

**Re-**  
**An Exploration of Transience in the Work of Selected Artists**

By  
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A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Masters of Technology in Fine Art Degree

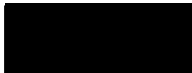
In the

Department of Fine Art and Jewellery Design  
Faculty of Arts and Design  
Durban University of Technology

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination through any other institution.



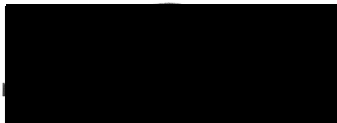
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2017

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this research is to investigate the exploration of transience in the work of selected artists. This study used qualitative, practice-led research methodology. This research is practice-led as my art making plays an integral part in guiding my research.

Process philosophy provides the theoretical underpinning and contextual framework for this dissertation. I focus on both contemporary artists and philosophers who explore the notion of transience. As my selected artists and I use paper as a predominant medium, I look at how paper is an ideal choice of material through which to explore themes of transience. The selected artists that I investigate include Peter Callesen (1967-), Mia Pearlman (1974-), Jodi Carey (1981-) and myself.

Through this research I have found that artists expressed similar sentiments to that of process philosophers centuries before these theories existed, and continue to do so today. This validates transience as a relevant form of visual enquiry. Through the exploration of transience by contemporary thinkers and the selected artists, I briefly examine the scope of interpretations and possible meanings of transience. The investigation into paper as an art medium supports its appropriateness as a means to explore themes of transience. The exploration of the selected artists' work highlights the various aspects of transience as a concept based on both subject matter and medium. This research resulted in a body of work, exhibited in partial fulfilment of the Master of Technology Degree in Fine Art.

## **Acknowledgements**

For all the academic support, extreme patience and tireless belief in me, I thank my supervisors, John Roome and Nirmi Ziegler, without whom this research would not be possible.

I thank Greg Streak for all his feedback on my practical work, and support. Your advice and willingness to assist and guide me at any time, even on weekends, has been a major influence to the success of my body of work. I also thank Joel and Kyle Nixon for their efforts and contribution to the success of my work.

To Dane Knudsen for everything. For his moral support and encouragement in my times of need. His physical support, from assisting in the creation of artworks to reading and rereading my research, and for patiently working through problems with me. Your role in my academic and personal life has been hugely influential to my success.

Karla Nixon



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## Introduction

This study argues that transience is the best line of approach to understanding existence through art making in the context of process philosophy. I do this through an investigation of transience in the work of Peter Callesen (1967-), Mia Pearlman (1974-), and Jodi Carey (1981-) in relation to my own artistic oeuvre over the last 3 years. I have chosen this field of research as it relates directly to my art practice, which uses paper to explore issues around transience.

The dissertation involves an investigation of process philosophy, which forms a theoretical underpinning and contextual framework to my focus of transience in the work of the above-mentioned artists. I argue that these, and other artists express similar sentiments that are congruent with that of process philosophers centuries before these theories existed, and continue to do so today. This research investigates transience and temporality looking at contemporary thinkers, which include Zygmunt Bauman (1925-), Espen Hammer (1966-) and Richard Sennett (1943-). I reflect on their thoughts on transience and temporality before linking their ideas to contemporary artists and artworks that explore similar concepts. This should provide a broad outline of what transience means.

Another important field of this dissertation is *paper as an art medium* since paper is my primary medium of choice. I explore this field by looking at its current and historic usage, which dates back to the invention of paper in 105 AD (Heyenga<sup>1</sup> 2011: 9). I argue that paper is the optimal medium to explore themes of transience and temporality in contemporary art. Paper has influenced and transformed our history, the lives we lead today, and the art

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Heyenga is an editor at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

world. I also argue that the physical characteristics of paper add to the appropriateness of it as a medium for this theme.

Paper has a long history and many different qualities. Schmidt and Stattmann<sup>2</sup> (2009: 10) describe paper as being “simple and unsophisticated, ephemeral and fragile”. I investigated these and other properties of paper, focusing on how the selected artists have dealt with paper to explore themes of transience.

My selection of artists is based on two criteria: their use of paper as a dominant medium and their exploration, directly or indirectly, of transience. These two criteria helped me choose artists who create contemporary artworks that resonate with my work.

I used qualitative research methods in this study. Data was collected by way of looking at artists’ backgrounds, concepts, thoughts, opinions, as well as analysing artworks. Blaxter, Hughes and Tight<sup>3</sup> explained qualitative research as:

Collecting and analysing information in as many forms, chiefly non-numeric, as possible. It tends to focus on exploring, in as much detail as possible, smaller numbers of instances or examples which are seen as being interesting or illuminating, and aims to achieve ‘depth’ rather than ‘breadth’ (2006:64).

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<sup>2</sup> Petra Schmidt is an independent author and consultant in Frankfurt am Main. She teaches at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe (Academy of Design, Karlsruhe) and writes for art and design magazines. Nicola Stattmann has works as an independent designer in Frankfurt. And has numerous design and architectural trade journals (Unfolded by Petra Schmidt, 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Loraine Blaxter and Christina Hughes are both based at the University of Warwick. Malcolm Tight is a Professor in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University and author. (How to Research, 2006)

This research is practice-led as my art making plays an integral part in guiding my research. According to Kessler and Anand (2012) practice-led research employs an interactive and interdisciplinary process. In researching and forming a hypothesis through my art practice, I used a critical self-reflective methodology (Whitehead<sup>4</sup> 1993).

Discourse analysis was used to unpack secondary data collected through texts, books, journals, internet sites and electronic databases. The data was analysed using historical (as the research provided a historical context from which to view the contemporary work), conceptual (relating to the conceptual underpinning of artworks) and formal (relating to the formal elements of artworks) approaches.

The practical component of this research consists of a body of work produced during the course of this study. This body of work explores themes of transience through imagery surrounding construction (which include building sites, tools and materials) as subject matter. I will argue that construction is an apt theme to explore transience as it is itself a state of it. The processes of building, such as destroying to create, become symbolic of similar complexities experienced in our transient existence. This idea is enhanced through the use of paper as my primary medium.

The five chapters cover:

1. process philosophy in relation to art, and the link with transience and temporality,
2. transience and temporality as a concept, introducing contemporary thinkers and their philosophies, and connecting contemporary artists who share similar sentiments in their work to these ideas,
3. the history and relevance of paper as a medium that speaks to transience

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Whitehead is a lecturer at the University of Bath. "He originated and developed the idea that individuals could create their own living educational theories" (Jack Whitehead 2016)

and temporality,

4. three selected contemporary paper artists and their exploration of transience and temporality and
5. my art practice.

The conclusion will sum up my findings and provide a recommendation for further research.



# Chapter One

## Process as Focus

This Chapter attempts to examine some of process philosophy's concepts and shows how art history has reflected similar sentiments, even though they may have occurred centuries before process philosophy was conceptualised. This will achieve a theoretical and historical contextualization of my visual enquiry. It will also provide some context as to why transience is the best line of approach to understanding existence.

The Oxford Dictionary (2015) defines temporality as: "The state of existing within or having some relationship with time". Time is often referred to as the fourth dimension, along with the three spatial dimensions. Transience, according to the Oxford Dictionary (2015) means "Lasting only for a short time; impermanent". Thus it follows that transience and temporality are both dependent on time. Therefore, temporality and transience are phenomena that can be found in everything. This means there are copious amounts of literature across various fields of study: from the theory of relativity to chaos theory in mathematics, from studying dynamic systems sensitive to initial conditions, to the study of cultural change and adaption in cultural theory. For this research, I have chosen the theory of process philosophy as I hope it will help provide a theoretical framework for my topic of transience and temporality and therefore provide the context to my selection of art and artists.

The Oxford Dictionary (2015) defines process philosophy as "Philosophy based on the idea of process". According to Seibt<sup>5</sup> (2012: 1) process philosophy "is based on the premise that being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive

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<sup>5</sup> Johanna Seibt teaches in the International MA Programme in Philosophy at Aarhus. And specializes in the areas of analytical ontology and metaphysics. (*Johanna Seibt 2016*)

philosophical account of reality and our place within it". It is without question that artists, from prehistoric times to modern day society, have attempted to explain their existence and realities through their art making. Process philosophy argues that existence is best explained through things (everything) being in a state of process. Nicholas Rescher<sup>6</sup> explains this when he says, "Process metaphysics as a general line of approach holds that physical existence is at bottom processual; that processes rather than things best represent the phenomena that we encounter in the natural world about us" (1996: 2).

