), still life and genre paintings referenced the economic success of the Dutch, largely due to overseas trade, by placing contrasting and often exotic objects together in fantastical compositions, allowing for metaphorical meanings to be generated. Westermann (1996:100, 102) states that these categories of painting emerged as a response to the Dutch nation gaining new-found national pride. Landscape painting, for example, became immensely popular because the Dutch painters wanted to portray prosperity in the productive landscape itself or by including such things as cattle and windmills as symbols of pride and ownership.

It appears that the religious beliefs of the growing Dutch merchant/middle class were at odds with their lifestyle. Calvinistic dogma espoused moderation and simplicity, whereas their new-found financial gain allowed them the opportunity to enjoy wealth and riches. The subject matter of seventeenth-century still-lifes was painted with much realism and designed and arranged in such a way as to showcase many of the luxurious and wealthy pleasures of the time. Examples of these items include exotic food (especially in banquet pieces or breakfast pieces), expensive ornamental objects made from various materials (ceramic and silver), and scientific equipment or books. In terms of the Calvinist belief system, which preaches against the temptation of riches, images such as these could perhaps be seen as promoting vanity and undermining the moral benefits of simplicity. Gary Schwartz (1986:153) explains that, before the seventeenth-century in the Netherlands, art was used as a religious device that aided worship. Because Calvinism rejects the use of art to aid religious practice, however, the Dutch painters needed to find another way to express these moral values. These paintings, therefore, cannot simply be viewed for what they represent on the surface. The objects of desire and opulence serve as symbols that carry a message of morals; a reminder that earthly luxury does not serve you in the afterlife and that one should pursue a life of deeper meaning.
In *vanitas* still-lifes, the aspect of mortality is emphasised with the inclusion of objects such as an extinguished candle, bubbles, an hourglass and a human skull. These objects are traditional symbols of death and transience, showing the passage of time and humanity’s inevitable conclusion. When these objects are combined with the luxurious items the juxtaposition provides a caution against earthly pleasures. Grootenboer (2005:138) describes *vanitas* as images that:

intend to combine the complexities of the ontological difference between being and nothingness with the impenetrable passing of time and the inevitability of death.

Still life paintings that were painted in the seventeenth-century were also created for another purpose, which might have influenced the context and style of these paintings. Griffith (2000:222) explains that due to the economic growth mentioned earlier, there were many people who could afford to spend their wealth buying art, becoming patrons of the artists. Thus, painting still-lifes for these patrons often included the imagery of wealth and opulence as a symbol of the patron’s newly gained riches or as a symbol of items that these patrons might wish to obtain but could not afford. Artists in the seventeenth-century felt pressurised by the art market, with patrons demanding specific types of paintings. As a result, Griffith (2000:223) states that artists were led to specialise in specific genres of still life paintings. Genres included flower-pieces\(^5\), breakfast-pieces\(^6\) (“arrangements of modest foods”), and *pronk* still life (“display of luxury objects”) (Griffith 2000:223). Other genres of still life painting which included hunting themes also became popular as they depicted another form of aspiration for the owner. Hunting was a carefully regulated pastime reserved for the nobility and high regents through a system of permits (Westermann 2004:122). While the wealth

---

\(^5\) Griffith (2000:226) explains that flower paintings were much cheaper than the bouquets that they represented, since flowers (especially imported) were very expensive during the seventeenth-century. According to Griffith (2000:227), these paintings captured flowers in their “brief moment of full bloom”, allowing the flowers to last forever. This very aspect of immortality is what makes flower still-lifes more than mere representations of nature’s beauty. Flowers became symbols of transience, and combined with *vanitas* imagery, shows the fleeting existence of earthly pleasures.

\(^6\) Simon Schama (1988:160) states that breakfast pieces are still-lifes that include simple food items that were considered staples. The appearance of moderation exercised by the Dutch is evident in these pieces, the modesty of the items displaying constraint “within wise moral boundaries” (Schama 1988:160).
and opulence were a symbol of what the patron wished he could own or reflected his/her pride in what he did own, the hunting imagery also symbolised nobility and the patron’s fantasy in obtaining nobility or the patron’s pride in having this nobility. In this case, I do not refer to paintings of hunting scenes (which were included in genre painting), but rather to imagery involving hunting trophies, such as carcasses of dead animals, which were included as part of the still life, becoming objects within the paintings.

Having given a brief overview of the social and religious context in which seventeenth-century Dutch paintings were made, I now conduct iconographic and iconological analyses of selected artworks that fall within the *vanitas* genre with the purpose of understanding the metaphors and symbolism used as it informs the direction I take in my own work, which will be discussed in chapter three. Historical Dutch paintings of the *vanitas* genre depict traditional objects one would find in a still life such as ornamental objects, food, plants and animals for the purposes of allegory and metaphor. Within these still life paintings, the visual metaphors would convey the concept of transience and mortality, often including imagery such as skulls, burning candles or decaying flowers (Sturgis 2000:228).

**Analyses of examples**

It can be said that most, if not all, seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings can be linked in some way to the notion that life is fleeting, but the metaphors and imagery used in still life is more subtle than the obvious symbolic meaning found in *vanitas* images. The term *vanitas* evokes the main function of these works, which is to convey a message of mortality and the futility of amassing worldly wealth. The more subtle artworks might contain some reminders of transience, but this is not necessarily their primary purpose.

---

7 Frances Homan (2000:216) explains that during the seventeenth-century, many still life paintings that depict hunting trophies were made for wealthy city dwellers instead of nobles. This is reinforced in genre paintings depicting the hunt, which feature ordinary people hunting, even though this pastime was reserved for nobility.
Griffith (2000:230) states:

The objects depicted in still lives often convey meanings beyond those that are immediately apparent. While a skull or an hourglass in a *vanitas* painting obviously stands for mortality and transience, the symbolism of other still-life objects is not always as clear.

Griffith is referring to the metaphorical meanings of certain objects (such as flowers, luxurious food and ornaments), that might be more difficult to decipher due to sophisticated or obscure metaphors and allegories. I have selected eight seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings that fall within the *vanitas* genre, and I dissect the metaphors and imagery within these examples in order to highlight the concepts of transience and mortality. The paintings are grouped and analysed under different headings (*vanitas*, pronk, etc.) to identify the subtly different messages that each genre within seventeenth-century still life promotes.

**Vanitas still life**

**Jacques De Gheyn – *Vanitas Still Life* (1603) (Figure 1.2)**

This painting is an example of an early seventeenth-century still life, which would be considered a *vanitas* still life painting. Firstly the focal point is provided by a centrally placed skull, positioned so that it is facing frontally out of the picture plane as if gazing back at the viewer. The skull is painted inside an architectural niche with identical vases on either side, one containing a tulip flower, the other empty with smoke rising from it. The flower represents transience in that the flower will inevitably die. Grootenboer (2005:139) points out that the tulip has a particular significance since tulips are expensive flowers and thus the tulip serves as a metaphor for earthly luxury and the fact that this luxury does not last forever and can serve no purpose.8

---

8 Griffith (2000:226) states that during the early seventeenth-century, numerous new species of flowers were imported into Western Europe for the first time due to the great advances in the study of botany and horticulture. Flowers became a luxury item and their role within the composition of seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings. The representation of the tulip, in particular, is significant due to its high prices at the time. Griffith (2000:226) explains that the tulip was originally imported into Europe from Turkey in 1554, and during the seventeenth-century, the tulip became incredibly sought after. This tulip obsession even resulted in many people trading all their
The smoke rising from the other vase also represents the concept of transience, describing life disappearing like smoke. In the upper left and right corners there are depictions of sculpted figures. Grootenboer (2005:139) explains that these sculptures represent the philosophers Heracleitus and Democritus, who have opposing views of the world: “Democritus, the skeptic, laughs at the absurdity of life, whereas Heracleitus, his head resting on his hand in a moment of melancholy, weeps over the human condition.” There is a large bubble floating over the skull that both of the sculptured figures gesture towards. Grootenboer (2005:139) goes on to say that the bubble is a metaphor for fragility, much like life, representing the “transience of the world”. Inside the bubble you can discern reflected images which are meant to symbolise human weakness. The images include reflections of drinking glasses, dice and playing cards which, according to Grootenboer (2005:139), represent “earthly pleasures”. There is also a heart with a dagger driven through it to symbolise “the burning desire of earthly love” (Grootenboer 2005:139). In the centre there is an image of war insignia and a crown and scepter which serves as a metaphor for “hollow trophies of worldly power” (Grootenboer 2005:139).

Lest the viewer is in any doubt about the moral tenor of this painting, De Gheyn introduces more vanitas imagery referring to the ‘fragility of the body’ with a wheel of torture, medical flasks and a rattle used by lepers to warn others of their arrival. Due to the age of this painting, these images have faded away and are now barely visible in the painting. Underneath the skull, De Gheyn has painted scattered coins to signify the wealth that is left behind when you die. Grootenboer (2005:140) points out that the painting has been metaphorically divided, with the ‘positive’ side on the left depicting natural beauty and earthly pleasures and a ‘negative’ side on the right depicting sickness, pain and decay. In her analysis of the painting Grootenboer (2005:140) states:

possessions for a single tulip bulb. Thus, the symbolism of the tulip in still life painting represents foolish behaviour in the pursuit of wealth.

9 It is ironic that this painting has faded, considering the painting’s message of earthly transience. Vanitas painting in itself has always been considered a contradiction, since the message of the painting is contradicted by the existence of the actual painting. Earthly pleasures do not last forever, yet the painting of these pleasures will survive even its maker. In this particular case, the painting has also faded, reinforcing the message within the painting.
Pleasure and beauty, on the one hand, and pain and decay, on the other, thus co-ordinate two poles. These poles, however, are not simply opposite extremes but rather stages in the same gradually developing process of life and its decline.

**Harmen Steenwyck – *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* (1640) (Figure 1.3)**

Steenwyck’s *vanitas* painting also includes the central skull which is emphasised by strong contrasting light and shade. The painting is carefully composed, with an arrangement of treasured objects: a delicate shell, a rare Japanese sword, books, a flute, an earthenware pot, a timepiece and a snuffed out lamp. Griffith (2000:228) explains that the shell and the sword are both symbols of wealth, since they were both considered rare and precious collector’s items. The book symbolises earthly knowledge, while the flute represents earthly pleasure, particularly of the senses. These objects are incorporated with the timepiece and snuffed out lamp, which signify the transience of life. Griffith (2000:229) goes on to say that even though the meaning of the painting in context is clear, it is contradicted in the painting itself as the painting becomes another beautiful luxurious object of desire.

This contention of condemning wealth but wanting to own or display it was a national dilemma faced by many in the Dutch Republic. Since the Dutch people in the seventeenth-century were predominantly Calvinist, these luxurious objects and exotic foods would have been identified by the seventeenth-century Dutch Calvinist viewer as warnings against such earthly desires. Yet, ironically, patrons requested luxurious subject matter in their still life paintings as a way to ‘own’ these objects by depiction, since they often could not afford to buy the real objects themselves. Grootenboer (2005:90) clarifies the irony by explaining that Calvinism is a religion with very strict rules about living a simple life, not indulging in luxurious clothing or food, and contemplating the word of God. This was in direct conflict with seventeenth-century society, however, since the Dutch citizens were able to experience higher standards of living due to the profit gained by the Dutch Republic’s flourishing trade. Examples of this dichotomy between wealth and moral piety can also be seen in the luxurious
paintings of Dutch painters Jan Davidsz De Heem and Willem Kalf while Mariet Westermann (1996:118) clarifies the resulting dilemma when stating that Kalf’s paintings are an example of the “Dutch mentality of the seventeenth-century, which revelled in prosperity yet was anxious about the moral consequences of wealth”.

**Cornelius Gijsbrechts – Trompe l’Oeil with Studio Wall and Vanitas Still Life (1668) (Figure 1.4)**

Gijsbrechts’s *vanitas* painting combines the concept of a *vanitas* image with trompe l’oeil. Trompe l’oeil means “fool the eye” and refers to the level of realism and the illusionism of this reality in a painting, which makes the image within the painting appear to be three-dimensional. Gijsbrechts has painted an image of a *vanitas* still life painting mounted on a temporary stretcher on his wooden studio wall. This is surrounded by small painted portraits and painting materials including oil paints, a bottle of painting medium and a palette dripping with used paint. There are two small painted portraits that are nailed to the wooden wall. One portrait is revealed to be Emperor Leopold I and the other portrait is left unfinished, with only the background complete. Another small painted portrait has been placed carefully on the shelf next to the painting materials, the subject of which is unknown. Next to this portrait is a slip of paper with Gijsbrechts’s signature scrawled on it. In the *vanitas* painting (within a painting), Gijsbrechts has painted a skull surrounded by various objects: a snuffed out candle, tobacco, paper with writing on it, a timepiece and dried twigs enveloping the skull. Gijsbrechts adds emphasis and allegory by combining *vanitas* imagery with the illusion of trompe l’oeil as Grootenboer (2005:147) states: “He [Gijsbrechts] pushes the *vanitas* theme to its limit in an attempt to visualize its paradox, namely, that it cannot be visualized.”

As the entire painting appears to be real, there does not seem to be a difference in the rendering of the *vanitas* painting and its surroundings. All the objects and surfaces are treated in the same way, making the *vanitas* painting and the objects therein blend with their surroundings. Therefore, Gijsbrechts implies that the painting within the painting
is as ‘real’ as the environment around it. The painting challenges the viewer to attempt to decipher what is considered real and what is considered allegorical.

It should be noted that the image chosen by Gijsbrechts as subject for this painting is a vanitas image, and the image is not merely painted like other still life paintings. This painting is created in an attempt to capture a specific moment in time; i.e. the process of creating a vanitas painting. That moment, in itself, is fleeting, like the moment that is captured within the vanitas itself. Thus, Gijsbrechts’s painting represents two moments in time and two realities. By doing this, he emphasises the message of vanitas paintings and implies that the concept of vanitas not only lies within vanitas paintings, but is rather present within life itself and in the present moment. Moments in life are fleeting and this concept is clearly symbolised as a key aspect of the vanitas theme.