## **Process Philosophy**

The philosophy was most active in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America. Process philosophy has become synonymous with the American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead<sup>7</sup>. Philosophers, active both during this period and after, who continue process philosophy ideas include: Samuel Alexander, George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, C.S. Peirce, William James, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne (Hustwit<sup>8</sup> 2015). For the purpose of this study I will not delve into each of these philosopher's similarities and differences, but rather discuss the general ideologies of the philosophy, focusing on Alfred Whitehead's particular approach. I have chosen to do this as I believe that the key ideas of the philosophy are more important to this study than foregrounding the individual philosophers that were considered to fall under the process philosophy umbrella. As Whitehead is considered a major player in this branch of philosophy, focusing on his ideology seemed the most appropriate.

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Rescher (1928- ) is a prominent representative of contemporary pragmatism. He has written about 400 articles and 100 books. (Marsonet 2016)

<sup>7</sup> "Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) was a British mathematician, logician and philosopher best known for his work in mathematical logic and the philosophy of science... Later he was instrumental in pioneering the approach to metaphysics now known as process philosophy." (Irvine 2015)

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Hustwit's is the acting Dean at the Methodist University in the USA. His area of specialization is philosophical theology (Dr. J. R. Hustwt, 2016)

Alfred North Whitehead's background was in mathematics and physics, but later his interest broadened into the philosophy of science and metaphysics (Sherburne 1961: xx). This led to process philosophy and he became most known for the ideas expressed in his book titled *Process and Reality*. This book was a creation of "a scheme of ideas that did justice to the richness and complexity of human being yet exhibited human beings as an integral part of nature" (Sherburne 1961: xxi). Today his ideas are applied to a number of different disciplines including: ecology, theology, education, physics, biology, economics, and psychology. I am joining this list of applications through this study, by applying this philosophy to art.

What we need to understand is that Whitehead's 'lived experience' was a response to the Industrial Revolution (1760-1840). Scientific breakthroughs and advancements were rife. Whitehead "turned his reflective efforts toward formulating a philosophy of science to replace the prevailing materialistic mechanism, which in his view was unable to account for the revolutionary developments taking place in science" (Barker, W *et al* 2008). Whitehead was attempting to do this by reuniting the sciences. Using a philosophical approach to find the source of the problem. "Whitehead recognized deep interconnections between the trajectory of civilization on the one hand, and its dominant contemporary moral outlook, epistemology, and cosmology on the other" (Poisson 2011).

The main problem Whitehead was concerned with was a moral issue. World War One, ending in 1918, made many scientists, philosophers and artists reflect and reconsider their values. Many artistic movements that followed World War One focused on the destruction and brutality of the war, such as the German Expressionists 'New Objectivity' movement. The Dada movement was also born out of the war, mocking "materialistic and nationalistic attitudes" (Dada 2016). The influence of the war caused Whitehead to notice a disconnectedness between people and the environment, which was of serious concern. Whitehead's philosophy argued that:

There is urgency in coming to see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us (Mesel 2009: 9).

Whitehead realised that for the future of humanity, society's moral obligation to itself and to the environment was of extreme importance.

Whitehead rejected Descartes' ideas of mental and material substances as the quintessence of real existence (Sherburne 1961: 7). He believed that "Actual entities"—also termed 'actual occasions'—are the final real things of which the world is made up" (Whitehead 1978: 18). 'Experience' (a term he used very broadly and inclusively) is better suited to understand real existence (Whitehead 1978: 18). Process philosophy holds process as the focus of understanding and explaining existence (Rescher 1996) as opposed to the long-standing Western philosophical view of substance being the focus, otherwise known as substance philosophy. The process theorists and philosophers believe that the predominant focus of substance, falsely alludes that 'things' (in nature or in the manmade environment) are permanent or fixed (Rescher 1996). Instead, they argue that there is nothing permanent. This shift of perspective, seeing the world and our existence through process, moments that will never exist again, lead me to investigate how artists, including myself, explore transience in their work.

Art that explores transience follows these rules and objectives in very similar ways: it also deals with everyday life themes, explores philosophical avenues, aligns transdisciplinary choices, and by doing so critiques them. Many artists don't consciously apply the above, or apply Whitehead's ideas, but, regardless of this, their work reflects these sentiments. This is particularly true to the artists discussed below. But Robert Morris (Figure 1) turns the dispute of substance versus process into an artwork that shifts the focus from the product to the leftover waste. He provokes a focus change. This waste is new material, but if the focus were on the product then this waste would be discarded. Morris came from an art movement called Process Art, in 1960's-

70's in America. Process artists, like the action painters, emphasized "the process and act of artistic creation rather than the actual finished work that comes out of it" (An Introduction to Process Art 2013). They believed that the act was as much an artwork as what is traditionally considered art. "Change, transience, and embracing serendipity are themes in process art" (Process Art 2016). Morris's waste forces the viewer to consider the process of art making. By showing what is left behind one can only wonder what the waste came from. Process art, environmental art and process philosophy are directly related in that they "engage the primacy of organic systems" (Process Art 2016). Process artists and environmental artists often used "perishable, insubstantial, and transitory materials" (Process Art 2016) to create their art. In Morris's case, he did not use ephemeral organic material but expresses a similar sentiment with his use of discarded waste.



**Figure 1**

Robert Morris. *Untitled (Pink Felt)*. 1970. Felt pieces. Size variable.

Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Our reality does not exist in a static vacuum, it is extraordinarily diverse, filled with complex 'things' that are continually changing. "The phenomenology of change is stressed by processists precisely because the difference between a static museum and the real world of vibrant activity is emblematic of our understanding of reality" (Rescher 1996). Everything on this earth exists in "a manifold of continual change, engaged in an inexorable transit leading from birth through maturation to decline and destruction... Process philosophy thus prioritizes change and development in all of its aspects over fixity and persistence" (Rescher 1996). A perfect example of the exploration of "a manifold of continual change" is seen in Andy Goldsworthy's<sup>9</sup> (1956-) work. Goldsworthy explores temporality and transience in his art through the themes "death, renewal, and time" (Binkly 2010: 5). He was drawn to this subject because "time and the notion of being temporary are aspects of life that the environment and every human have in common" (Binkly 2010: 1). By connecting the environment with man through his exploration of transience Goldsworthy attempts to do what Whitehead believed was lacking, reuniting us with the environment by forcing us to see our interconnectedness and responsibility we have to the environment. Goldsworthy explores this through his creation of ephemeral works that are often influenced by the environment around them. He photographs his works throughout their transformation. According to Binkly (2010: 5) Goldsworthy's fixation with "death and rebirth only adds to the deep symbolic meanings of his works and the different ways he wants his viewers to see nature". A "manifold of continual change" is clearly reflected in his exploration of the life cycle, through ephemeral works.

Goldsworthy's work titled *Neuberger Cairn* (2001) (Figure 2) is symbolic of the inevitability of change. "The ephemeral quality of his pieces is what gives his art the immense impact that it has. It forces one to realize that change is inevitable. Life cannot continue without birth, death, and change" (Binkly 2010: 11). The title of the work is, however, ironic; According to the Oxford

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<sup>9</sup> Andy Goldsworthy is a prolific site-specific sculpture and photographer currently living in Scotland. (Andy Goldsworthy 2016)

Dictionary (2015) a cairn is “A mound of rough stones built as a memorial or landmark, typically on a hilltop or skyline”. They are therefore usually associated with an attempt at permanence. Goldsworthy subverts this by using balanced limestone to create a sculpture, which seemingly represents an egg. Not only is the precariously balanced limestone, with the potential to collapse at any moment, a great representation of his themes of transience, but an egg is also a perfect object to suggest the life cycle and is therefore a very appropriate choice of subject matter to represent his underlying themes of change.