**Pronk still life**

Griffith (2000:223) explains that the word ‘pronk’ comes from the Dutch word “pronken”, which is a verb that means “to display” or “to show off”. These ‘pronk’ still life paintings show exotic objects and luxurious foods, which were often imported into the Dutch Republic during that time due to the wide ranging trading voyages of the Dutch East India Company.

**Jan Davidsz De Heem – Pronk Still Life (1648) (Figure 1.5)**

De Heem is a seventeenth-century Dutch painter who focused primarily on painting pronk still life paintings. This painting shows a table that is laid out with exotic fruits, seafood (crab, lobster, and prawns), meat and wines. There are also luxurious objects, such as silver plates, Delftware bowls and wine glasses inlaid with silver. This is not merely a display of luxury, however, as Grootenboer (2005:90) states, this painting is considered to be a carrier of a moral message about the dyad relations between abundance and moderation, restriction and excess, framed by the religious imperative warning that choosing one means struggling with the other.
Grootenboer (2005:90-91) explains that in this blatant display of worldly desire, De Heem tries to teach a moral message of moderation, against sinful gluttony and indulgence, instead of what seems to be a celebration of these objects when merely observing the painting on its surface. The ways in which the objects are painted depict a seductive richness in technique, which evoke the richness of the real objects. In order to achieve such richness, these techniques used by De Heem include the use of bright colours and the application of highlights.

Willem Kalf – Still Life with a Nautilus Cup and a Wan-Li Bowl (1662) (Figure 1.6)

This still life painted by Kalf during the mid-seventeenth century is a good example of the tension between material wealth and transience in a vanitas painting. Like the still life painted by De Heem, this painting also depicts opulence and luxury and is also considered to be part of the ‘pronk’ still life genre. Expensive objects such as an eastern rug, a nautilus cup and the Wan-Li bowl, are depicted in minute detail with luxurious illusionistic textures. These items along with the examples of exotic fruit refer to the Dutch trade at the time and are considered especially precious and desirable, with the artist focusing on expensive objects rather than placing more emphasis on exotic foods as seen in the De Heem painting.

Kalf’s focus is not on the depiction of gluttony and indulgence, but rather on material wealth. Each object seems to come from another country, placing focus on the access that the Dutch trade routes provided for the acquisition of exotic items, since these objects would have been imported. Furthermore, the focus on Dutch trade during the seventeenth-century has great significance, since this is where the Dutch Republic gained its wealth. However, there is a deeper meaning within this painting, if you consider the Dutch religious beliefs of the time and there is a moralistic reason attached to the subject matter. In its display of obvious luxury, the painting serves as a warning to those who look upon it. Earthly desires are useless since we are all destined to die and cannot take our earthly possessions with us into the afterlife.
Hunting still-lifes / Game Pieces

Still life paintings that depict hunting trophies, also known as ‘game pieces’, became very popular in the seventeenth-century in the Dutch Republic. Scott Sullivan (1979:66) explains that before 1650, still life paintings of game were focused on the culinary aspect of game hunting, depicting dead birds or a dead hare surrounded by fruits, vegetables or kitchen utensils. A good example of an early game piece such as this is *Still Life with Game Fowl, Vegetables and Fruits* (1602) (Figure 1.7) by Juan Sánchez Cotán. The composition of these early game pieces was simple and balanced and the colour palette usually monochrome, whereas later paintings by other painters such as Jan Baptist Weenix, are markedly richer and more sumptuous.

According to Sullivan (1979:68), still life paintings within the game piece genre that were painted during the seventeenth-century subsequently “began to assume a more trophy-like character, with hunting gear replacing the various foods and kitchen utensils found in earlier still lifes”. The inclusion of hunting gear is important to note, since these objects provided more insight into how the hunting was done as well as emphasising the resources needed for this activity. As Sullivan (1979:68) states: “The inclusion of more ornate accessories such as velvet game bags and brocaded hunting jackets implies that hunters were men of wealth and refinement.” Sullivan (1979:68) goes on to explain that in order to enhance the perception that hunting was an activity reserved for those of noble birth, artists created game piece still-lifes that became more monumental, with more dramatic colour palettes, and altogether more grandiose compositions, befitting a wealthy member of the aristocracy. Through his investigation, Sullivan (1979:68-70) has theorised that the patronage of these game pieces consisted mostly of nobility that participated in hunting, with the painting being “considered as mementos of the aristocratic hunter’s catch, as painted trophies of the noble sportsman’s good fortune”. Sullivan (1979:70) states:

The sport of hunting held great interest for the wealthy burgher who, however, could not legally participate in the most prestigious gaming activities. The alternate to actual participation seems to have been the purchase of a game piece by means of which the Dutch burgher could acquire, if only vicariously,
some of the status inherent in an aristocratic sport. The trophy piece, conspicuously displayed, became a mark of social prestige.

Indeed, the rise of the Dutch middle class allowed for them to become patrons in the arts even if they could not engage directly with the events or objects depicted. According to Sullivan (1979:70), Dutch society and class distinctions had become less defined by the middle of the seventeenth-century and “class distinctions between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie grew less apparent as the latter accumulated more and more wealth.” This merging of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie allowed the middle class to explore certain facets of noble life, and as Sullivan (1979:70) explains, they “developed a heightened social consciousness and began to assume aristocratic tastes and habits”. This is largely the reason why the Dutch middle class sought to buy still life paintings depicting hunting imagery, in an attempt to acquire the status of this activity, despite their Calvinistic beliefs.

**Jan Baptist Weenix – *Still Life with a Dead Swan* (1651) (Figure 1.8)**

Weenix almost exclusively painted game pieces, incorporating hunting trophies into his still life imagery. In *Still Life with a Dead Swan*, Weenix has painted a large white swan in the center of the composition. The swan is placed on a stone block and is surrounded by other dead birds: a finch, turkey, two partridges and two bitterns, which are hung upon the wall. There is also a large basket of fruit in the background and on the bottom right corner the viewer can see front legs belonging to a hare and the underbelly of a duck. On the bottom right corner, the viewer can see another partial view of a duck. Compared with earlier game pieces by other artists, Weenix’s still life has a more engaging and complex composition. In *Still Life with a Dead Swan*, there are strong diagonal lines in the swan and the turkey’s body. These create movement combined with vertical lines in the suspended bitterns in the background which create stability within the composition. The colour palette of the painting consists of warm earthy colours with hints of brighter more saturated colour found on the red fruit in the basket and partridges with orange feathers on their heads. The effects of the dynamic composition and colour palette are enhanced by the dramatic contrast in the light brushstrokes. The symbolism of wealth and nobility is apparent in this painting (as
mentioned earlier, hunting was a pastime reserved for nobility in seventeenth-century Holland). The various species of birds depicted in Weenix’s still life also symbolise wealth and nobility, since Sullivan (1979:67) explains that the swan would have been a prize catch for the seventeenth-century hunter and the turkey is a bird that was not indigenous to Holland at the time, thus making it an expensive item. Turkeys were imported from America to Holland in the 1500s and, over time, could eventually be found in the wild throughout Western Europe. Sullivan (1979:67) states that Weenix’s depiction of turkeys is considered to be one of the earliest depictions of the bird in seventeenth-century still life. Furthermore, Sullivan (1979:69) explains that the types of game depicted in Weenix’s paintings such as rabbit, pheasant, partridge, swan, duck and bittern were reserved for hunting, and limited to the aristocracy.

The analyses of seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings demonstrates who these images were created for, as well as why they contain this particular subject matter and aesthetic. The iconography they display through analysis also determines what they signify in terms of transience and mortality. It should be noted that there is a certain amount of hypocrisy within the seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings, especially those that depict riches, luxury and exotic items. Despite the moral message within these paintings, there was a certain amount of exploitation in the acquirement of these items through the slave trade and through colonial exploitation. These themes and techniques have particular significance for Penny Siopis, and in the next section of this chapter, I consider the vanitas theme in relation to selected examples of Siopis’ work.

**Analysis of *Melancholia* (Figure 1.9) by Penny Siopis**

Penny Siopis is a contemporary South African artist who, in many of her works that were made between 1986 and 2002, appears to engage with both the visual complexity and the moral undertone found in the works discussed above. Taking inspiration from seventeenth-century Dutch still life, Jennifer Law (2002:19) explains that there is a definite connection to vanitas paintings in her artworks, which are “heavily burdened by symbolism”. Siopis employs the use of allegorical imagery in the same way that vanitas paintings use such imagery in order to provide meaning on transience,
mortality and memory. My analysis will focus on her painting titled *Melancholia* (1986). I investigate how Siopis uses a range of these objects in her painting in a way that reflects the concerns raised in seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings: as symbols and metaphors for death and transience in response to their society at the time.

**Melancholia**

Law (2002:17) states that in her painting titled *Melancholia* (1986), Siopis has depicted a “vision of colonialism in decline” during a time when South Africa was going through a period of civil unrest. The *vanitas* theme discussed in the previous section is tied closely to the Dutch colonial imperative. Colonialism gave rise to Dutch power and prosperity and influenced their contemplation of worldly riches opposed to earthly mortality. In *Melancholia* (1986), Siopis has painted an image depicting a large hall that stretches into the distance, which has been filled to the brim with food and objects. Like the food depicted in seventeenth-century *pronk* still life, the food in *Melancholia* is exotic and luxurious, with fruits and decadent desserts and pastries. Amongst the food, there are strange seemingly arbitrary objects such as a monkey, a tortoise shell, porcupine quills, various exotic sea shells, tropical flowers and various Greek-inspired sculptures. These objects relate very closely to the objects depicted in the seventeenth-century paintings, but are exchanged, in certain cases, with objects related to Africa. Instead of using swans or grouse as hunting trophies, Siopis uses a taxidermy monkey. The flowers include proteas and African lilies, and the sea shells include perlemoen, which is also found in seas around the African continent.

The colours used in the painting are intense reds, yellows and blues giving the food items the effect of over ripeness, with the implication that they are going to decay soon. The ripeness is also emphasised by built-up texture created by using thick impasto paint that is applied using an icing syringe to make patterns on the fabrics and the exaggerated texture of objects and food. The texture, much like the colour, makes the food look overripe as if it is about to decay. In some areas the textures are so heavily layered that they create shadows and three-dimensionality. The process of
constructing physical texture through paint application also relates to a metaphor for a physical body in the process of over ripening and decay. Siopis treats the surface of the painting like human skin, waiting for the thick paint to dry enough to form a ‘skin’ on the surface and then using her palette knife to ‘scar’ and alter the surface, metaphorically referring to the violence experienced during that period of social unrest against the apartheid system. An important difference between the seventeenth-century still life paintings and Siopis’ still life paintings is the building up of physical texture to create an object that promotes a response of disgust, rather than an emphasis on illusionistic texture to create an object of desire. Siopis’ intention is to use her painting technique as well as the subject matter to refer to the rotten nature of contemporary South African politics as this was painted during the State of Emergency (1985 - 1989).\(^\text{10}\)

The fact that the room is filled to the brim with objects and food acts as a metaphor for waste and excess. At the same time this excess indicts a European population who enjoy the spoils of colonialism at the expense of others. Their exploitation of Africa is illustrated by African exotica such as a taxidermy monkey, tortoise shell, porcupine quills, and African sculptures interspersed with European mementoes such as Michelangelo inspired sculpture, flowers and food. One can also see traditional *vanitas* objects, for example the hourglass, which refers to the passage of time and the implication of mortality. The food and flowers will decay and wither, acting as a metaphor for death as a representation of our own mortality.

Like the Dutch still life paintings from the seventeenth-century, Siopis also comments on her own society. While the seventeenth-century Dutch paintings provide a view on living as a Calvinist during a period of excess and wealth, Siopis provides a view on living as a white person in South Africa during (and after) apartheid. Katherine Smith (2005:49) explains that *Melancholia* is an allegory of South Africa during apartheid, presenting South Africa as a country of plenty for the white population (hence the abundance depicted in the painting that is over abundant to the point of being

\(^{10}\) According to the South African History Archive (2014:sp), with violence escalating in the mid 1980's, the state declared a state of emergency in an attempt to restore peace and order.
disgusting) but with an underlying sense of unease and even, perhaps, imminent violence. The link between traditional vanitas paintings within colonialism and that of Siopis' *Melancholia* is mirrored by our South African heritage and its links to colonialism and how this has affected our recent history of apartheid. Siopis continues to explore these themes in later artworks, focusing on South African society post-apartheid and its relationship to transience, mortality and memory.

The seventeenth-century artworks and the artwork created by Siopis have used themes of vanitas to raise moral issues. In the seventeenth-century paintings the moral issues are a reference to worldly riches and the temptation of amassing wealth at the expense of the immortal soul (which as noted earlier was a somewhat hypocritical stance, as they neglected to raise the moral issues of how the riches were gained through the exploitation of colonized lands and slavery). However, in Siopis' case her theme of vanitas, decay and excess in *Melancholia* points to a broader malaise in South African society that was part of the current (apartheid) political dispensation at the time. Her later (post-apartheid) works should perhaps have taken on a more positive aspect in the post-apartheid era, however, as I have pointed out, the thread of violence and disquiet that runs through her later vanitas objects points to a continuing problem within South African society. Analysis of Siopis' work serves as an introduction to my third chapter, in which I analyse various post-apartheid artworks by selected contemporary South African artists whose imagery of death and violence becomes symbolic of a perceived social decline in contemporary South African society, despite the end of apartheid.
Figure 1.1: Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533. Oil and tempura on oak, 207 x 209cm. National Gallery, London (Grootenboer 2006: plate 13).

Figure 1.2: Jacques De Gheyn, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1603. Oil on panel, 82.6 x 54cm. Charles B. Curtis, Marquand, Victor Wilbour Memorial, and The Alfred N. Punnett Endowment Funds (Grootenboer 2006: plate 22).

Figure 1.4: Cornelius Gijsbrechts, *Trompe l'Oeil with Studio Wall and Vanitas Still Life*, 1668. Oil on canvas, 152 x 118cm. Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (Grootenboer 2006:plate 24).
Figure 1.5: Jan Davidsz De Heem, *Pronk Still Life*, 1648. Oil on canvas, 79.2 x 102.5cm. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam (Grootenboer 2006:plate 11).

Figure 1.6: Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Nautilus Cup and a Wan Li Bowl*, 1662. Oil on canvas, 79 x 67cm. Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid (Rosenbaum 1979:132).
Figure 1.7: Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Game Fowl, Vegetables and Fruits*, 1602. Oil on canvas, 68 x 88.2cm. Prado Museum, Madrid (Kemp 2000:236).

Figure 1.8: Jan Baptist Weenix, *Still Life with a Dead Swan*, 1651. Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 153.7cm. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit (Sullivan 1979:66).
Figure 1.9: Penny Siopis, *Melancholia*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 197.5 x 175.5cm. Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg (Smith 2005:13).
Chapter Two: Contemporary approaches to versions of *vanitas* in South African artworks by Diane Victor, Conrad Botes and Jane Alexander.

Introduction

It is my perception that South Africa is experiencing serious levels of social decay. I base my perception firstly on my own observance of the erosion of social values and a general lack of consideration for others. These observations are based on my Christian background, which inform my perceptions of social decay. This can be seen daily in the flouting of traffic laws by taxis and other vehicles; the litter and general theft of societal infrastructure (such as the highway guard rails or manhole covers); and in ongoing cable theft that incapacitates entire suburbs (among other examples). It is also clear from media coverage that there is little consideration for the sanctity of life, and there is a perceived lack of official reaction to criminal activity. Perhaps, the inability of those in power to counteract this demoralizing trend effectively appears to encourage a form of desensitisation and/or apathy within South African society.

I include here some examples of media responses that identify these trends as the result of a moral decline in society arising partly from the moral shortcomings of South African leadership. For example, in an internet article on Reuters by Ed Cropley (2012:sp), the South African Council of Churches (SACC) criticised the African National Congress (ANC) blaming them for social moral decline as a result of poor leadership and saying that political leaders had “largely lost their moral compass”. Outspoken critic, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, also points to the many examples of violence, crime and high death rates as evidence of the erosion of values in our society, saying that this is “causing our country to fall apart at the seams” (Khumalo 2012:sp). In J. Tyler Dickovick’s (2012:317) discussion of violent crime he indicates that, South Africa’s murder rate is “one of the highest in the world”. He furthermore states that: “South Africa remains one of the few countries in which one is more likely to be murdered than die in an automobile accident” (Dickovick 2012:317). In 2013, Justice Malala reviewed the many violent acts that occurred in the first few months of that year.
in an online article for CNN. He suggested that deaths related to destructive acts are increasing and ascribed this increase to police brutality (Malala 2013:sp). The inverse may also hold true, however, where the behavior of police is merely a symptom of the general malaise of a violent society.¹

Thuletho Zwane (2014:sp) wrote an article for the Mail & Guardian which discusses the most recent crime statistics during April 2013 to March 2014 in South Africa. These statistics indicate an increase in murder from 16 257 in 2013 to 17 068 in 2014 and an increase in attempted murder by 4.6%. Zwane (2014:sp) states that the police have noticed higher levels of violence in society and police minister, Nkosinathi Nhleko, ascribes this escalation to immoral tendencies in relation to the abuse of illegal drugs and alcohol, as well as cultural violence and aggression² (Zwane 2014:sp).

The motivation for this chapter and for my practical work stems from a critical response to such reports in the media. I firstly investigate the historic context for the perceived moral decay and levels of violence in our current society. I then give a very brief overview of the social problems that have arisen due to our colonial past as it is presented by a selection of researchers. My discussion of the historic context is framed by a literature survey of some post-colonial theory, particularly the writings of John Keane and Achille Mbembe. Keane (2004) provides a study into the origins of violence and its consequences as well as the relationship between violence and democracy and how this relationship affects social interactions. Mbembe (2001) considers the

¹David Bruce (2002:sp) defines police brutality as “deliberate unlawful violence” perpetrated by the police or groups similar to that of the police, as well as the ability to abuse their power, using unnecessary force. Bruce (2002:sp) states that police brutality is very serious, since these acts of violence perpetrated by police do not just end at torture. Other violent acts include death as the result of torture, execution killings in custody or at the point of arrest and accidental killings as a result of misconduct and irresponsible behaviour. Bruce (2002:sp) also reports cases where death is linked to assault of persons not in custody, even persons who are attempting to report crime to the police. Bruce (2002:sp) investigates 29 cases where there is evidence of police brutality from 1996 to 2000. Out of these, 19 cases resulted in death due to torture, execution killings and misconduct. The 10 remaining cases resulted in assault, rape and torture. Our violent past can shed light on aspects of police brutality, especially during the years directly following apartheid and South Africa’s transition to democracy.

²High levels of violence can partly be attributed to the recent xenophobic attacks that had taken place in South Africa since May 2008 that degenerated into criminal looting. This is also a symptom of a greater violent problem in South Africa.
complexities that Africans face in our current post-colonial and post-apartheid society: he focuses specifically on cases of violence and death and also makes links between acts of violence and death and political issues that he identifies as catalysts for extreme reaction. With reference to contemporary violence I also refer to writings by David Bruce, Steven Hunt, Bronwyn Harris, R.W Johnston and others who have studied the social implications and underlying reasons for violence in South Africa.

In my previous chapter the iconographic and iconological analyses of selected seventeenth-century *vanitas* paintings and the works of Siopis ascertain how symbols and metaphor function within the paintings and allude to wider social and moral implications. In this chapter I analyse various artworks by selected contemporary South African artists: Diane Victor, Conrad Botes and Jane Alexander, in response to issues raised by the authors listed above, to show how their iconography of death and violence responds to the perceived social decline in South Africa. My chapter ends with a discussion of animal imagery as a metaphor for social victims in Victor and Alexander's work, as this links directly to the use of animal/human hybrids in my artmaking.

**Social context and contemporary artistic responses**

Since violent death in South Africa is a particular focus of my research, it is necessary to understand the way violence functions as part of the human condition. In order to understand the social context of violence in a broader sense, I begin by considering aspects of John Keane’s book titled *Violence and Democracy* (2004). Keane (2004:34) defines violence as “an ‘exercise of physical force’ against someone who is thereby ‘interrupted or disturbed’”. The worst and ultimate consequence of violence is death and Keane (2004:40) describes violence that results in death as the ‘purest’ form of violence, as violent death robs a person of an “individual death”. This means that it strips the person of their individuality, making their death forced, abrupt and anonymous.
Keane (2004:7) provides a broad view of the way democracy and violence are connected, giving a worldwide perspective and stating that there appears to be a general belief that violence is part of the “human condition”. This view is supported by a global report on violence, first published in 2002, which provides statistics on violent behaviour (Keane 2004:8). From these statistics, I focus on the instances that are relevant to violent deaths. For example, 1400 people on average are murdered on a daily basis and roughly 35 people are killed every hour as a result of armed conflict worldwide. Death and violence make dramatic news stories so it is natural for the media to report at length on such events. In countries where violence and death occur frequently, therefore, the public exposed to such stories on a constant basis would unavoidably develop the opinion that violence is on the rise and is a natural component of human nature (Keane 2004:8). According to Keane (2004:7) the presumption of our natural tendency to violence encourages governments or states to both accept and employ violence as a method of control or punishment. In his study of the relationship between violence and democracy, Keane (2004:7) states:

the belief that violence is ‘natural’ – a deep-seated predisposition in every individual, or generative of either the body politic or of the species as a whole – is both historically specific and profoundly anti-democratic.

This statement provides the context for his next argument, in which he explains the different types of violence within a democracy and how “democracy democratises violence” (Keane 2004:9). What Keane means by this is that violence is used by governments in order to combat violence. This can be attributed to war and police brutality towards citizens or convicts on a smaller scale. If violence is considered “profoundly anti-democratic”, the use of violence in order to combat violence by governments within a democracy creates a hypocritical dilemma in terms of what is morally acceptable. As Keane (2004:161) states, democracy is able to use violence as a “means of creating or strengthening a peaceful civil society by publicly accountable political-legal institutions”. In other words, violence is only permitted in the act of reducing violence by government institutions. This becomes problematic when government institutions abuse their authority through acts of violence, especially in cases that end in multiple deaths.
With reference to African countries, Keane (2004:25) explains that acts of violence can “assume a life of their own” or a means to an end and that the perpetrators of violence are only able to affirm their identity by projecting violence onto others. The reason for this, according to Keane, is that people who commit violence “need enemies who appear to threaten them with extinction”; in which case, they need to kill them to survive (Keane 2004:25).

The African context brings me to my next section where I specifically consider the history and evidence of violence in South Africa though the writings of Achille Mbembe. *On the Postcolony* by Achille Mbembe presents an overall view of the history of violence within sub-Saharan Africa. This provides a broader context from which I can examine the causes and effects that might shed light on the post-colonial South African situation in particular. Mbembe’s focus is on violence within the postcolony, attempting to define the violence as well as analyse the causes of violence and explain how they have been ascribed to the results of long term oppression in Africa. He focuses, therefore, on the behaviour and psyche of African countries in relation to colonialism in particular. Mbembe (2001:102) describes the postcolony as being:

made up of a series of corporate institutions and political machinery that once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence.

In order to understand this statement and the context of the postcolony fully, it is necessary to examine the violence that stemmed from colonialism in Africa.

One of the first results of colonisation, according to Mbembe (2001:13, 14), was the enslavement of native Africans by the European colonisers. It appears, therefore, that he ascribes the violence engendered by colonialism as initially a direct result of the slave trade and its brutalization of human capital arising from the dehumanizing aspects of owning another human being. This results in the colonised being treated as merely a body or object; rather like an animal which the colonisers may do with as they please (Mbembe 2001:13,14). Mbembe (2001:13) points out that the slave trade during colonisation had unknown ramifications in which colonialism “posited the issue of contingent human violence.”
Mbembe (2001:26) defines colonial violence as a specific type of violence that was employed in order to maintain control by using authority and morality. Morality in this case is allied with the imposed religious doctrine of Christianity. Melvin Page (2003:116) states that Christianity grew substantially in sub-Saharan Africa during and after the colonial period. Christianity was first introduced in North Africa in the first century AD, but only became more prevalent in the late nineteenth-century (Hilde Arntsen 1997:sp). This is largely attributed to missionaries that came from the various colonial countries who associated Christianity with Western culture and imparted both as part of a ‘civilizing mission’ to the ‘savages’. Arntsen (1997:sp) explains that African religions were seen as an evil and that traditional beliefs and practices were inferior. In order to teach the principles of Christianity, missionaries believed that traditional customs had to be removed before the native African people could accept Christianity, even if they were perceived to be ‘morally neutral’ (Page 2003:116). In order to avoid resistance of white domination, religion was used to promote oppression in the cultural and political domination of the people (Arntsen 1997:sp).

Dutch settlers were the first to colonise South Africa, hence The Dutch Reformed Church (which is a form of Christianity based in Calvinism) was used as a tool to control the indigenous people (Page 2003:23). The development of one small part of what is now South African culture and society during the seventeenth-century was largely framed by the Dutch Reformed Church and its theology. With regard to colonialism, the Dutch Reformed Church “contributed greatly to the formation of a distinctive identity among the white settlers and to their conviction of superiority to the indigenous peoples and slaves” (Elphick and Davenport 1997:16). During the seventeenth-century in South Africa, those who were part of the Dutch Reformed Church and their descendants, were considered redeemed and free from sin. Therefore, those from other cultures or races were automatically devalued as they were not considered part of the church or the ‘chosen people’.³

³ Karen von Veh (2013:sp) states that this religious superiority continued as a result of victories won by the Boer military in battles fought against the local inhabitants during the nineteenth-century. These battles, according to Von Veh (2013:sp), were fought against local indigenous people for the protection of a Christian way of life and the protection of the Afrikaner nation and contributed to the belief, amongst some Afrikaners, that the Afrikaner people were created by God for a special purpose.
Conrad Botes is an artist who has responded directly to this history of divinely sanctioned domination in his lithographic print *Cain and Abel* (2008) (Figure 2.1). Botes grew up in a traditional Afrikaans household in South Africa during apartheid and notes that religion was inherently part of his upbringing (Von Veh 2013:sp). He thus makes use of religious imagery and the culpability of the Dutch Reformed Church to engage with violence and moral issues within contemporary South African society. Botes’ style is influenced by comic imagery, which is attributed to his use of satire in his early career when he was working on *Bitterkomix* with Anton Kannemeyer. As a visual artist, he uses this comic/illustrative style combined with subversive biblical imagery.

Botes’ *Cain and Abel* (2008) is comprised of full-colour panels that make up a ‘comic strip’ which tells the biblical story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4: 3 – 5). In the original story, two brothers make offerings to God. Cain’s offering to God are the first fruits of his harvest, while Abel offers God the best lambs. When God prefers Abel’s offering and rejects Cain’s offering, Cain becomes jealous and murders his brother. This murder is considered in the bible as the first murder committed by humankind after sin was brought into the world (Von Veh 2013:sp).