**Figure 2**

Andy Goldsworthy, *Neuberger Cairn*. 2001. Limestone. H 259cm x C 655.3cm. Neuberger Museum of Art, New York.

Land artists tackle transience and temporality both conceptually and physically. Not only do Goldsworthy and many other land artists interrogate transience and temporality through themes and subject matter, but through creating artworks out of organic materials from the land and placing them

outside, they expose the work to the natural elements creating layers of interrogation of transience and temporality. This allows the work to transform and decay.

Transience as philosophical underpinning goes much further back than Whitehead. The genre of Vanitas paintings expresses the focus of process philosophy in the context of Christian religion. Rescher explains that process philosophy believes that “The “self,” the human person, is accordingly best seen not as a substance or being (a thing of some sort) but as an experience-integrating life process of the human mode, the concrete realization of a developmental sequence comprising childhood, youth, maturity, and, finally, old age” (Rescher 1996: 116). This would of course be concluded with death, a theme very prominent to the Baroque period. This painting genre not only addresses themes of transience and life’s processes but attempts, as the process philosophers did, to reunite the viewer with their moral obligation. In Vanitas paintings, this takes the form of Christian beliefs.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Baroque art and architecture 2015), during the Baroque era, Vanitas paintings used symbols “to remind the viewer of their mortality and of the worthlessness of worldly goods and pleasures” (Vanitas 2015). As with the era of Enlightenment, society started to lose the fear of hell. The inclusion of symbols and phrases enforced mankind’s perception of mortality and the futility of material wealth (Batchelor<sup>10</sup> 2012: 18) as a way of reminding the viewer to live a moral and righteous life. Every person will go through the developmental sequence that will eventually end in death. Memento mori, a Latin term meaning ‘remember you must die’ (Memento mori 2015), is not fixed to a specific art period, unlike Vanitas, but was initially explored during the same period. Memento mori artworks are a reminder of “the shortness and fragility of human life” (Memento mori 2015). One can almost always find memento mori themes in Vanitas paintings.

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Batchelor is the Assistant Curator for British Art at the Tate Art Museum.



During the Baroque period, as mentioned above, it was believed that it was necessary to remind the viewer that they themselves are, as process philosophers later maintained, processual and mortal. Edward Collier<sup>11</sup> is a prime example of an artist using symbols to do exactly that. In his series *Life with a globe* (Figure 3 an example of one of the works from his series), he includes a piece of paper with the text “Vita Brevis Ars Longa”, which means “life is brief, art endures” (Batchelor 2012: 18). He also includes a burnt-out candle, which is a common Vanitas symbol, along with skulls and hourglasses. The candle signifies “the brevity of life by showing how that which burns bright can be extinguished at any time” (Batchelor 2012: 18). Although not seen in this painting, Collier often includes “aphorisms [such as] Memento Mori (remember death), Sic transit gloria mundi (like this the glory of the world passes by) and Nemo ante mortem beatus dici potest (no one can call himself blessed before death)” (Batchelor 2012: 18). It is clear that Collier’s, and many Vanitas artist’s, works were never short of symbols of their transient lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Collier was a Dutch painter born in Breda, Netherlands c.1640. Collier is known for his Vanitas and trompe l'oeil paintings. (Riggs 1998)



**Figure 3**

Edward Collier, *Still Life*. 1699. Oil on canvas. 762 x 635 mm. Tate. London.

It is not only our lives that are transitory, colours can also be considered processual. Rescher (Rescher 1996: 72-73) explains that a colour only exists through the process of perceiving, because we go through the process of seeing and comprehending. This could apply to almost everything, such as poetry or even numbers. A great art example of the process of perceiving colour can be found in Pointillism, 1880-1905 (Strickland<sup>12</sup> 1992: 112). Pointillist paintings consist of “confetti-sized dots of pure, unmixed colour over the whole canvas”. These “complementary (or opposite) colours, set side by side, would mix in the viewer’s eye” (Strickland 1992: 114). The process of perceiving is therefore inseparable from viewing these artworks. See Figure 4. What was interesting about this movement was the convergence of science and art. Seurat the founder of this technique took “a more scientific method which he developed around 1884 and called Chromoluminarism” (Pointillism (c.1884-1900) 2016). This method of painting was “based on the scientific colour theory of the French chemist Michel Eugene Chevreul and the

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Carol Strickland is a former professor and best-selling author and contributes feature stories on visual art to Art in America magazine. (Carol Strickland 2015)

American physicist Ogden Rood” (Pointillism (c.1884-1900) 2016). By using this approach Seurat was seeking a means to create the most vibrant of colours. Although they worked in different fields and at different times, Both Whitehead and Seurat looked beyond their immediate discipline to seek solutions for their respective concerns.



**Figure 4**

Georges Seurat. *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. 1884-86. 207.5 x 308.1 cm.  
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

What makes process philosophy so adaptable and appropriate as a framework for this study is its vast application to everyday life. This was very important to Whitehead, who attempted to make the applications of his philosophy expansive. “Process metaphysics as such has doctrinal tendency rather than a concrete position” (Rescher 1996). This is because it’s relevance and exploration differs depending on its application, from perceiving things, to the human condition or ‘self’ to our environment. In essence process philosophy, as mentioned above, places the primary focus on process rather than substance no matter the application.

## Process Philosophy Precursors

As with the artists and art movements I have already discussed, and will continue to discuss below, there are many theorists who share similar ideologies to process philosophers, even though their systems of belief occurred before process theories were formally developed. The discussion of the precursors provides evidence that the focus of transience, both in theory and in art, has been a topic of enquiry for centuries and is examined as a means to understand existence. The analysis of pre-process philosophy concepts provides an understanding of the vast scope of this exploration, especially when viewed in conjunction with the next chapter, which explores transience in contemporary society.

The roots of process philosophy are said to originate in the pre-Socratic time with Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, who was active in Ephesus around 500 BC. He “likened the structure of reality to the element of fire, as change is reality and stability is illusion” (Hustwit 2015). Heraclitus’ account of reality, being like an ever-evasive flame, dancing and moving, never static is very similar to process philosophers’ account of reality. He is famous for his interpretation of continual flux in his quote “They do not step into the same rivers. It is other and still other waters that are flowing” (Heraclitus in Harris 2003: 10). The river gives similar imagery to his choice of fire, polar opposites in terms of properties, yet they share a similar feature: continuous change. Both are used as wonderful metaphors for the transient state of existence.

Over a thousand years later, in 1865-1885 in Paris, France, Impressionist painters reflected a similar ideology to Heraclitus’ philosophy of change and fleeting time. This is clearly reflected in their work and their aims “to render the fleeting moment in paint” (Stockstad and Cothren<sup>13</sup> 2011: 984). As the name clearly indicates, this movement’s aim was to capture impressions of

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<sup>13</sup> Marilyn Stockstad is a distinguished professor of Art History at The University of Kansas. Micheal Cothren is a professor of Humanities Department of Art, Swarthmore College (Stockstad and Cothren 2011, 984).

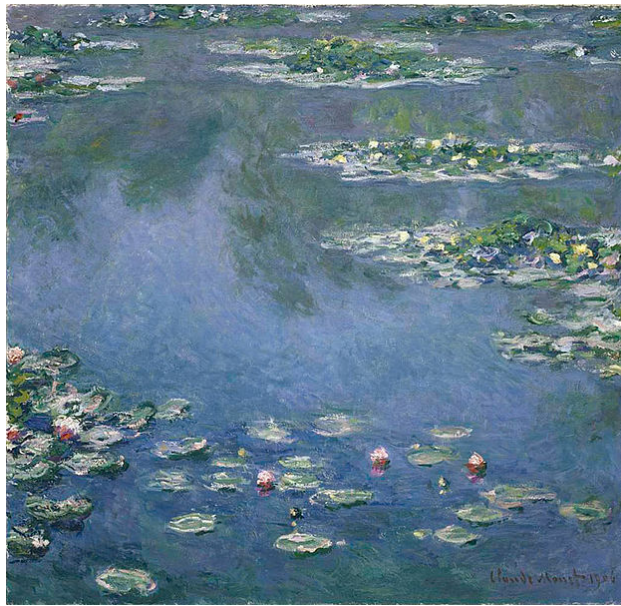
places, environments, light, colour and scenes. The word impression implies something left behind. This indicates that whatever they were painting was in a state of transience. They attempted to capture “certain fleeting aspects of reality that had never been caught before” (Powell-Jones<sup>14</sup> 1994: 20). Instead of focusing on scenes that were understood as fixed, impressionists aimed to portray momentary aspects of reality as they saw it. The most prominent artists of this movement include; Claude Monet (1840-1926), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917).