In Botes’ depiction, Cain and Abel take on racial dynamics, with Cain depicted as a black African man, and Abel taking on the identity of a white Afrikaner. Botes tells the story of South Africa during and post-apartheid through the use of this biblical story, connecting the racial divide through the metaphor of brotherhood. The white Afrikaner man (Abel) is portrayed as a strong, muscular businessman wearing a suit, while the black African man (Cain) is smaller in stature and poor, only wearing a simple pair of trousers. In Botes’ interpretation, violence is perpetrated by both men: Abel kills his horse at the beginning of the comic strip and appears arrogant and superior while Cain slays Abel at the end of the comic strip. Abel can be interpreted as representing South Africa’s past during apartheid, while Cain’s situation at the end of the story can be interpreted as allegory of post-apartheid South Africa, where the demons of the past have created animosity and violence.
The scenario that Botes has presented clearly mirrors aspects of South African society that were affected by apartheid. As Mbembe (2001:26) explains, the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is one of control, where the colonised is positioned as a ‘thing of power’ who is wielded for the benefit of the coloniser. It is this chain of events that has led to the dynamics within current sub-Saharan African societies and has left a lasting impact despite the fact that slavery was abolished in the nineteenth-century. Mbembe (2001:113) defines colonial violence as a form of discipline, to make the colonised docile in order to “make better use of them”. Punishment was therefore used as a tool to increase productivity, but is not the only reason for the violence of colonialism. This punitive treatment of the colonised formed a particular identity within the indigenous people characterised by subjugation, humiliation, inferiority and powerlessness.

A comparison can be drawn between the way in which colonialism used violence as a form of control and the violent tactics employed in post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa to stop rebellions and to seize power. Mbembe (2001:43) suggests that there is no distinction between generalised unbridled violence and the acts carried out by government institutions to maintain control and, ironically, to curb the occurrence of violent crimes. The type of violent acts perpetrated by authorities are to be found where the government and society meet. Post-colonial violence employed by government institutions differs from colonial violence in that punishment is still used as a form of control, but not necessarily in terms of ensuring a useful workforce.

An important factor affecting the levels of public violence in African countries is the lack of resources and high levels of poverty. Mbembe (2001:46) states that the economic crisis in African countries has led to shortages and scarcity with a sharp drop in the standard of living. The resultant extreme levels of poverty and desperation create a rise in the number of riots and protests, so post-colonial violence is often a result of inequality and this is further exacerbated by corruption (Mbembe 2001:68). We in South Africa have seen, first-hand, the result of corrupt and/or dysfunctional government institutions in the rise of violent service delivery protests where people are killed or property is destroyed. Such responses by the public ultimately result in a
widespread breakdown of society (Mbembe 2001:50). The concept of control becomes distorted when a population has to resort to violent acts because they feel they have no other recourse to address their dissatisfaction.

The issue of corruption in government was taken up by Diane Victor in her submission for the Sasol Wax Art Awards in 2006, titled In Smoke and Stain – The Recent Dead (Figure 2.2). Included in this installation is an ironic altarpiece, where Victor has created a triptych of etchings depicting corrupt and immoral figures of social and political authority that are stained as well as scarred with charcoal and ink to represent their immorality. Each image represents a powerful patriarchal institution in South Africa and highlights their shortcomings. For example The Good Preacher represents the authority and lack of empathy from the church in cases of sexual violence and those living with HIV/AIDS. Von Veh (2013:sp) states that the Anglican Church in Southern Africa admitted to being responsible for much of the stigmatisation suffered by AIDS victims including the belief that AIDS was brought by God to those who have sinned through immoral lifestyles. The Good Doctor represents the health system in South Africa and how its lack of services has failed the population, depriving them of adequate medication. The policies regarding the health system could refer to Thabo Mbeki along with Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and their belief in restricting the use of anti-retrovirals and instead placing emphasis on traditional medicines. As a result, millions of people died of AIDS. The Good Politician represents the failure of honest political leadership in South Africa, questioning the moral status of our leaders. Inspiration for this image can be attributed to Jacob Zuma’s rape trial in 2006, where he was accused of sexually assaulting a close family friend. This is suggested by his unzipped pants, with his penis hanging out.

The three figures are situated where an altar would be within what looks like a religious sanctuary or a church (Von Veh 2013:sp). Smoke drawings of disembodied faces are positioned around the walls of the sanctuary like icons or stained glass windows in a church, staring at the three figures who have failed them. Victor responds to these victims by using a particularly fragile drawing medium: carbon deposits from the smoke
of burning candles. Victor is unable to preserve the drawings as one would preserve charcoal, which is sprayed with a fixative medium. If one were to spray the smoke drawings, they would disappear. The effects of violence and the vulnerability of victims are thus alluded to through both subject matter and medium. These portraits serve as memorials for the victims and the fragility of the process as well as the fragility of the portraits themselves evokes transience and ephemerality.

The individuals in the smoke drawings are representative of the plight of many African nations as hopeless, failed people. These people are directly a result of the inability of African governments to run their countries efficiently, thus leading to corruption and the breakdown of law and order. Mbembe (2001:76) explains that across Africa governments and institutions are losing their ability to control, due largely to the fact that they no longer have the financial means or administrative power to maintain a functioning society. The current lack of tactics or methods, that would normally have politically resolved conflicts and contained violence within ‘tolerable limits’, causes the public to lose faith in the government. This in turn results in “resources and labour devoted to war, a rise in number of disputes settled by violence, a growth of banditry and numerous forms of privatization of lawful violence” (Mbembe 2001:76). In the case of South Africa, Bruce (2010:52) states that the rise of violent crime can be attributed to the weaknesses of the criminal justice system in the conviction of perpetrators and in the prevention of crime. Bruce (2010:52) goes on to explain that the leading cause of the failure within our government is corruption within the government itself and within the police. Bronwyn Harris (2003:7) reinforces this by stating that the challenges in the criminal justice system in post-apartheid South Africa are due to “high levels of mistrust between the public and the police, limited resources, inefficiency, corruption and the abuse of power.”

---

4 In this unique process, Victor clips paper onto board which is raised above her head, and draws the image by holding and moving the lit candle underneath the paper. Different candles are used to achieve different marks of soot and carbon. After using the candles, Victor removes any unwanted soot and then draws back into the image, using a combination of additive and subtractive techniques. She accentuates certain areas and adds detail. The combination of these different techniques allow Victor to have some control in what is left and what is taken out of the image.
The larger framework of colonialism and its aftermath in Africa has a particular emphasis in South Africa due to our history of apartheid, as certain studies by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) have identified a specific link between apartheid and post-apartheid violence. For example, in his study on the violent nature of crime in South Africa undertaken in 2010, Bruce (2010:15) identifies the three major forms of violence as domestic violence, rape/sexual assault and robbery. These categories account for more than two-thirds of all violent crime in South Africa and often result in murder. The number of aggravated robberies has increased from 105,888 cases in 2012/13 to 119,351 cases in 2013/14. Furthermore, Bruce (2010:22) states that the occurrence of violent death in South Africa has more prevalence in metropolitan areas, where the numbers have risen from 8,341 in 2000 to 11,904 in 2007. These statistics indicate that violence is on the rise in post-apartheid South Africa.

According to Steven Hunt (2003:sp), the main causes of violence in current South African society has not changed much since the 1980s, when South Africa was still under apartheid rule. Hunt (2003:sp) states that according to the CSVR, South Africa’s high rate of violent crimes is largely due to “economic and social marginalization”, similar to that which occurred during apartheid. In an attempt to curb violent behavior by understanding the causes of violence in current South Africa the CSVR has conducted research on the extent of sustained patterns of violence in South Africa since its transition to democracy. Hunt (2003:sp) explains that this research was conducted over a two year period, starting in 1999. The main difference from apartheid until now, according to Hunt (2003:sp), is the context of the violence. During apartheid, acts of violence perpetrated by the public were understood as a form of political protest, whereas these behaviors are now considered criminal (Hunt 2003:sp).

Bruce (2009:8) explains that the unequal nature of South African society contributes to the levels of violence and the increasing poverty, particularly within the black communities, and “reinforces the psychological legacy of apartheid.” Inequality combined with unemployment, as well as the lack of services, has a direct impact on the occurrence of violent crime in South Africa. Harris (2003:1) reinforces this by
saying that the key obstacles in establishing a human rights culture, rather than a criminal culture, are inequality, poverty and limited access to justice. In the occurrence of inequality and exclusion, violence occurs in the form of deliberate criminal lifestyles that fulfil the need to assert power and control (Bruce 2010:50, 51).

Bruce (2009:5) further states that there is a direct correlation between current high levels of violence in South Africa and the legacy of apartheid and colonialism, because the extreme levels of violence experienced for the past few hundred years has “nurtured a culture of violence that has been reproduced” in the present (Bruce 2009:5). Harris (2003:1) clarifies this state of affairs by noting that there are still racial issues and hatred within communities that persist, years after South Africa’s first democratic elections. Bruce (2009:6) explains that studies of violent behaviour conducted in other countries have indicated that feelings of inferiority and low self-worth are connected to the propensity for violence, and that racism amplifies these feelings in contemporary South African society. The combination of racism and marginalisation breeds insecurity, inadequacy, frustration, hopelessness and discontent. This contributes to a scenario based on exclusion, “the roots of which lie in the injustices of the past” (Bruce 2010:51). Hunt (2003:sp) explains that: “being poor in a wealthy environment breeds a desire for a better life – or a criminal one, in the case of a small minority of the population.” In a country where 35% of the youth are unemployed, crime becomes an attractive opportunity and a legitimate career option. Hunt (2003:sp) argues that those who choose this way of life see it as a way to gain status and opportunity.

R.W. Johnson (2009:590) places the blame for crime and social violence on the mismanagement of government, in much the same way as Mbembe points to corruption and mismanagement as the root of violence elsewhere in post-colonial Africa. Poverty has led to the development of many informal settlements where many people live in squalor. These “squatter camps”, as they are more widely known, have become environments where the government has little control and the only form of justice is found within vigilante groups. Bruce (2010:50) states that South Africa has a culture of violence and criminality, consolidating itself within the townships and inner
city areas. This culture of violence has led to “a certain level of tolerance” within these communities (Bruce 2010:51). This is due to the continual exposure to violent behaviour, easy access to weapons and the use of crime as a source of income. This not only affects South Africans, but also the huge influx of migrants from the rest of Africa that are trying to get away from the poverty and corruption of their own countries, ironically looking for a better life in South Africa.

Whereas violence within the apartheid government was attributed to racial segregation, the current issues facing South Africa, as noted above, can be attributed to poverty. Bruce (2009:7) states that during apartheid the police focused primarily on enforcing apartheid laws within the townships and suppressing resistance to the apartheid government. Little focus was given to addressing crime within the townships, which resulted in the spread of a criminal culture within these areas. In discussing the reasons for this violence, Johnson (2009:590) states that our history of apartheid can be seen as a main contributor because the poor leadership skills of the ANC government can be attributed to the Afrikaner National Party, who denied quality education to the black leaders of today. The current leaders’ notions of governmental rule are tainted by their past, as they were without the opportunity to be mentored into positions of power or to learn the necessary skills required for governance.

In a case study for the Project on Environment, Population and Security at the University of Toronto titled Environmental Scarcity and Violent Conflict: The Case of South Africa (1998), Val Percival and Thomas Homer-Dixon investigate the connection between violence and the lack of resources in South Africa, as previously stated by Harris. The case study deals with three different types of scarcity, which is then linked to violent behaviour, these being: depletion of environmental resources, population growth where demands for resources rise and unequal social distribution of resources. The depletion of resources results in a lower standard of living for poverty-stricken societies, which can lead to anti-social and violent behaviour (Percival, Homer-Dixon 1998: 281, 282). Percival and Homer-Dixon (1998:282) further state that the “uneven social distribution in environmental resources” as a result of the apartheid past, is a direct cause of conflict. This situation remains relatively unchanged, with the majority
of poorer populations unable to afford better resources, so, as Hunt and Harris pointed out above, the persistence of inequality remains one of the roots of violence in South Africa. Mbembe (2001:165) supports these facts and states that when authority is combined with poverty and scarcity, two types of violence occur: the unnecessary taking of resources and political brutality.

I would argue, however, that there is another form of violence that is particularly prevalent in South Africa and in essence is also a result of the general brutality of poverty and dispossession. This is the violence towards women and children: people who are inherently helpless and who are subject to the brutal exercise of power by men - who possibly act out against them because of the powerlessness they feel in their daily lives.

In a large altarpiece titled No country for old women (2013) (Figure 2.3), Victor creates a series of smoke drawings on glass that form a triptych 4 meters tall and 6 meters wide. The glass panels are made to look like stained glass windows framed by pointed arches in the gothic style. Victor (2013:sp) explains that the reference to the stained glass is their traditional use within churches to commemorate martyrs or saints. The woman depicted in each panel becomes a contemporary social martyr as she tells a story of violence within South African society. Victor (2013:sp) states that her main inspiration for the artwork was the murder of her aunt, Angela Reardon, who appears in the panel on the far left. Reardon was an 82 year old woman who worked for the church and helped in soup kitchens when she was murdered. Victor (2013:sp) tells that when her family came to look for her after she went missing, they eventually found her body buried in her vegetable garden. The criminals who murdered her saw her as insignificant and an easy target, burying her in an attempt to get her out of the way so that they could return to steal all her belongings. Victor (2013:sp) explains that because she was an old woman, the criminals assumed that no one was going to look for her and the attitude of the police appeared to corroborate this as they were very disinterested, as if they had better things to do.
The title for the work refers to the movie *No country for old men* (2007)\(^5\), and this situation quite literally expresses the belief that South Africa is no country for old women. Victor (2013:sp) makes an interesting comparison between the murder of her aunt to that of the recent murder of model Reeva Steenkamp. Steenkamp’s murder took over headlines and news reports because she was young, beautiful and famous. She had a higher value in society as opposed to Victor’s aunt who was marginalised because she was old and didn’t have any family. Despite the fact that this old woman contributed to society and worked for the church and helped in soup kitchens, she had a lesser value in society: she was disposable. Victor (2013:sp) states that the artwork refers to violence in relation to the transience between life and death, especially in the use of smoke as a medium. In the image, Reardon is depicted holding the spade that was used to bury her in her own garden.

Another panel on the right of the central section of the artwork refers to the gang rape and murder of Anene Booysen from the Western Cape in February 2013. She was found with her abdomen slit and disembowelled at a construction site by a security guard. She was still alive when found, but later died of her injuries in hospital. Victor depicts her dressed in her own intestines, becoming ensnared in them. She poses as if lying in a coffin and the intestines become an ornamental wreath. Victor (2013:sp) states that the portrait of her is taken from the only photograph that she could find on the internet, which is her ID photo and again, Booysen is regarded as worthless; she is disembowelled like an animal that has been slaughtered.