Monet probably incorporated transience and temporality more than any of the other impressionists. He only worked on a painting for up to an hour at a time. He believed working on them longer would be a false representation of the fleeting light at that specific time of day (Powell-Jones 1994: 21). This is why he would work on more than one painting of the same scene at a time, as well as re-paint the same scene continuously over a long period of time. Every time he re-painted a scene it would be completely new. His numerous paintings of Water lilies (Figure 5 and 6) reflected transient reality; no painting was like another, because no day or hour was the same.

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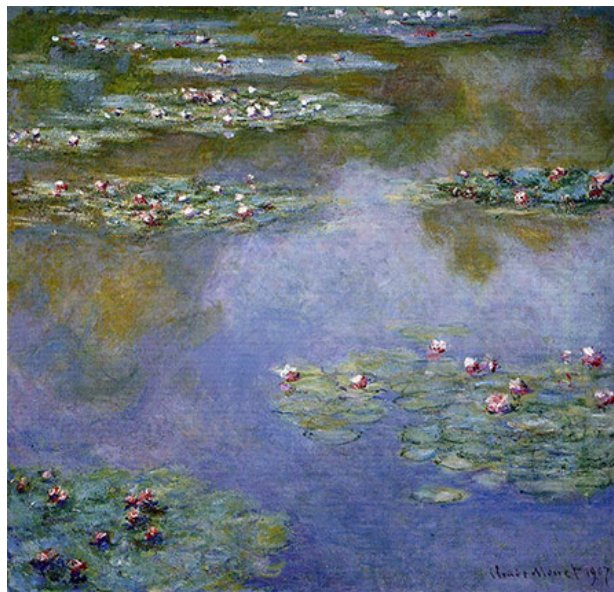
<sup>14</sup> Mark Powell-Johns Is an art historian with special interest in Impressionism (Impressionism 2016).





**Figure 5**

Claude Monet. *Water Lilies*. 1906. Oil on canvas. 89.9 x 94.1 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.



**Figure 6**

Claude Monet. *Water Lilies*. 1907. 96.8 x 93.4 cm. Oil on Canvas. Museum of Fine Art, Boston.

Capturing the impression of the scene influenced the brush marks made by the Impressionists. Monet used techniques and mark making “to represent ever-changing reflections in the ripples of the water” (Powell-Jones 1994: 12).

How appropriate this is in relation to the Heraclitus' quote about the river. He pursued "the most difficult and evanescent effects of light, by the river, in the fields, or in the steam rising from the railway engine" (Powell-Jones 1994: 13). It is this pursuit of capturing the transient moments of light and scenes through painting techniques, which mark the impressionists as prime example of artists who explores themes of transience.

Even though process theory was developed in the west, it can be applied to Eastern religions, despite these religions existing prior to process philosophy. Taoist and Buddhist doctrines are considered to fit under the umbrella. "The Taoist admonition that one should be spontaneously receptive to the never ending flux of yin and yang emphasizes a process worldview" (Hustwit 2015). The Buddhist "notions of *pratyitya-samutpada* (the inter-dependent origination of events) and *anatma* (the denial of a substantial or enduring self)" is also considered processual (Hustwit 2015). "In Buddhist belief, everything is in transition—nothing and no one remains the same from one moment to the next" (Benskin<sup>15</sup> 2005 41). These beliefs play a large role in their everyday life and art making. Japanese Buddhists "have taken the idea of the transitory nature of all things and imbued it with aesthetic values and strong emotion" (Benskin 2005: 41). An example of this is seen in the celebration of the blooming cherry blossoms, which is also an example of *mono no aware*, meaning a "'pathos' (*aware*) of 'things' (*mono*), deriving from their transience" (Japanese Aesthetics 2011).

The blossoms of the Japanese cherry trees are intrinsically no more beautiful than those of, say, the pear or the apple tree: they are more highly valued because of their transience, since they usually begin to fall within a week of their first appearing. It is precisely the evanescence of their beauty that evokes the wistful feeling of *mono no aware* in the viewer" (Japanese Aesthetics 2011).

Seasons are very important to the Japanese people as they reflect the Buddhist belief in impermanence. "If man were never to fade away like the

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Benskin is the director of school and teaching programs and the Baltimore Museum of Art (Elizabeth Benskin 2016)

dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty” (Keene<sup>16</sup> 1976: 7). It is believed, like the cherry blossoms, seasons or man are only appreciated and considered aesthetically pleasing because of their impermanence. The transience is seen as a cause for celebration rather than a concern.

“The world of flux that presents itself to our senses is the only reality: there is no conception of some stable “Platonic” realm above or behind it” (Japanese Aesthetics 2011). Japanese art traditionally displays this impermanence “sometimes lamenting but more often celebrating it” (Japanese Aesthetics 2011). Artworks, especially from the genre ukiyo-e, meaning “pictures of the floating world”, “depicted contemporary life and fleeting pleasures of the Edo [1615–1868] period” (Benskin 2005: 42). According to Benskin (2005: 43) Ukiyo-e alludes to the Buddhist view of the fleeting nature of pleasures. An example of this can be seen in Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-1694) artwork titled *Viewing Cherry Blossoms at Ueno Park* (Figure 7). According to Benskin (2005: 43) the work “reflects Moronobu’s celebration of the seasonal pleasures of a resurrected and vital city”. The allusion to Buddhist belief of transience and impermanence in this artwork is validation of process theories being evident in eastern religion and art.



**Figure 7**

Hishikawa Moronobu. *Autumn at Askakusa; Viewing Cherry Blossoms at Ueno Park*. 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ink, colour and gold on paper. 179.9 x 382.3cm.  
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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<sup>16</sup> “Donald Keene is one of the greatest scholars of Japanese literature and has been highly influential in the establishment of Japanese studies in the West” (Arita 2009)



Interestingly, in today's time China has started to "blend traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism with Whitehead's [process philosophy] in order to create an "ecological civilization" (Todd 2008).

## **Process Philosophy and Transience**

One of the most important aspects of process philosophy is temporality and transience. "Time is so central and important in process philosophy because temporality is the definitive characterizing feature of the processual nature of the real. To be real is to occupy a place in the order of time" (Rescher 1996: 97). Rescher (1996: 120) explains this in his explanation of the connection of process with ephemerality:

Processes in general are by nature ephemeral: Whatever has a beginning also has an end. In the domain of process, nothing is permanent except that domain itself the collective maxiprocess that embraces all the rest. And transiency eventually means loss, since the passing of anything that is positive can itself be seen to be a negativity.

The negative side of transience is seen in Vanitas flower still lives. Beautiful and expensive flowers were often used as a symbol for both wealth and the transience of time as they "will soon fade and die" (Batchelor 2012: 18). Often flowers would be depicted as they start to wilt, "entering into the process of death and decay: thus, withering petals and brown crumbling leaves become a reminder of the passing of time" (Batchelor 2012: 18). Stockstad and Cothren (2011: 755) explain that the "short life of blooming flowers was a poignant reminder of the fleeting nature of beauty and of human life" (Figure 8).



**Figure 8**

Jacob Vosmaer. *A Vase with Flowers*. Ca. 1618. Oil on wood. 85.1 x 62.5 cm.  
Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Many Philosophers in this field, such as David Ray Griffin<sup>17</sup>, believe that process philosophy should be considered 'constructive postmodernism'. "Constructive postmodernism... seeks emancipation from the negative aspects of modernity through revision rather than elimination" (Hustwit 2015). Process philosophy does not want to disregard everything we have come to believe as our reality, but that everything that we believe to be reality exists in a state of process. What is interesting is that there were artists and philosophers who followed similar ideologies despite existing in a time when preconceived ideas of substance and stability were foregrounded to understand reality. These artists not only foreground process philosophers' primary focus of process/change in our reality, but also exemplify it.

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<sup>17</sup> David Ray Griffin is Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Theology. He is co-director of the Center for Process Studies at the University in Claremont, California. He has published over 34 books. (Bio 2010)

Rescher creates a direct connection between process and temporality when he states, “process philosophy sees every natural process as having an inherently spatiotemporal connection, and has it that the ramifications of space and time encompass all of nature” (Rescher 1996: 95). Process philosophers do, however, believe that space and time are something to view process through, but are themselves processual. Mead<sup>18</sup> (1932: 1) said, “That which marks a present is it’s becoming and it’s disappearing”. The present cannot exist if it does not start somewhere and end somewhere else, if that were possible we would not have a present, future or a past. Rescher agrees with Mead’s ‘transitory present’ when he explains that, “process metaphysics insists on the present status of temporality as manifesting the dynamism of an ever-innovative present” (1996: 96). Temporality allows new and different things to take place, without something ending nothing new can begin. Dewey<sup>19</sup> believes that “temporal seriality is the very essence, then, of the human individual” (in Mozur 1991: 146). It is therefore undeniable that transience, and in particular, temporality, is not only the essence of process philosophy but of existence itself.

In this chapter I have shown a diverse set of artists and artworks who have explored different aspects of an ontological approach to change, transience and temporality, thereby applying notions similar to that of process philosophers. The art examples reinforce process philosophers’ ideas that reality is not merely made up of ‘things’, but is a continuous process of change, which makes reality transient. For the most part transience forces us to see our moral obligations, whether to the environment or to ourselves. Process philosophy explains that looking at process, which I have interpreted as transience and temporality, is an optimal way to understand reality and our existence. I have argued that this ontology has been explored for thousands

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<sup>18</sup> George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) is a major figure in the history of American philosophy, one of the founders of Pragmatism (George Herbert Mead 2016).

<sup>19</sup> John Dewey (1859-1952) was an academic philosopher and proponent of educational reform, from the USA. He originated the experimentalism philosophy. (John Dewey Biography 2016)

of years in art. Thus, my claim that transience is the best line of approach to understanding existence is supported by the examples given in this chapter. This chapter proves that the turn to transience to understand existence is not new, it is a reoccurring interrogation that artists keep returning to and, therefore, must hold value and meaning.

The following Chapter will demonstrate that this exploration is not only relevant today, but is still an important form of visual enquiry. I will do this by exploring the writing of contemporary thinkers and artists who explore these themes.

## Chapter Two

# Transience and Temporality

As I have argued, in the previous chapter, transience and temporality are the essence of process philosophy and therefore unlocking the understanding of existence. The rest of the study will focus solely on these terms; investigating how artists have used transience and temporality to understand their own existence through art making. As I am a contemporary Fine Artist creating work about the world now, it is important to contextualise these terms in contemporary society. This chapter attempts to do this.

Contemporary art is “a pivotal site of temporal experimentation” (Ross 2012: 4). Contemporary thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman<sup>20</sup> (1925-), Espen Hammer<sup>21</sup> (1966-) and Richard Sennett<sup>22</sup> (1943-) interrogate ideas around temporality and transience, specifically in the modern world. This chapter will investigate these thinkers’ perception of transience and temporality and discuss selected artworks by contemporary artists who share similar sentiments. Through both thinkers and selected artist’s exploration we will see that transience and temporality is fundamental to our existence and therefore helps us understand our contemporary reality.

We live in fluid times says Bauman (2000), who defines our constantly changing world as “liquid modernity”. He explains that we live in a time of “circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement” (2000: 14), it is expected that we “cherish the transient”, the ephemeral. This is because of

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<sup>20</sup> Zygmunt Bauman “is one of the best known sociologists and philosophers in the world. His name is often mentioned as a principal creator of the concept of “post-modernism”” (Zygmunt Bauman 2015)

<sup>21</sup> Espen Hammer is Professor of Philosophy at Temple University. “His main interests are in Kant and German Idealism, social and political philosophy, modern European philosophy, phenomenology, Critical Theory, and aesthetics” (Epsen Hammer, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Richard Sennett is a university professor of the Humanities, New York University and a professor of Sociology, the London School of Economics and Political Science. (Richard Sennett 2016)

our inability to be content. “Fulfilment is always in the future, and achievements lose their attraction and satisfying potential at the moment of their attainment, if not before” (Bauman 2000: 28). Living in a time of speed and development has influenced our behaviour. “Being modern came to mean, as it means today, being unable to stop and even less able to stand still” (Bauman 2000: 28). It is not just the modern world that is transient; it is almost everything around us, even life itself. Being in a state of liquidity brings with it a sense of vulnerability and fragility because of the lack of stability or ‘solidity’.

According to Ross<sup>23</sup>, contemporary art explores these and many more complexities of temporality. He states that art is:

flooded with temporality gaining in malleability; a time which might well be ecologically just-about-too-late but which persists as temporal passing that passes differently for different beings; an unreality we cannot do without. Yet it also partakes of the counterpart confirmation of the functionality of humans as temporal beings and the human possibility to phenomenologically manipulate temporality (Ross 2012: 4).

It is with this in mind that I will address the following ideas, through the writing of contemporary philosophers and thinkers, and artworks by contemporary artists: the transient being, living by the clock, production transience, consumer transience, the influence the Web and globalization has on accelerating flux, and finally routine as a means to cope.

## **The Transient Being**

We are temporal, transient beings. There is no denying that fact. Hammer (2011: 237) explains why we are so temporal:

Time is anthropologically temporalized in many ways: there are the daily biological rhythms; there is the cycle of life through adolescence and maturity to old age and death; and there is the transindividual time of periods and historical epochs. In all three contexts, the modal shape of our lives and the meaning we are able to experience will inevitably

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<sup>23</sup> Christine Ross “is Professor and James McGill Chair in Contemporary Art History in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. Her main field of research is contemporary media arts” (Ross, Christine 2016)

have a temporal dimension.

There are two main types of transience that people experience, the biological and, according to Hammer (2012) the interpretable. Our interpretation of others and ourselves is built by our “own forms of temporality”. He goes on to explain, “human life is a continuous and highly complex negotiation of existing commitments and remembrances with future demands and expectations” (Hammer 2012). So, not only are we physically transient beings living in a transient environment on a day-to-day basis but also constantly trying to negotiate our daily lives through the past simultaneously with the future in mind. We live in layers and layers of transience. It seems to be clear that it goes beyond having “temporal dimension”.

Jenny Saville<sup>24</sup>, a British based artist, explores Hammer’s ‘interpretable transience’. According to Becker (2014: 26) her work does not explore temporality “in the sense of Vanitas, but rather of omnipresence”. This is most noticeable in her work titled *Reproduction Drawing (After the Leonardo Cartoon)* (2009) (Figure 9) in which she depicts herself and her child in layered movements. Layering the drawings on a singular page creates multiple ‘presents’. “Past, present and future are woven together into a dynamic fabric that seems to virtually surround the figure” (Becker 2014: 26). Saville seems to be talking about motherhood and passing things on from generation to generation. The historical reference to Leonardo’s Madonna “points to the timelessness of the subject” (Becker 2014: 26). Saville’s compilation of images, seemingly in motion, and her subject matter of mother and child echo Hammer’s ‘complex negotiation of existence’, grappling with memories, doing things in the present while planning for the future. Saville’s marks, the layering of images and her subject matter of generations all culminate in creating a conceptually and aesthetically temporal work.

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<sup>24</sup> Jenny Saville (1970-) a British artist “is best known for her rich, naturalistic paintings of large, fleshy women, often featuring images of her own body in her work” (Jenny Saville 2016)



**Figure 9**

Jenny Saville. *Reproduction Drawing (After the Leonardo Cartoon)*. 2009.