A panel on the right-hand side of the triptych shows an old woman holding a chicken. She is surrounded by stones relating to people (particularly old women) being stoned to death in Mpumalanga and Limpopo due to witchcraft. According to Victor (2013:sp), there is minimal news coverage of these events despite the 20-30 cases a year. The women become the scapegoat for other tragic events, when people of the community possibly those guilty of the crimes, accuse the women of being witches and guilty of

\(^{5}\) According to the Internet Movie Database (IMBD) (2015:sp) the movie is based on a book written by Cormac McCarthy that was published in 2005. A Western film directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, the story tells of violent events in rural Texas after a drug deal gone wrong, where the main character takes a case of money after discovering the violent scene.
witchcraft. Another panel on the left of the central section depicts an image which refers to ‘corrective or therapeutic rape’ that occurs in the South African lesbian community, particularly within the townships. Perpetrators believe that this is necessary in order to ‘cure’ the woman of her sexual orientation in order to turn the woman into a heterosexual. The victim is considered abnormal in society and therefore she needs corrective rape. Victor creates an image where a battered torso of a woman emerges from a dog skin, which, to Victor, signifies the way these women are mistreated and beaten like dogs at the whim of their ‘master’ (2013:sp).

Victor (2013:sp) states that South Africa is not a safe country for women and children in general. The artwork serves to commemorate and honour these women as well as highlight the atrocities that are being perpetrated against them in South African society. The use of the smoke creates a ghostly image when applied to glass, so the figures appear already dead and fading away. Mary Corrigal (2012:sp) further explains that the use of candles to create these images also suggests a ritualistic or religious practice, where candles are used to remember the dead, and ash implies the last traces of those once living.

The use of animal imagery as symbolism for victims of violence

Here I focus on South African artists who use animal symbolism within their artworks as metaphors for the victims and perpetrators of violence. My interest in their use of animals is directly related to my own use of animal symbolism as I replace the skull as a symbol of life’s transience with ghostly images of animal-headed victims in my paintings. Human/animal combinations also appear in my sculptures and prints, signifying victims of violence. In some cases, however, animals can also indicate bestiality and the loss of human morality, so these images can become ambiguous signifiers of the results of moral decay from both sides of the spectrum.

---

6 The term ‘corrective rape’ was coined in South Africa by charity workers in the early 2000s. They noticed a rise of such cases and they continue to rise, despite international media coverage. Statistics indicate that at least 31 women in the past 15 years have died as a result of corrective rape and since 2009, there are 10 new cases every week with each case becoming more violent (Patrick Strudwick 2014:sp).
Victor’s *Disasters of Peace* (2001 - present) series incorporates cases of violent crimes reported in the media that are translated into etchings, which provide a combination of metaphorical imagery with realistic depiction. The title of the series refers to a series of 82 etchings titled *Disasters of War* (1810 – 1820) created by Spanish artist Francisco de Goya. Goya made these prints as a protest against violence, by depicting events that occurred during the time. While Goya’s prints refer to times of war, Victor depicts violence committed in contemporary South Africa within a “peaceful democracy”, in order to highlight this irony. In the work *In Sheep’s Clothing* (2001) (Figure 2.4), a young girl with the head of a lamb is being molested by an older male. Not only is the lamb a symbol of innocence and vulnerability, but it also suggests a biblical sacrifice and helplessness.

The man looks huge, possessing a bulky frame in contrast to the slender body of the young girl, emphasizing the fact that he could easily overpower her. In the background the viewer can see ghostly images of wolves. The wolves serve as metaphors for perpetrators of violent sexual crimes and are directly linked to preying on their victims; much like a wolf would prey on a vulnerable lamb. In Afrikaans culture, there is a term of endearment: “skapie”. Often, this term is used by men to describe their wives or children. Victor says that this term always disturbed her, calling a loved one something that one slaughters and eats. This is the main theme of this etching, using this term to describe the child as a lamb going to the slaughter. The wolf imagery in the background comes from an old cartoon, “*Peter and the Wolf*” (1946)\(^7\), which depicts the wolves as stylised animation that seems quite dark and disturbing.

*She was killed like a goat* (2008) (Figure 2.5) shows an image of a slaughtered goat with its legs tied. The goat lies on the side of the road, surrounded by people: next to it is a silhouette and shadow of a woman. The goat is used as a metaphor for the woman who was killed in order to show the brutal and violent way in which she was murdered like an animal. Victor thus addresses the violence in society through both her drawings and her ongoing series of prints. She has said (Von Veh 2008:68) that

\(^7\) The Internet Movie Database (IMBD) states (2015:sp) that this animated film is directed by Clyde Geronimi for Disney and tells the story of a Russian boy named Peter who decides to go hunting for the wolf that threatens his village. The movie incorporates music by Sergei Prokofiev.
her art is a way of processing and dealing with upsetting information, so it is relevant, in terms of my research, that so much of her work addresses the results of societal violence in South Africa. Victor (2015:sp) explains that this work was her response to a headline she saw in the Mail and Guardian newspaper and the title of the artwork refers to the title of the headline. The article explains that the woman was killed like a goat, by tying her hands and feet and slitting her throat, causing her to bleed out, as it happens when animals are slaughtered.8

Taking the metaphor of animals as victims further, Victor also created a series of smoke portraits of animal heads on glass, called Brief Lives (2011). These are remarkably affective as records of victims in a similar way to No Country for Old Women. Brief Lives (2011) (Figure 2.6), consists of six naturalistic, ghostlike smoke portraits on glass of the animals normally used in meat production (pigs, goats and sheep). These were suspended in an abattoir and exhibited as memorial images, mementoes of the transience of a fragile existence snuffed out for mankind’s greed (Von Veh 2012:21). In this case, the space itself became Victor’s inspiration, which brought about the smoke drawings of slaughter animals (Victor 2015:sp). The building reminded Victor of certain buildings in Auschwitz, where many people had died. People are horrified when they go into the gas chambers or buildings in Auschwitz and remember what happened there, and Victor felt that going into this abandoned abattoir stirred up the same emotions for her (2015:sp).

Like Victor, South African artist Jane Alexander uses animal imagery and symbolism to express the darker sides of contemporary South African society. Alexander’s approach to art making lies primarily in the medium of sculpture which she blends with other media (photography and installation). Her three-dimensional figures are used to explore the facets of South African society; during and post-apartheid. Using the human body as her starting point, Alexander seeks to question human nature in relation to violence in South Africa by combining her figures with animalistic features

8 Victor states (2015:sp) that the etching is referencing a Rembrandt etching, titled The Hog (1643); the composition directly referencing the composition of the image almost exactly, replacing the image of the goat with that of a slaughtered pig. There are children playing in the background with the entrails and women pealing vegetables. The pig is lying there waiting to die.
and placing them within environments in order to tell a story or re-enact an event. In the creation of Alexander’s hybrid creatures, the definitive lines between humans and animals are erased, combining our human intellect and morals with that of animalistic survival instincts (Pep Subiros 2011:22). Michael Sadgrove (2009:180) explains that what differentiates humans from animals is our ability to verbally communicate using language, our capacity to distinguish between right and wrong and being able to face our mortality. Therefore, Alexander’s hybrid creatures can be understood as representing humans as handicapped by their animal characteristics, making them vulnerable and fragile, almost benign and pathetic and worthy of our pity. In some cases, however, they can also be dangerous, like wild predatory animals. As Subiros (2011:24) explains, there is a delicate balance within human beings, between societal values and our animal impulses – we have the ability to be peaceful and constructive, as well as violent and destructive.

Akiko Miki (2002:22) states that one of Alexander’s important devices is the use of “binary opposites” within her work; the relationships between good and evil, human beings and animals, children and adults, stillness and motion, strength and weakness, exploiters and exploited, oppressors and victims, controllers and controlled.

This amalgamation of opposites is centered on reality, providing insight into the moral ambiguities of society (Miki 2002:23). Alexander (2011:71) states that the context of her early artworks were based in the experience and structure of the social system of apartheid, whereas her later works consider discrimination, colonialism and displacement in contemporary South Africa in relation to social control and political power.

Alexander’s *Butcher Boys* (1985-86) (Figure 2.7) consists of three monstrous figures, made of plaster and animal bones, sitting on a bench. They were made during the apartheid era and Subiros (2011:13) states that they highlight the insanity of the time: “expos[ing] the dehumanizing effects of its all-too-human rationale not so much on the victims as on the perpetrators themselves.” They are human-like figures that have
animalistic features (horns and snouts) so they appear distorted and mutilated, with exposed spines, scarred torsos, lack of ears and genitals. The scars on their chests suggest that their organs have been removed or that something has been inserted. Their mouths are non-existent or have been sealed, denying them the ability to communicate. Their postures are unnerving because of their humanism. One of them leans back, seeming anxious, while another leans forward rather aggressively. The third sits relaxed or bored, with his legs crossed, prompting John Peffer (2003:sp) to say that he should be the most feared, since he is the figure that “personifies a kind of complacency which condones the most inhumane acts”. According to Peffer (2003:sp), the animal abstraction of the Butcher Boys serve as metaphor for the “sinister, inhuman, animal nature of apartheid society as a whole, and the psychological inscription of its daily cruelties and hypocrisies on the human figure.” They present the torturers as well as the tortured in one body. The figures lack ethnicity, which disregards the apartheid structures of racial categorising. Alexander does not seem to emphasise race, but rather the human aspect of the sculptures, or rather “incarnations of humanness gone wrong” (Subiros 2011:13).

In contemporary South African society, Alexander shifts her focus from apartheid themes to that of its aftermath. Subiros (2011:14) explains:

> South African society is a societal compound where both the immense possibilities for a fulfilling life and the overwhelming problems of our contemporary world are ... closely juxtaposed and radically counterposed.

It is the juxtaposition between wealth and poverty and the social results of this discrepancy that is the focus of Alexander’s more current work. She shifts her focus to the connection and interaction between humans in our current society, particularly those relations related to abuse of power, discrimination and exclusion (Subiros 2011:18).

Alexander explains to Subiros (2011:17) that the nine small figures in Bom Boys (1998) (Figure 2.8 and 2.9) refer to a group of “displaced children” living on Long Street in Cape Town between 1990 and 2000, where Alexander lived for a number of years.
Alexander describes these children as having lived difficult lives; facing aggression, fear, abuse and hunger. Social workers who work for Projects for Street Children in Cape Town have told Alexander that many of these boys are adolescents but often look younger than they are, due to malnutrition (Alexander 2011:sp). The title of the installation, Alexander (2011:17) explains, is taken from graffiti in one of the alleys that leads off Long Street in Cape Town, which could refer to one of the youth gangs in the area. “Bom” translates as “bomb” in Afrikaans, while gang members in Cape Town refer to themselves as “boys”. The small figures wear a variety of animal masks to hide their identity, which makes them slightly different from the other figures created by Alexander, which have actual animal body parts. Yet the masks are not merely worn by the boys, but rather become part of their body. They seem, in places, to fuse to the heads of the figures, becoming part of their skin, thus representing the boys’ transformation from one identity to another: from boy to man, from innocence to survival, from vulnerability to violence (Alexander 2011:169). The masks become their armour, their defense in surviving on the streets.

The distorted nature of the particular animal/human hybrid combination seen in The Butcher Boys appears dangerous and unsettling, whereas the heads on the Bom Boys have a more benign mien despite the sense of ambiguity about their otherness. They have an almost innocent aspect to them; like the heads of Victor’s animals they are perhaps more victims than perpetrators.

Alexander (2011:168) describes the children as feral creatures, creating their own colony and society: sleeping in doorways, begging, stealing, selling and taking drugs to numb their senses. Society is meant to protect these children, but instead we see them as a nuisance or a threat. We choose to ignore them; accept them as part of the South African landscape. Alexander confronts us with this reality in her installation, sharing their space, looking at them as they gaze back at us. We are free to view the scene and take time to contemplate it, which we might not have the ability to do in reality. As these street children have the ability to commit crime and perpetrate violence, this conflation between vulnerability, innocence, danger and violence is the main focus of her installation. Alexander (2011:169) explains that we feel a certain
tenderness towards the childish figures, as one would when confronted with children, but at the same time we hold back from comforting them, alienated by their clothes and animal mutation which makes them separate from us. They become the ‘other’ and Subiros (2011:19) states that being in this fragile post-adolescent state while being forced to survive on the streets can cause a dramatic halt in their human development.

A similar sense of unease is created by the animal human hybrids in *African Adventure* (1999 – 2002) (Figure 2.10, 2.11 and 2.12), which is a site-specific installation by Alexander at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town. The particular room that is used for the installation, the British Officers’ Mess, is one of the oldest rooms in the castle. Alexander (2011:sp) explains that she chose this room in particular because it was used as a church during the seventeenth-century. At the time, it was the only church in Cape Town. Again, she includes sculptures that depict human-animal hybrids, which are surrounded by a variety of found objects: machetes, sickles, toy tractors, child’s car, push chair, oil drum, ammunition boxes, clothing, Venetian gloves, gold, diamonds and a jackal skin. These objects are arranged around the figures or become part of the figures themselves, using or holding the objects. The floor is covered in red sand, which is revealed to be earth from Bushmanland. The significance of this earth, explains Subiros (2011:19), is to highlight the exploitation of Africa by colonialists in our past and present and its related conflicts. Alexander (2011:sp) states that *African Adventure* is based on “observations of social shifts on Long Street, Cape Town, and in other parts of South Africa during the last decade of the twentieth century.”