Charcoal on Paper. 194 x 145 cm. Private Collection

Diane Victor (1964-), a South African based contemporary artist, and Jason Yarmosky (1987-), a New York based artist, both focus on Hammer's 'biological transience' in their works. Yarmosky explores issues surrounding the life cycle. In an interview with Deanna Elaine Piowaty (2013) Yarmosky explains "My paintings examine the relationship between the limitations of social norms and the freedom to explore, particularly the juxtaposition between the young and old". Yarmosky explores aging by painting elderly people who are dressed up in superhero costumes, like children. This creates a dichotomy that makes one question the aging process and what society understands and expects. "The lack of permanence and the inevitability of



aging have always been on [Yarmosky's] mind" (Piowaty 2013). He not only looks at the physical/biological process of aging, but the psychological aspect as well (Pierce 2013). This is seen in his work titled *Trick or Treaters* (2013) (Figure 10). As the title suggests this elderly couple are dressed up to go trick or treating, commonly seen as a children's activity during Halloween. By altering the norm and placing elderly people in the place of children Yarmosky forces the viewer to question their perceptions of aging, and what is believed old people can and should do. This is further reflected in the couple's stance, although they are not smiling they are relaxed and seem quite comfortable dressed up walking the streets, even though this is very uncommon. The costumes themselves are filled with symbolism: the bunny outfit references the playboy bunny outfits, girls commonly wearing bunny ears and a tail, dressed sexily, these outfits epitomize sex appeal. By putting a granny in a bunny outfit Yarmosky questions what society finds beautiful and sexy. Why can't the granny be and feel sexy, to her husband she may be very sexy. The elderly man is dressed in a batman outfit, which could reference strength and power, qualities that are not commonly linked to an old man. Social norms see aged people as weak and frail, not strong and super.



**Figure 10**

Jason Yarmosky. *Trick or Treaters*. 2013. Oil on canvas. Bertrand Delacroix Gallery, New York.

Diane Victor's work titled *Transcend series IV* (2010) (Figure 11) is created from ash and charcoal dust. It depicts an elderly lady from a frail care facility, who is seemingly dead and alive. Victor's medium and imagery speaks to biological transience. Victor's work "evokes a loss of a lifetime's accumulated wisdom, understanding and knowledge" (von Veh 2012: 34). She manages to capture a moment between life and death. "The body appears to be dissolving, enhancing the 'memento mori' effectiveness of the drawing" (von Veh 2012: 36). Her work explores ideas around the transience of not only the human body but about knowledge and experience. All that we live through and learn, for the most part, dies with us. Her uncensored, realistic representation of the elderly forces viewers to deal with ideas of aging, decay and the inevitability of death. Victor captures the moment between life and death by drawing the figure floating as if it has just lifted off the ground,

defying gravity. This implies a spirit leaving the body. The figure, which is missing a breast and has bandaged knees draws attention to the 'ugliness' of the biological aging process. This 'ugliness' contrasts the beauty commonly associated with a spirit leaving the body, which usually references the angelic, thereby humanizing the evanescent figure. The bodily abnormality and wounds imply the figure has lived through many ailments. Her age suggests that she has lived a full life and could therefore have a wealth of knowledge gained from her experiences, which of course die with her.



**Figure 11**

Diane Victor. *Transcend series IV*. 2010. Ash and charcoal dust drawing. 151 x 100 cm. Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

## Living by the Clock

If life is so transient, why don't we constantly feel like we are being swept away in a river? Why are we not continuously aware of transience? If we were, I would imagine there would be two types of people in this world, people who have an existentialist outlook that is full of despair, anxiety and dread, and those who are full of gratitude, complete satisfaction and appreciation of every transient moment, similarly to the Buddhists. However, the reality is that a large majority of society has neither approach to life and only occasionally feels the fleeting nature of time. Dr John Kotter's<sup>25</sup>, explanation for this is "that what we believe, for the most part, is highly influenced by our own personal experiences" (Kotter 2012). What we see today and in a few months' time may not seem to have changed, but it has. "Our experiences can be literally 99.5% the same" (Kotter 2012), because we only notice what directly affects us. It's not that life isn't constantly in a state of flux, it's that we sometimes don't notice it. It is not uncommon to hear comments such as 'where did this year go?' or 'I can't believe how big you are already'. Life has its way of catching up with us. Hammer, however, disagrees with Kotter. He believes we do feel the transience, especially in today's society, because we live and work by the clock, which leaves a great sense of dissatisfaction. Hammer (2012) explains two reasons for why we experience this sensation of "The modern time frame". He indicates that living by the clock amplifies the feeling of transience. "If time is understood as a succession of discrete moments, then, strictly speaking, our experience will be one of perpetual loss: every instant, every unit of time, is a mere passing from that which has not yet been to that which will never again be, and the passing itself will not endure but simply be a boundary between future and present" (Hammer 2012). It's that opportunity missed, that thing one can't take back, its life's 'no return policy' that leaves us in a state of unease.

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<sup>25</sup> Dr John Kotter is an "authority on leadership and change" and Harvard professor (John Kotter, 2016).

The world around us is rapidly changing. Bauman (2000: 28) explains that there is a:

Compulsive and obsessive, continuous, unstoppable, forever incomplete modernization; the overwhelming and ineradicable, unquenchable thirst for creative destruction (or of destructive creativity, as the case might be: of 'clearing the site' in the name of a 'new and improved' design; of 'dismantling', 'cutting out', 'phasing out', 'merging' or 'downsizing', all for the sake of a greater capacity for doing more of the same in the future – enhancing productivity or competitiveness)

## **Production Transience**

Technological progress takes place rapidly; new cell phones, new computers, new apps and new cars keep emerging as 'new and improved'. Baudrillard (1998: 25) explains, "We live by object time: by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession". These upgrades or technological and product advances are, for the most part, developed to be transient. Durability, for the manufacturers, is not of importance any more. Flaws are purposely built into products so they will need to be replaced with a better, more expensive, in-trend product. Today durability has a short time span, this is "to forget about the 'long term', to focus on the manipulation of transience rather than durability, to dispose of things lightly in order to clear the site for other things similarly transient and similarly meant to be instantly used up" (Bauman 2000: 125-126). This is reflected in cell phone contracts, and kitchen appliances, it's almost as if items are programmed to self-destruct after the warranty has expired. "Today, it is we who watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generations of human beings" (Baudrillard 1998: 25). According to Bauman "Once the infinity of possibilities empties the infinity of time of its seductive power, durability loses its attraction and turns from an asset into a liability" (Bauman 2000: 125-126). It is no longer desirable to have something old and trustworthy. We are indoctrinated to believe new is always better, no matter how irrational the purchase.

## Consumer Transience

Consumers are equally as transient as products. Baudrillard (1998: 47) says “The consumer society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to *destroy* them. The use of objects leads only to their *dwindling disappearance*”. Bauman (2000: 74) explains our consumer desires as “volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious”. Largely manipulated by the media and advertising, our desires are as fleeting as smoke in a breeze. As soon as one desire is fulfilled with a product we are quickly lured with a new ‘need’. We constantly seek gratification, often through consuming. It is rational choice that allows us to seek gratification “while avoiding the consequences, and particularly the responsibilities which such consequences may imply. Durable traces of today’s gratification mortgage the chances of tomorrow’s gratifications” (Bauman 2000: 128). Today’s society is transient in its endless desire to seek happiness through objects. Both our desires and these objects are constantly changing.

An artist who comments on consumerism is the well-known British street artist Banksy<sup>26</sup>. Banksy’s work titled *Christ with shopping bags* (2005) (Figure 12) is an example of his protest against consumerism. The aim of this artwork is “to mock the commercialisation of religious celebrations such as Christmas, but more importantly to show the hypocritical relationship between capitalist consumer culture and religious values” (Consumerism 2012). It also speaks to the commodification of religion in general. Many people make money selling statues, jewellery and trinkets of religious symbols and leaders. Christmas season is renowned for over-consumption; it has become “a time of personal gratification through materialistic consumption” (Consumerism 2012). Banksy captures similar ideas to those of Bauman stated above. Banksy seems to make commentary on companies who have commercialised religious holidays and a society that uses the holidays to consume. The dripping shopping bags

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<sup>26</sup> Banksy (c. 1974-), a British Street artists, “is the pseudonym of a “guerrilla” street artist known for his controversial, and often politically themed, stenciled pieces” (Banksy 2016)

“represent the ephemeral joy brought by material things” (Jesus Christ with shopping bags 2016). Jesus could represent society and how we sacrifice ourselves for ‘things’ that can be sold and bought, that we will forget about or throw away. Items that may have monetary value but have no personal importance.



**Figure 12**

Banksy. *Christ with Shopping Bags*. 2005. Screen print. 70 x 50 cm.

Bonhams, London

### **The Influence the Web and Globalization has on Accelerating Flux**

The Internet has had a vast influence on the speed we live at. Access to information from anywhere around the world creates faster development and trends. Bauman refers to the “time of the software world” as “instantaneous...’Instantaneity’ means immediate, ‘on-the-spot’ fulfillment – but also immediate exhaustion and fading of interest” (Bauman 2000: 118). The world may move fast, but so do we. Our focus and interests change rapidly. A major reason for this nowadays is the instantaneity of the World

Wide Web. Not only are developments and trends influenced by the Internet, but so is information. Information is so rapidly dispersed and readily available, allowing new information to add onto and quickly replace the old, although not all of this information is “correct”. The platform is used to feed incorrect information as a point of manipulation towards a secret agenda.

The artist, Jon Rafman<sup>27</sup> comments on the spread of digital information and questions the right of people and/or companies dispersing this information and the influence they have on society. He does this by selecting and curating images taken from Google Street view on Google maps (Figure 13). According to Rafman (2009) Google Street View is “consistent with the company’s mission “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful””. Cars, equipped with nine cameras fixed to the top of them, drive around, supposedly, every street of the world photographing the surroundings. This allows people to search any part of the world on Google maps and virtually navigate their way through the streets. Rafman (2009) explains, “we are bombarded by fragmentary impressions and overwhelmed with data, but we often see too much and register nothing”, this is exactly what Google maps street view does. It photographs everything, thousands and thousands of streets, systematically, devoid of human interference. Any human interaction or ephemeral moments captured by the cameras are entirely coincidental and insignificant for Google’s cause. Rafman believes that Google undeniably frames our perceptions of the world (Rafman 2009). He states:

in reasserting the significance of the human gaze within Street View, recognizes the pain and disempowerment in being declared insignificant. The artist/curator challenges Google’s imperial claims and questions the company’s right to be the only one framing our cognitions and perceptions (Rafman 2009).

Although Rafman doesn’t comment directly on the transient nature of information being replaced with something new, he delves into issues around the influence this readily available digital information has on society. This

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<sup>27</sup> Jon Rafman (1981-) is a Canadian born artist. He has participated in a number of shows nationally and internationally at prestigious galleries. (Jon Rafman 2016)



overwhelming amount of information, which is constantly being added to, is transient in nature. As new information appears the old is quickly forgotten or goes unseen. Rafman believes that the overload of information is too much to even register. The change of information on the Internet is so rapid, and it is a major modern influence, that 'we' change with it.



**Figure 13**

Jon Rafman. *Unknown* (From *Nine Eyes* series).

### **Routine as a Means to Cope**

With all this speed, how do we stay in control and not be completely overwhelmed? One coping mechanism, or a manifestation of every day temporality/ephemerality, is routine. It gives us a sense of control over the unpredictable, temporal world. While change has always been an integral part of societal structures, and has rapidly grown with globalization, we still seek routine as a means to control our lives. Sennett (1998: 44) explains, "Routine can demean, but it can also protect". Routine can make our lives seem stagnant and stale but it can also protect us. By the same token life without repetition or routine is completely pointless. "To imagine a life of momentary impulses, of short-term action, devoid of sustainable routines, a life without habits, is to imagine indeed a mindless existence" (Sennett 1998: 44). This

creates a strange dynamic: we use routine to protect ourselves from living spontaneously, as nature seemed to intend us to do, but at the same time if we lived without habits life would become meaningless. There would be no reason to do simple things. This would make survival near impossible and cripple growth and development in society.

We have always been transient and existed in a state of temporality. But it is without question, as shown by these contemporary thinkers, that today's society experiences transience like no other. There are a number of different dimensions in which we experience it; we live in transience; we are aware of our biology and consequential death. And in modern day society we are more aware of this in our preoccupation with living by the clock. We experience temporality through the products we buy, through our unquenchable desires and needs. We see it in our natural and urban environment. Development and change is rapidly increased thanks to readily available, and extremely transient, information through the World Wide Web.

Contemporary artists see and explore similar themes to the contemporary thinkers referred to above. My examples of contemporary artists support this claim. Jenny Saville explores Hammers 'interpretable transience', Jason Yarmosky and Diane Victor look at biological transience, Banksy comments on the transient consumer, and Jon Rafman on the influence of the internet on our transient lives. Each artist has attempted to explore these themes to understand aspects of our contemporary reality. They do this for the same reasons as the Process Philosophers. They see that transience is the fundamental nature of life and therefore a concept that helps them understand the reality they are living through.

It is no surprise that many contemporary artists have chosen to explore temporality and transience in their artwork. One of the characteristics of contemporary art is the artists' specific use of a particular medium to convey meaning. Although the artists discussed above work in a variety of media, this

study focuses more specifically on artists who use paper as an integral part of their work. It is therefore important to explore the connotations of paper before detailing the work of my selected artists. The following chapter details the history and relevance of paper as a medium that speaks to transience and temporality.

## Chapter Three

# An Exploration of Transience in the work of Selected Paper Artists

Today the craft of paper-cutting, folding and sculpting is practiced throughout the world. Contemporary artists, including myself, have appropriated and transformed these crafts to create contemporary works of art. Ian Samson<sup>28</sup> said, “Without paper our lives would be unimaginable” (Samson 2012: xii). Owen Gildersleeve<sup>29</sup> echoes Samson’s statement when he said, “paper is one of the most important inventions in the development of human civilization” (Gildersleeve 2014: 6). This momentous invention has not only transformed and moulded our lives into what we know, it has shaped our history and art. In this chapter I will first argue that paper is the optimal medium to explore themes of transience and temporality in contemporary art, because of its influences and transformation of our history, the lives we lead today and the art world. I also argue that the physical characteristics of paper add to the appropriateness of this medium for exploring transience and temporality.

This chapter then discusses the work of selected artists; Peter Callesen, Mia Pearlman and Jodi Carey, to provide evidence of contemporary artists using paper as a medium to explore themes of transience. I have chosen these artists as they provide the best insight for this investigation. These artists all see transience and temporality as a reality of our existence. Although explored diversely they all interrogate these terms in an attempt to understand their reality, similarly to that of the process philosophers. The selected artists have also been influential to my own art practice. These artists exhibit a diverse and innovative use of paper.

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<sup>28</sup> Ian Samson lectures at Queens University, Belfast and is writer in residence at the BBC Northern Ireland. He is an author of both fiction and non-fiction books. (Ian Samson 2016)

<sup>29</sup> Owen Gildersleeve “is an artist based in London, specialising in handcrafted illustration, set design and art direction.” He is known for his use of paper, and has won numerous awards. (Handcrafted Design and Illustration 2016)

## **Paper as a Medium to Speak to Themes of Transience**

Since paper's invention in China in the second century, during the Han Dynasty (History of Paper 2013), it has been central to the development and transformation of many concepts that have shaped the world we live in today. It has been used in numerous inventions, such as lining the inside of the first hot air balloons, aiding the invention of airplanes and in developing advertising as we know it. The introduction of paper to Europe, in the twelfth century, led to an increase in the production of books, which resulted in a rapid spread of knowledge. Gildersleeve elaborates, "over the millennia, it has helped humanity to spread information across the globe through printed text and imagery, allowing communication across cultures". It has not only helped with the spread of information but "over the past five hundred years, paper has helped to create and define landscapes" (Samson 2012: 41). Economies and economics were built on paper thanks to the invention of paper money (Samson 2012: 41), which is incredibly central to our daily lives. Our built environment, for example, exists because of paper, "architecture has been, for most of our history, a paper profession. When imagining a house, architects have traditionally done so on paper" (Samson 2012: 101). Paper has morphed, moulded and transformed the world we live in today, it has touched and changed our lives throughout history, and continues to do so today. Because of this, paper epitomizes transience and temporality as it is responsible for so much change.