The figures are individually titled as *Beast, Custodian, Dog, Doll with industrial-strength gloves, Girl with gold and diamonds, Harbinger, Ibis, Pangaman, Radiance of faith, Settler* and *Young man*. There is one particularly fragile figure: *Girl with gold and diamonds* (Figure 2.13). This small figure depicts a girl with the head of an antelope. She wears a small crown and a beige, frilly dress. Lize Van Robbroeck (2011:44) describes the dress as being reminiscent of baptism gowns worn by infants or communion dresses worn by young women. To add to her fragility, she is disfigured.

---

9 The Castle of Good Hope, Alexander (2011:sp) says, is the oldest building in South Africa, built by the Dutch East India Company in 1652/3.
She has small disfigured arms and seems completely helpless. Her gold and diamonds, according to Van Robbroeck (2011:44), refer to the exploitation of Africa’s resources. The girl appears completely victimized by the exploitation of our country and she signifies the way this process has dehumanized the local people or divested them of strength and agency in their own land.

To accompany African Adventure, Alexander created a series of projection images titled Survey: Cape of Good Hope (2005-09) (Figure 2.14). Alexander (2011:69) states that these images can be considered a “contextual backdrop against which the origin of the sculpted figures can be considered. The backdrops of the images include scenes of rural areas in the Western Cape and city scenes of Cape Town. Alexander (2011:69) states that these images are meant to refer to South Africa’s current post-colonial environment, within the context of our past in the seventeenth-century in the Cape Colony and the Dutch administration of Jan van Riebeeck. This historical ‘survey’ highlights landscapes of human intervention that have been created through violence and conflict, where Alexander’s characters tell a story of this past and our current social environment.

It appears that the researchers discussed in this section all concur regarding the underlying reasons for violence in society. It also seems evident that South Africa fulfills the historic and social conditions for a violent society and those who live here are too often made aware of this fact. The contemporary artists I have discussed, respond to the brutality of South African society through their art with the result that the violence and/or pathos of their imagery becomes symbolic of what appears to be a wider perception of social decline in contemporary South Africa, despite the end of apartheid.

The artistic response of Alexander, Botes and Victor is influenced by events within current South African society, which are informed by South Africa’s past. In the next chapter, I discuss the content and methods employed in my own artwork, to show how I also attempt to respond to current shortcomings of South African society and the legacy of a colonial past.
Figure 2.1: Conrad Botes, *Cain and Abel*, 2008. Lithograph, 105 x 75cm. Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (Kannemeyer and Botes 2008:65).
Figure 2.2: Diane Victor, *In Smoke and Stain - The Recent Dead*, 2006. Etchings and smoke drawings on paper, various dimensions. Location unknown (van Waerden Duneas 2012:25).

Figure 2.3: Diane Victor, *No Country for Old Women*, 2013. Smoke drawings on glass panels, 4 x 6 meters. Private collection (S.A Art Times 2013:11).
Figure 2.4: Diane Victor, *Disasters of Peace: In Sheep’s Clothing*, 2005 - 2010. Etching, 30 x 35cm. David Krut, Johannesburg (McInnes 2011:8).

Figure 2.5: Diane Victor, *Disasters of Peace - She was killed like a goat*, 2005 - 2010. Etching, 30 x 35cm. David Krut, Johannesburg (Von Veh 2012:66).
Figure 2.6: Diane Victor, detail of *Brief Lives*, 2011. Smoke drawings on glass panels, 123 x 80cm. David Krut, Johannesburg (Von Veh 2012:19).

Figure 2.7: Jane Alexander, *Butcher Boys*, 1985-86. Plaster, oil paint, horns and animal bones, 128.5 x 213.5 x 88.5cm. South African National Gallery, Cape Town (DaimerChrysler AG 2002:38, 39).
Figure 2.8: Jane Alexander, *Bom Boys*, 1998. Fibre glass, acrylic paint, clothing, wood, 105 x 360 x 360cm. Collection of the artist (DaimerChrysler AG 2002:66, 67).

Figure 2.9: Jane Alexander, *Bom Boys* detail, 1998.
Figure 2.10: Jane Alexander, *African Adventure*, 1999 - 2002. Reinforced plaster, oil / acrylic paint, fibreglass, synthetic clay, ammunition boxes, clothing, jackal skin, machetes, sickles, oil drum, wood, steel and Bushmanland's earth, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist (DaimerChrysler AG 2002:66, 67).

Figure 2.11: Jane Alexander, detail of *African Adventure*, 1999 - 2002.
Figure 2.12: Jane Alexander, detail of *African Adventure*, 1999 - 2002.

Figure 2.13: Jane Alexander, detail of *African Adventure: Girl with gold and diamonds*, 1999 - 2002.
Figure 2.14: Jane Alexander, *Survey: Cape of Good Hope* series, 2005-09. Slideshow projections, variable dimensions. Collection of the artist (sa:sp).
Chapter Three: *In memoriam: a South African dystopia* (the exhibition).

**Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to elucidate my practical work, which forms an integral component of my research. My practical artworks include drawing, painting, photography, sculpture and installation and together they comprise an exhibition to accompany my dissertation. The visual effect of my practical work is primarily determined by a seventeenth-century Dutch aesthetic. Each facet of my artworks serves to provide a response to death and violence in South Africa through the use of seventeenth-century Dutch imagery, which relates directly to the aesthetic found within my own home environment. My work thus forms a personal exploration of my history and responds to current social problems in contemporary South Africa. The context of my practical work has been discussed in the previous chapters so the main purpose of this chapter is to investigate my art processes and iconography, to explain how they inform the social message in my work. Each group of works is analysed in detail, considering choice of subject matter and medium and discussing how these support my reflections on death and violence in contemporary South African society.

My use of seventeenth-century Dutch imagery is important for two reasons: firstly the historical context of seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings, and their message of death, transience and morality and secondly my personal connection to this imagery through my Dutch/Afrikaans heritage and the nostalgia it holds for me. Combined with the seventeenth-century Dutch imagery, a common thread that is present within all my artworks is the use of human/animal anthropomorphic figures. These human/animal hybrids are used as an allegory within my images to describe the state of people living in contemporary South African society. The animals used are slaughter animals, referring to vulnerability and the way in which people in South Africa are often helpless and sometimes ‘butchered’ in ongoing social violence. The use of these animals also relates to seventeenth-century *vanitas* still life paintings, where butchered animals were incorporated within the still-life in breakfast pieces or as hunting trophies. The
animals in my images become replacements for traditional *vanitas* objects (like the skull). In the pecking order of most communities, animals are seen as inferior to humans, which is evident in the exploitation of animals for their flesh and by-products. I use only the heads of these vulnerable animals and place them on human bodies. By replacing the head, I take away the identity and personhood of each figure, transforming them into anonymous victims of possible violent death. These anthropomorphic/zoomorphic figures appear as characters within each artwork, whether it is a painting, print or drawing. The use of human/animal hybrids is inspired by examples of artworks created by Diane Victor and Jane Alexander, who use animal/human hybrids in a similar way (as discussed in the previous chapter). The use of these hybrids is also inspired by the book *Animal Farm* (1945), by George Orwell. Orwell creates an allegorical and dystopian society that reflects the reality at the time he was writing. Orwell uses the relationship between farm animals and humans to illustrate violence perpetrated between the rich and the poor. Just as humans exploit animals, the same exploitation occurs between the classes. The title of my exhibition refers to *Animal Farm*, where my exhibition serves to present current South Africa as a similar dystopian society to that which is represented in the book. Within this dystopian society, I present my artworks as a memorial for those who have suffered and perished in the current violence being experienced in South Africa.

**Delftware slaughter**

The first series of artworks to be discussed, titled *Delftware slaughter* (Figure 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4), is a series of images printed onto ceramic plates which reference blue and white delftware crockery. Delftware refers to porcelain, usually blue and white in colour, made in the Dutch town, Delft, during the seventeenth-century. The inspiration and the design for delftware originates from China, when the Dutch East India Company began importing blue and white porcelain from China to Holland in the

---

1 Sheila Muller (2011:58) states that traditional delftware made in Holland during the seventeenth-century was not made of porcelain, but rather earthenware. To compete with the Chinese porcelain during that time, the Dutch used specific techniques of painting fine imagery. They did not copy the traditional Chinese designs, but rather painted their own decorations that depicted biblical scenes, landscapes and family coats of arms.
seventeenth-century. According to Gordon Campbell (2006:308), potteries were established in Delft in response to the porcelain imported from China. Delftware became very popular and was exported to Dutch trading partners and settlements elsewhere in the world. As such, delftware has become synonymous with traditional Afrikaans (as well as British) culture. All my artworks reference traditional objects found within my mother’s home and I decided that her traditional delftware porcelain would be my starting point, due to its prominence in her home\(^2\) and its direct link with seventeenth-century Dutch culture.

_Delftware slaughter_ references the aesthetic and design of delftware and consists of 12 blue and white mixed media drawings of plate designs which are printed via ceramic transfers onto plates. In the creation of _Delftware slaughter_, I researched the traditional designs and motifs of delftware and the design used around the border of each plate is referenced directly from patterns found during my research. These designs are drawn by hand and in the centre of each plate, I have drawn my own motifs of human/animal hybrids and baboons, thus creating my own collection of delftware inspired designs. My figures are naked and are in vulnerable poses, mimicking slaughter animals in factory farms and abattoirs, or killed as a result of hunting. I have used goats, sheep, pigs, cows and rabbits. These figures are the victims, the martyrs of contemporary South African society. Referencing the use of religious imagery, these figures represent sacrifice. Opposed to these vulnerable figures are the baboons (Figure 3.5 and 3.6) who are not vulnerable, but rather appear in control. Some are in relaxed poses, while others bare their teeth suggesting aggression and indicating that they are the perpetrators of violence, self-righteous and satisfied. I have chosen the baboon as the aggressor, not only because I find them personally terrifying, but because they appear in themselves half human. They are, to me, an appropriate metaphor for the bestial behaviour and energy within the human race, which relates back to our pre-human ancestry. To me, they carry the same sense of menace that one sees in Alexander’s _Butcher Boys_.

---

\(^2\) My mother owns a delftware dinner set, which she displays proudly in an antique wooden cabinet, along with other delftware ornaments. Every Christmas, my mother uses this dinner set when our family congregates for Christmas lunch. Due to my nostalgic response to delftware style ceramics, I have started collecting my own pieces, displaying them on the walls of my home.
Vanitas

Since beginning my research, I had the intention of creating my own vanitas paintings. My aim is to redefine the contemporary vanitas image, while still holding true to the essence of its origins. An essential component in the creation of my paintings is the use of photography to capture the image as opposed to setting up the still life and painting from life; which is what would have been done in the seventeenth-century. The juxtaposition of the digital and painted surface as well as the amalgamation of photographic and traditional painting techniques in these vanitas still-lifes are an important focus in this body of work.

My process in the formulation of these artworks began in a photographic studio where I set up each still life and photographed them with the appropriate lighting to simulate a seventeenth-century Dutch aesthetic. The objects that appear in each still life are personal objects belonging to myself, close family and friends. In each still life, I sought to group certain objects together to evoke memories of family members or a sense of nostalgia. In many cases, the material and colour palette of the objects played an important role in the compositions and choices of these groupings. I included contemporary objects alongside traditional objects, merging the new with the old. This reflects the grouping of objects within my home. The objects are placed in a particular way, using seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas paintings as inspiration for the compositions and the objects used, as well as the lighting of each image. I photographed nine still life compositions and then processed each one using Photoshop. Certain objects within the photograph are digitally removed from the composition with the intention to paint them back into the image using traditional oil painting techniques (see Figures 3.8, 3.11, 3.14, 3.17, 3.20 and 3.23). The altered photographs are then printed onto canvas and the missing items are painted in manually with oil paint. The photographic areas are less saturated in colour than the painted areas, making the painted areas more prominent. In certain areas of each painting, I also paint into the photographic area, merging the painted surface with the photographic surface. The painted objects are realistically and carefully painted to approximate the finish of seventeenth-century Dutch works. Certain areas are allowed
to reveal a more painterly finish, so the viewer is encouraged to try and identify which part is photographic and which part is painted.

The ambiguity I create between painting and photograph is integral to the vanitas theme; the essence of reality and the transience therein is juxtaposed with levels of illusion that suggest all is not what it seems. By integrating the painted image and the photographic image, I use trompe l’oeil within a modern context. The illusion is taken further with the use of a photographic image which mimics reality. My inspiration for this is Gijsbrechts's painting *Trompe l’Oeil with Studio Wall and Vanitas Still Life*; a vanitas painting within a painting. As mentioned in my first chapter, Gijsbrechts challenged the viewer to attempt to decipher what is considered real and what is considered allegorical, since the entire painting appears to be real. There does not seem to be a difference in the rendering of the vanitas painting and its surroundings. All the objects and surfaces are treated in the same way, making the vanitas painting and the objects therein blend with their surroundings. I employ the same idea, using a contemporary technique.

Unlike Gijsbrechts, however, I do not attempt to blend reality and the painted areas by using the same technique. Instead, I attempt to bring elements of the photographic image into the painted areas and likewise bring areas of the painting into the photographic image. The result of this is an image containing paint and photography simultaneously, creating a new reality within it. The choice I make in which objects or areas to paint is based on certain compositional elements but also on which items would be enjoyable for me to paint based on their material or surface. Certain elements, like proteas, shells or other objects with interesting textures allow me to explore my painting techniques by either changing the style in which I paint or how I apply the paint to the canvas.

To replace the traditional vanitas objects (skulls, burning candle, etc.), my human/animal hybrids appear in half of the paintings. They are seen within the reflected surfaces of certain objects, becoming part of the still life, but also indicating that they, like us, are a viewer of the scene. In the paintings where there are no
reflective objects present for the ghost-like figures to appear, their presence is implied when placed collectively with the other paintings. In all the paintings, objects are repeated from one painting to another. As a result, the paintings are conceptually linked through the repetition of objects, like clues that need to be solved in order to unravel the entire narrative. Some examples of my still life images are discussed below, as well as elements included in some of the works, to explain how they illustrate the central concepts and how these techniques are employed and to what effect.

**Grandmother’s tin (Figure 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9)**

The objects chosen for this still life are inspired by a tin that I inherited from my grandmother. The tin appears in the photograph, showing a portrait of a young girl. The objects I have chosen have some affinity with the type of person I believe my grandmother to have been. My maternal grandmother is the one I feel closest to, despite having never really known her. I believe that the influence of my grandmother is very prevalent in my mother’s home, identified in the creation of a particular aesthetic within her home as well as mine. As such, I believe that the sense of tradition and nostalgia within my mother and me stems from this particular grandmother. This painting functions as a memorial of my grandmother - a *memento mori* with the memory of her living on through the painting.

This still life seeks to represent my heritage, including objects from three generations: my grandmother (the tin), my mother (shell, beaded cloth and vase), and myself (the framed lace and rose potpourri jar). The objects I have chosen to paint within this still life are the cloth, beads on the lace, vase, shell and the framed lace. Certain objects, like the framed lace and beads, are painted illusionistically to look like the photograph. The cloth, shell and vase have elements of painted realism, like the framed lace, but have painterly elements as well. A particularly painterly style is evident in the flower print on the vase, which mimics the paint on the real vase, as well as the texture of the shell.

---

3 I never really knew any of my grandparents, since they either died before I was born or died when I was very young. I am the “laat lammetjie” (late lamb) of my family, which means that I was born many years after my siblings, resulting in my grandparents already being very old when I was born.
**Lucky cat (Figure 3.10, 3.11 and 3.12)**

Objects used within the seventeenth-century still life tradition are carefully chosen in order to define death and transience metaphorically, as well as to warn against sin and earthly pleasures. Using this tradition, I sought to use contemporary everyday objects to define aspects of death and transience.

The focal point of this painting is the golden cat which has a moving arm mechanism and is a traditional object within Chinese/Japanese culture, also known as the beckoning cat (maneki neko). The cat is a symbol of wealth and prosperity (often the reason for its gold colour and a coin held by its other paw), and owning such an ornament to display in your house or business is said to bring the owner luck. I was intrigued by this object and its prevalence in South Africa in Asian shops and flea markets as a mass-produced kitsch object, and I include this cat as a metaphor for the transience of life which, for some people, is attributed to luck and chance. To emphasise this aspect of transience I include a silver pocket watch and a dried-out protea. The watch symbolises our lack of control over time and our urgency to hold onto it, knowing that inevitably our time will eventually run out. For some, this valuable time is taken away too soon through violence. The protea functions as a *memento mori*. As mentioned in my first chapter, flower-pieces in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings became symbols of transience, since the flowers are captured in a moment where they are beautiful. In the painting, they will never wilt, decay or die. When these flowers are incorporated in seventeenth-century *vanitas* still life paintings as decaying or dead, they become symbols for death. The protea in this painting is dead and dried out, used as part of a macabre bouquet in my mother’s home of dried and dead flowers.

I have included a small wooden Russian nesting doll, part of a set of dolls designed to fit within one another. The idea behind this doll relates to the concept of layers and concealing secrets. As each still life represents different characters and personalities, the nesting doll represents the secrets within their lives or layers of their personality. In the background there is a glass liquor decanter used to store expensive alcohol such as wine, cognac or whisky. A decanter can be associated with wealth; it is an
accoutrement for people who can afford to buy such luxuries for their own pleasure. I use the decanter as a symbol of the frivolity of wealth. The main discourse within contemporary South African society is the struggle for wealth between the classes, which causes social unrest. Lives are lost in the search of wealth and it appears that the sanctity of life is being traded for material possessions. I also use this symbol of wealth as it was used in seventeenth-century Dutch still life; as a caution against earthly pleasures and a reminder of life’s transience.

The objects that I have chosen to paint in oils are the gold cat, the protea and the nesting doll. The cat is painted naturalistically, with certain areas becoming slightly more painterly. The painterly areas are more prominent in the protea and the nesting doll, where brush strokes are evident. The natural textures and appearance of these objects allow me to explore and experiment with painterly techniques.

**Whimsical rabbit (Figure 3.13, 3.14 and 3.15)**

The objects in this still life represent a feminine child-like character that refer to aspects of myself and my childhood. The wooden white rabbit ornament is the focus of this painting, which I bought for my home from a second-hand store. The rabbit is surrounded by a soap tin, silver hand mirror, bag of dried scented rose petals (potpourri), a floral ceramic biscuit jar, chocolates and a starfish.

The soap tin belonged to my mother. She used it to keep her hairpins in. The hand-mirror also belonged to my mother and is part of a set which includes a brush and a comb. My mother gave it to me when I moved into my own home, since I always used it when I lived with her. My mother’s favourite flowers are roses, and she is always using the dried rose petals to make potpourri, scenting the dried petals with aromatic oils and placing them around the house. As a result, the house always smells of these scents. The small bag of potpourri in the still life was made by my mother for me to put in my underwear drawer to make my clothes smell fragrant. The floral ceramic biscuit jar was an item that I acquired at a second-hand store and I gave to my mother. The chocolates are a nostalgic childhood memory for me. I have included Quality
Street chocolates, which have the brightly coloured shiny wrappings characteristic of this brand to identify their different flavoured centers. For every special occasion and family gathering, we would display a tray of these chocolates. The starfish refers to my childhood life near the beach in the Western Cape. Our family would often pick up shells or buy large shells from shops and my mother has a very impressive seashell collection, which includes the starfish.

The objects in this still life display luxury and indulgence; they refer to a lifestyle that is whimsical and carefree. Rabbits have a child-like appeal, most often being portrayed as protagonists in children’s books, such as the white rabbit in Lewis Carrol’s *Alice in Wonderland*. In seventeenth-century Dutch still life, dead rabbits would appear as hunting trophies, displayed among other objects and food. This rabbit ornament replaces the hunting trophy in a way that is more contemporary, providing themes of earthly childhood pleasures. The objects surrounding the rabbit represent a pampered life and contemporary wealth. The chocolates are scattered haphazardly on the cloth, spilling from the plate, while the biscuit jar’s lid balances at an angle, showing a carefree attitude and giving the feeling of someone having just been present and recently left the scene. This implied ‘someone’ can be identified as the missing anthropomorphic/zoomorphic figure.

The painted areas in this painting include the rabbit, the chocolates and some of the floral pattern on the biscuit jar. The rabbit is painted naturalistically to mimic the photograph, which blends with the photographic image of the potpourri. Certain chocolates are also painted naturalistically, while others are left with basic brush strokes and less detail. The wrappers of the chocolates are painted in fully saturated colours, which can also be seen in the painted areas of the floral pattern. Since not all the flowers on the jar are painted, the saturated painted flowers stand out among the less saturated printed flowers. As a result, the painted areas and printed areas merge in certain areas, while in other areas, the divide and contrast between the paint and the print is clearly evident. The combination of painted areas and printed areas create a new reality – questioning what is ‘real’ and what is painted. The entire artwork is in fact an illusion, since neither photography nor paint is the real object. I am using these
techniques to represent the objects in a particular way, to enhance certain aspects and conceal others in order to question the ‘reality’ within the painting.

**Delft blue with shell** (*Figure 3.16, 3.17 and 3.18*)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, my mother is an avid collector of delftware ceramics. A delftware jar is the focal point of this still life, necessitating less dramatic colour than that present in the other paintings mentioned above. Instead of using a dark cloth, I have chosen to use my mother’s lace and crochet tablecloths, which are paired with objects that have a muted palette. The palette and objects are reminiscent of the interiors in my mother’s house: antique wooden furniture, blue and white ceramics, silverware and lace. The delftware jar was a gift given to me by my mother and the large shell is part of my mother’s seashell collection. I bought the tall white ceramic bottle with the blue floral pattern at an antique shop. The small decorative tin comes from a set of two, both with the same image. The one in this painting belongs to my mother and the other belongs to me. The chosen objects thus evoke the familial links between us and suggest a sense of generational continuum. The metal flour sifter relates to seventeenth-century breakfast pieces, where kitchen utensils are displayed with staple food items. Flour is a main ingredient in many staple food items and is used in many cultures, especially for its use to make bread. I use the flour sifter to reference a simple life of moderation which is metaphorically shown in seventeenth-century breakfast pieces by using simple food items and everyday objects. In contrast, I use another liquor decanter; associated with wealth, frivolity and excess and these objects become metaphors for the different lifestyles that are present within contemporary South African society.

I have chosen to paint the delftware jar, shell and floral patterns on the ceramic bottle. The delftware jar is painted realistically from the photographic source, while the shell has been painted realistically with thicker paint in order to show texture. It is only on closer inspection that the viewer can see the textured, thicker paint. I combine the printed and painted image by painting just the floral pattern on the ceramic bottle. The floral pattern is left somewhat painterly, with certain areas blending into the printed
areas. Again, the textures and objects dictate my decision in how I apply the paint onto the canvas.

**Red wine (Figure 3.19, 3.20 and 3.21)**

This still life is inspired by the traditional Dutch seventeenth-century pronk still life, which would include luxurious items along with foods. As explained in my second chapter, ‘pronk’ still life paintings show exotic/luxurious objects and foods, which were often imported into the Dutch Republic during that time, due to the wide ranging trading voyages of the Dutch East India Company. These paintings usually display a vast variety of food and objects that are laid out on a table, in order to show opulence and abundance. My still life does not display a wide variety of items, but rather a portion. As such, the composition is simpler, as if looking at a close up view of a pronk still life. The main focus of my still life is the red grapes. The colour of the grapes is mimicked in the red tablecloth that is placed underneath a transparent, lacy tablecloth and is reflected within the silver chalice. In the background is another silver object; an engraved circular tray. I create a theme with the use of silver and other objects with shiny, metallic surfaces such as the silver and gold jewelry box. A glass liquor decanter is placed on top of the jewelry box and the final object is a white ceramic spice jar with a black and white image and patterns painted onto it. The image depicts an exotic desert scene with palm trees and camels and floral patterns painted around the rim.

My intention in combining these objects is to display objects and food which metaphorically represent wealth and luxury, relating them to seventeenth-century pronk still life. Silver is a very luxurious and precious item, only affordable by people who are wealthy. The jewelry box especially implies wealth and riches, with the box itself being an item of desire, and the promise of greater riches within the box. The silver chalice and tray belong to a set. The tray is used to serve the grapes, which look shiny, juicy and plump. Food within a still life, especially fruit, is used to evoke desire. There is a certain *vanitas*-like element in using the grapes as they are frozen in time, never to go rotten. Like the flowers, they become a symbol of transience, captured in this moment. During the seventeenth-century, exotic fruits (like these grapes) were
considered luxury items. Grapes are often depicted within pronk still life paintings, and I use them here for the same purpose. The grapes are related to wine when placed with the decanter and chalice. Again, the use of the decanter is evident of wealth, for those who can afford to buy expensive wines. Furthermore, alcohol is a frivolous item, bought only for enjoyment and pleasure. The spice jar is a direct link to the exotic spices that were imported into the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth-century. Spices were also considered a luxury item and were very expensive. This still life is a classic example of luxurious items, as seen in seventeenth-century paintings, being used to warn against earthly pleasures and frivolity. The pursuit of wealth and material possessions is futile as you cannot take them with you into the afterlife. These objects also represent the struggle between the wealthy and the poor within current South African society and the discourse related to this struggle. Much of the violence and death in our current society can be attributed to wealth, with many deaths occurring in the vicious pursuit thereof.

On looking closely at the silver chalice, one can see the reflection of a figure with a human male body and a pig’s head (Figure 3.21). The figure is dressed in formal, rather old-fashioned clothes: shirt and trousers, leather shoes and suspenders, kneeling down on his haunches in a relaxed pose. His presence is subtle and ghost-like, only noticeable when the viewer analyses the painting closely. By including him as a reflection, I imply that he is kneeling in front of the still life. This includes him within the artwork, but also includes him as a viewer or spectator of the scene. This duality which makes him a viewer of the artwork implies that we (the viewers) are the same as he is. He becomes a metaphor for the violence of South African society, a memento mori reminding us of the way people are slaughtered like vulnerable animals in violent acts of greed. These ghostly figures are present in four other still life paintings, appearing as reflections in various objects. The animals used are a chicken, cow, sheep and pig.
Other objects used and their meaning

I have not discussed all the still life paintings in detail, but here I give some explanations of certain objects depicted which have not yet been mentioned.

In one painting I include an antique hat, which is a family heirloom that belongs to a friend with an Afrikaans heritage and looks as if it could have been worn by a general in the seventeenth or eighteenth-century. It is commonplace within seventeenth-century still life, not only to use objects which define wealth and excess, but also objects that denote accomplishments or symbols of power. In chapter one, I mentioned objects like these used within vanitas still life: the crown and scepter in Vanitas Still Life by Jacques De Gheyn which symbolises the worthless objects related to worldly power and the books in Harmen Steenwyck’s painting Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life, which symbolise the pursuit of earthly knowledge and achievements. I use the hat as a similar metaphor, since the hat seems to have been worn by someone of importance, such as a general. It is used to signify power related to war, which also references the senseless killing involved in South African politics in the past and present, as well as the senseless pursuit of this power which is of no use (since we are all destined to die).

In vanitas still life, the depiction of candles as metaphors for transience are common. The candle represents life: as the candle burns, so one’s life is eventually burnt up or snuffed out. I use the oil lamp in the same way: as a metaphor for life and its transience. Just like the candle, the lamp can burn out. In my image the lamp does not burn, signifying death.

In another still life image I depict an old pansy shell which belongs to my mother. It becomes an important metaphor when placed in a still life, since the shell has an interesting story attached to it. According to Christians, the pansy shell tells the story of the birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christian symbolism, the

---

4 The star pattern underneath the shell represents the star of Bethlehem that led the three wise men to Jesus when he was born. The pattern around the star represents the Easter lily, which is a symbol of Christ’s resurrection. The four holes around the edge of the pansy shell represent the holes in Jesus’s
shell implies the purity of Jesus and his part in cleansing humankind from sin. The pansy shell actually isn’t a shell, but rather the bleached skeleton of a specific type of sea urchin. It therefore also becomes a *memento mori* within the still life. In terms of its Christian context, implying moral teachings and values, it refers to a lack of such virtues within South African society.

**The pig’s riches (Figure 3.22, 3.23 and 3.24)**

My final still life completes the previous series, and can be read as an artwork on its own. It is not part of the other eight still life images, but does represent and relate to them. Like Penny Siopis’s *Melancholia*, this still life is large and filled with objects. Each object was carefully collected and chosen to represent excess, luxury and *vanitas* symbolism. Certain objects that appear in the other still life images are repeated here: golden cat, jewelry box, silver tray, silver pocket watch, brass lamp, my grandmother’s tin, silver chalice, white rabbit ornament, tea tin, floral vases, silver hand mirror, Russian nesting dolls, shells, framed lace, flour sifter and brandy jar. At least one or more objects from each still life is represented. These familiar objects are arranged among other objects which, like the other familiar objects, have been specifically collected or have sentimental meaning.

The focal point of the still life is right in the centre of the image where, for the first time, I make reference to traditional *vanitas* symbolism by including a brown skull-shaped glass bottle with a burning candle emerging from its neck. The skull represents a direct symbol of death, and the candle (burning or snuffed out) becomes the symbol of life burning out or being cut short. Other traditional *vanitas* objects and symbols, such as the lemons, flowers and pocket watch, also appear. Half peeled lemons are a common *vanitas* symbol for life itself – as life may seem sweet in appearance, but is in fact bitter. The flowers refer to seventeenth-century flower paintings representing transience as discussed above. In this still life, I use fresh yellow and red roses as well as dried hands and feet when He was nailed to the cross during His crucifixion. The fifth hole in the centre of the shell symbolises the wound in His side. The pattern on top of the shell represents a poinsettia, or Christmas flower. Once the shell is broken, five ‘white doves’ emerge from inside the pansy shell, which are symbols for the peace and joy of Christmas.
pressed flowers placed in small wooden frames. The rose petals are wilting and have started falling off onto the objects below, representing the inevitable passage of time. The dried flowers are already dead, but are preserved; becoming a symbol of death. Similar to the use of the candle, time pieces such as hourglasses or, in this case, the pocket watch, refer again to the passage of time and humanity’s inability to stop it.

The remaining objects evoke excess and luxury or are objects to which I have attached my own vanitas symbolism. As indicated in the other still-lifes, the representation of liquor in a decanter refers to frivolity and luxury, as well as to foolish behaviour. I have also included tobacco, in the form of a traditional hand-rolled cigarette historically associated with masculinity and power. Along with alcohol, tobacco is considered a luxury item, traditionally used by upper and middle class men. On the far right, the cigarette is placed in a gold, ornate ashtray emphasising the wealth and power associated with the tobacco, as well as the pursuit of earthly pleasure. Food can also be considered an earthly pleasure, especially in the case of luxurious and expensive food items. I have included nectarines, fortune cookies and mince pies among the objects. The yellow and red nectarines are the same colour palette as the roses, as well as the red and yellow Russian nesting dolls. The nectarines look plump and juicy, evoking desire. The fortune cookies are dusted with edible gold leaf and have a similar texture to that of the golden cat ornament. The fortune cookies, like the cat, reflect the uncertainty of life. We cannot predict what will happen to us or when and how we will die. The White Rabbit sweet tin in the background of the still life completes this link. The mince pies are included for their Christian symbolism, as they are primarily eaten during Christmas, yet they also evoke desire and gluttony, emphasising the divide between earthly pleasures and moral pursuits.

To further evoke the vanitas theme I have included owls, a tarantula spider and ceramic bells. The owl is placed near the centre of the still life and can be seen as another focal point of the image. In African culture, owls are bad omens and symbolise death, yet in Western culture they symbolise wisdom. Despite the inevitability of death, humankind has the opportunity to show wisdom in the choices we make during our lifetime and to reinforce this notion I have hidden smaller owls throughout the still life.
The spider, on the other hand, represents the fear of death, evoking evil predators and the violence they commit. The spider looks real, but merely consists of the skin that the spider has shed. This ‘empty shell’ is a metaphor for perpetrators and victims of violence – living empty lives with no apparent soul present. The ceramic bells apply to the tradition of the “death knell” – the act of ringing a bell to announce a death, or a term used which is metaphorical for an event that has caused a death or an indication that someone has died.

As with the other still life images, there is a faint reflection present within the glass of the brass lamp. In reference to the title, a human figure with the head of a pig stands proudly with hands holding their coat (Figure 3.24). The figure refers to the dual nature of humanity. Just as pigs are used as a metaphor for corrupt humans in Orwell’s book Animal Farm, this figure could represent humanity’s pride as well as frivolous and gluttonous behaviour. On the other hand, however, the figure also represents humanity’s vulnerability in South Africa’s violent society.

**Family portrait series (Figure 3.25, 3.26, 3.27 and 3.28)**

This series of digital prints is inspired by a very old and faded black and white family photograph that I discovered in a second hand store. I wanted to create a body of work with the same aesthetic as old portrait photographs, which would include my human/animal hybrids as the subjects. As a result, I photographed eight individuals and photoshopped their images to create twelve faded sepia prints. The figures have human bodies that are clothed in ordinary and old-fashioned clothing with each having a different animal head. Like Delftware slaughter, I have chosen to represent animals that are either slaughter animals or are animals that were hunted for trophies in the seventeenth-century: cows, pigs, sheep, goats, ducks and rabbits. These portraits refer also to the images that appear in the reflections as part of the still life images. A connection is thus formed between these ‘family portraits’ and the vanitas imagery of the objects they, perhaps, once owned.
Ceramic sculptures (Figure 3.29, 3.30, 3.31, 3.32, 3.33, 3.34)

Using the figures from the *Family portrait* series as reference, I created five ceramic sculptures of human/animal hybrids wearing old-fashioned and ordinary clothing. Aesthetically, I wanted the sculptures to represent ornaments that would be displayed on a shelf or in a cabinet. The sculptures are glazed with white or muted colours; a combination of matt and shiny/reflective glazes. In making the figures three-dimensional, the sculptures become a physical manifestation of the images that have been repeated throughout the exhibition. Through the existence of the sculptures, the figures have become objects, like those present within the still life images. They then physically become part of the exhibition as they are displayed, like traditional ornaments, on an antique cabinet which forms part of the installation. They do not show their vulnerability in their poses, but vulnerability is implied through the fragile material that has been used to create them. While they represent ghost-like characters within the still-life and portrait works, their ceramic presence represents them as frozen and helpless within their breakable bodies. They are not in control of what happens to them; fated to be merely ornamental representations of themselves. Like victims of violence who do not have control over what happens to them, or like the slaughter animals they represent, they are victims of circumstance.

**Installation**

The entire exhibition is displayed in the form of an installation that mimics a version of my mother's living room and is thus decorated in the style of an old-fashioned, Afrikaner home. The artworks become part of the installation, with portraits and paintings on the walls and the plates and sculptures displayed inside an antique wooden cabinet and on tables. Old-fashioned furniture is included, such as chairs and side tables. Among the artworks, the objects that are represented in the still life images are displayed on the tables. Imagery that combines motifs of *Delftware slaughter* and the *Family portrait* series are printed onto cushions that are placed on the chairs, as well as forming a design that is printed on a small carpet.

---

5 Images unavailable, installation will be set up for the first time at the gallery for the exhibition.
The installation allows my artworks to be viewed within their specific context, further exemplifying the meaning and history within the artworks.
Figure 3.1: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 1*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.2: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 2*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.
Figure 3.3: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 3*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.4: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 4*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.
Figure 3.5: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 5*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.

Figure 3.6: Loreal Vos, *Delftware slaughter 6*, 2015. Mixed media waterslide paper transfer on ceramic plate, 30 x 30cm.
Figure 3.7: Loreal Vos, *Grandmother’s tin* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.8: Loreal Vos, *Grandmother’s tin* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 90 x 74cm.
Figure 3.9: Loreal Vos, *Grandmother’s tin* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 90 x 74cm.

Figure 3.10: Loreal Vos, *Lucky cat* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.
Figure 3.11: Loreal Vos, *Lucky cat* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 110 x 75cm.

Figure 3.12: Loreal Vos, *Lucky cat* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 110 x 75cm.
Figure 3.13: Loreal Vos, *Whimsical rabbit* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.14: Loreal Vos, *Whimsical rabbit* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 105 x 74cm.
Figure 3.15: Loreal Vos, *Whimsical rabbit* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 105 x 74cm.

Figure 3.16: Loreal Vos, *Delft blue with shell* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.
Figure 3.17: Loreal Vos, *Delft blue with shell* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 106 x 74cm.

Figure 3.18: Loreal Vos, *Delft blue with shell* digital print with painting in progress, 2015. Digital photograph and oil paint on canvas, 106 x 74cm.
Figure 3.19: Loreal Vos, *Red wine* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.20: Loreal Vos, *Red wine* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 100 x 82cm.
Figure 3.21: Loreal Vos, detail of *Red Wine* digital print, 2015.

Figure 3.22: Loreal Vos, *The pig’s riches* photograph, 2015. Digital photograph, variable dimensions.
Figure 3.23: Loreal Vos, *The pig’s riches* manipulated digital print before painting, 2015. Digital photograph on canvas, 180 x 174 cm.

Figure 3.24: Loreal Vos, detail of *The pig’s riches* digital print, 2015.
Figure 3.25: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 1*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.

Figure 3.26: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 2*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.
Figure 3.27: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 3*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.

Figure 3.28: Loreal Vos, *Family portrait 4*, 2015. Digital photographic print on paper, variable dimensions on A3 format.
Figure 3.29: Loreal Vos, *Sondebok*, 2015. Ceramic sculpture, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.30: Loreal Vos, *Sondebok* detail, 2015.
Figure 3.31: Loreal Vos, *Soos water op 'n eend se rug*, 2015. Ceramic sculpture, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.32: Loreal Vos, *Soos water op 'n eend se rug* detail, 2015.
Figure 3.33: Loreal Vos, *Die kalf is in die pit 1*, 2015. Ceramic sculpture, variable dimensions.

Figure 3.34: Loreal Vos, *Die kalf is in die pit 1* detail, 2015.
Conclusion.

In this dissertation I have explored and analysed the way in which symbols and/or images of death, violence and transience are used in selected artworks from the seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* tradition, as well as artworks created in contemporary South Africa. My analysis of these works and their social contexts has created a framework for the discussion of my own art production, which comprises the practical component of my degree.

In chapter one, I discussed the social and religious context in Holland during the seventeenth-century in order to understand how and why certain symbols and imagery are used in seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* still life paintings. Since religious imagery was banned by the Calvinist church, still life paintings became messages of morality and mortality through the use of objects as metaphors for death and transience and to warn against earthly pleasures and frivolity. Through in-depth analyses of seventeenth-century still life paintings, I have determined various specific symbols and metaphors that are used within the paintings which refer to death, transience and mortality within the context of seventeenth-century society.

To conclude chapter one and to provide an introduction to chapter two, which includes a context of post-colonial South African society and discussion of contemporary South African artworks, I provided an analysis of Penny Siopis’ still life painting titled *Melancholia*. *Melancholia* contains specific symbols and metaphors that give an insight into the social context of South Africa during apartheid. My discussion of this work thus provides a framework that explains the consequences of social violence and unrest experienced in contemporary post-colonial South Africa.

In chapter two, I discussed various reasons put forward by social commentators for the violence experienced in contemporary post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa. Through their analysis of South Africa’s current social context, I determined that there is a rise of death and violence due to social unrest and moral decay within society. This context informs the way the selected contemporary South African artists
discussed in this study create artworks that respond to the many problems perceived in South African society. I compare their approach with the artists in seventeenth-century Holland, who created art, particularly vanitas paintings, in response to their social and religious context with regard to morality, death and transience. I have shown in chapter two that certain South African artists respond in a similar manner to South Africa’s current social context. In my analyses of their works I discussed the particular symbols and metaphors they employ to convey the erosion of social values and the prevalence of death and violence in our society, concluding that these artists could be said to create what I refer to as contemporary versions of vanitas artworks.

My own artmaking practice, discussed in detail in chapter three, alludes to both the stylistic factors and the symbols and metaphors used in seventeenth-century artworks. At the same time I also include references to death and transience but in a more subtle way than those found in the work of the selected South African contemporary artists discussed here. My artworks have been discussed as a personal social response to South African society and the lives that are lost daily in senseless acts of violence.

My hope for this study is to raise awareness of the ethical challenges we are facing as a country through my exhibition, in a similar manner to the way that Victor, Alexander and Botes raise awareness of these social problems through their art. Even though I believe it is necessary and important to raise awareness and highlight these specific issues, it is difficult to measure whether art such as this has an impact and what that impact might be. I began this study primarily as a form of catharsis for myself, which undoubtedly is the only measurable and predictable outcome for each artist. The process of art making as a form of personal catharsis has been shown to have benefit through the recent practice of using art making as a form of psychological therapy. Art therapy employs art techniques in order to relieve daily stress as well as to come to terms with emotional trauma. According to the website on art therapy (Art Therapy 2014:sp), expressing oneself through art allows individuals to “work through thoughts, feelings and concerns” by focusing on the creative process of making art instead of the final outcome or aesthetic of the art itself. Furthermore, certain individuals find the creative process an easier method to express themselves, rather than expressing
themselves through words. I thus believe that whether my art actually presents an effective message to the viewer or not, there is a personal value that lies in the therapeutic effect it has had for me in the process of creating these visual minutiae and through the labour intensive methods of my art production. I therefore conclude that one thing this exhibition can demonstrate is the effectiveness of artmaking as a form of personal catharsis.
List of sources


Accessed: 27 August 2014

Accessed: 27 August 2015

Accessed: 27 August 2015

Accessed on 25 September 2014


Accessed on 19 April 2013


Accessed on 25 September 2014