We live in a digital age, and we have heard time and time again, we are, or will soon become, a paperless society. But will we really? Evidence indicates otherwise. Paper is still extensively prevalent in today's society. Everything that is important happens or is captured on paper. Samson explains that even in today's digital age:

Without paper, we are nothing. We are born, and issued with a birth certificate. We collect more of these certificates at school, and yet

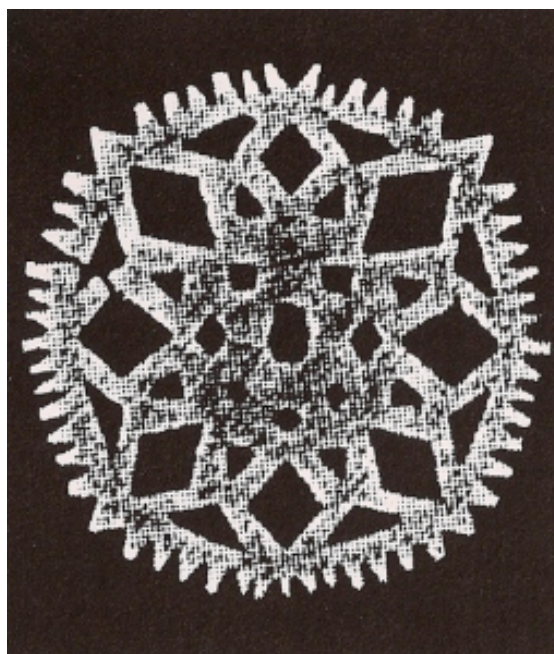
another when we marry, and another when we divorce, and buy a house, and when we die (Samson 2012: xix).

Every important event is captured on camera, often printed out, diarized, newspaper cuttings stored, birthday dates are jotted down and any other “scrapbookable ephemera of our lives” (Samson 2012: 184) are kept and stored to solidify a temporary event; to act as an external hard drive to our memory, a backup in case we forget. Paper not only plays a role in important events, it is used to package almost every product we buy and thus features in our daily lives.

Paper, in all of its mundanity, is such an interesting and rich, yet inexpensive, artefact. It has the ability to be and not be so many things; it exists in numerous dichotomies. Schmidt and Stattmann (2009: 10), for example, describe paper as being “simple and unsophisticated, ephemeral and fragile”. And yet it has the ability to be extremely complex. Depending on how you use it, it is extraordinarily sophisticated and very robust. It “may be a priceless artefact – a painting or manuscript – or a piece of litter” (Samson 2012: xx). Paper is flat and as two-dimensional as an object gets, yet it has the ability to be folded, cut and transformed into the most incredible three-dimensional objects. It is no surprise that paper has inspired and become so many artists’ chosen medium, including my own. Mademoiselle Maurice, a French paper artist (in Anon 2014: 4) explains: “It may seem obvious in our daily lives, but paper contains numerous hidden treasures and beauty. Many artists do not see it as a simple object of consumption, but transform it into artistic creations with the appreciation of each of its features”. It is this complexity, diversity, and ephemerality that makes paper the optimal medium for speaking to themes of transience and temporality.

Paper hasn’t only transformed our history and our daily lives but the art world as well. The art world would be unimaginable without paper. “One might easily construct not only a history of modern art but also a history of modern politics

from artists' work on paper" (Samson 2012: 127). It is said that paper became important to the arts in the fifteenth century through artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer. But through traditional crafts it has been in use since before the Renaissance. The traditional craft of paper cutting, for example, has been in existence for thousands of years (Heyenga 2011: 9), originating with the Chinese who invented it (Angrave 1981: 11). Chien-chih (jian-jeh), which means paper cutting, or K'e-chih (kuh-jeh), which means paper carving (Das 2015), came into existence soon after paper was invented. The exact date is unknown, as paper cutting was not held in the same regard as calligraphy or painting, so there was no attempt at its preservation (Cameron 1976: 4). One of the five oldest paper-cuts to be found was discovered in a Xinjiang archaeology site and dates back to 486-581 CE (Berliner 1986) (Figure 14). Paper slowly spread throughout the world along the trade routes and with it each country created its own unique form of paper craft. Contemporary artists, including myself, have appropriated and transformed this craft along with other paper crafts to create contemporary works of art.



**Figure 14**

Artist Unknown. 486-581 A.D. *Untitled*. Paper. Provenance unavailable.

Paper was central to many important artists throughout our history and because of it we are able to learn from and archive some of the most historically important artists' work we have come to admire. "Until the beginning of the nineteenth century all artists' paper was handmade – because, of course, all paper was handmade. It was therefore expensive" (Samson 2012: 118). It is because of the expense that even "established artists were not likely to waste paper on mere sketches and drawing" (Samson 2012: 118). But artists such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) were exceptions, "Leonardo da Vinci was arguably the first artist to develop a style on paper in the late fifteenth century, through his process of continual, incessant sketching and drawing" (Samson 2012: 119). He drew on paper not just to develop ideas, but as a means to understand human form (Figure 15). Because of this his ideas were captured and allow us, centuries later, to explore and understand who he was as a person, an artist and inventor. It also allows insight to the history and period he lived in. Paper, unlike any other material or medium before, allowed artists to revise, revisit and refine artworks before creating the final masterpiece (Samson 2012: 119). According to Samson, paper helped define and create da Vinci as an artist, "Leonardo didn't just think on paper he thought *through* paper. Paper was not the preliminary to other work. It *was* the work" (Samson 2012: 119). It can be argued that because of da Vinci's use of paper many artists soon followed, transforming the arts as we know it. This process allows us to not just see and learn from artists' final products but through insight into their process.





**Figure 15**

Leonardo da Vinci. *The Surface muscle of the neck and shoulder*. 1508-1510  
 Pen and Brown ink with wash over black chalk. 29,2 x 19,9 cm. Royal Library  
 Windsor Castle

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), another prolific artist who is said to have helped shape the art world into what it is today, transformed the way we currently think of and use paper in art. He “went through a paper phase earlier than anyone” (Samson 2012: 124). He was one of the first influential artists to use paper not just as a substrate but as a creative medium. This is seen in his early collages (Figure 16) and assemblages (Figure 17). “The use of paper as an art medium in modern times originated in Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque started using newspaper cuttings and scraps of wallpaper for their collages” (History of Paper 2013).



**Figure 16**

Pablo Picasso. *Man with a Hat*. 1912. Cut-and-pasted newspaper and coloured paper, ink, and charcoal on paper. 62.2 x 47.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 17**

Pablo Picasso. *Guitar*. 1912. Paperboard, paper, thread, string, twine, and coated wire. 65.4 x 33 x 19 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) was possibly the first artist known to use paper cutting as a medium to create what one could consider contemporary art. He shifted from painting to, what Matisse (in Malbert 2006: 56) described as, “drawing with scissors”. Henri Matisse started and ended his art career with paper, interestingly both through illness. He created his first artwork on paper while in hospital, with appendicitis. He later reverted to paper, this time not creating works of art on paper but with paper. “The remaining few years of his life he devoted entirely to cutting paper” (Samson 2012: 121). Elderfield (1978: 7) explained, that to Matisse, one can achieve more feeling through cutting than you can through any other medium. Matisse was like a "sculptor releasing an imagined form from inside a block of marble or stone" (Elderfield 1978: 7). His paper-cuts were simplified and naive. His use of vibrant, colourful paper emphasizes this (Figure 18).



**Figure 18**

Henri Matisse. *Blue Nude (II)*. 1952. 116.2 cm × 88.9 cm. Tate, London.

Paper is, today, many contemporary artists' chosen medium. Thomas Demand, a paper artist, explains that for him "paper is the material of temporary notations. It doesn't make a big difference whether this is in writing or is three dimensional...it's a strange anything-material that can be anything, but rarely itself...Basically it's the 'Zelig' of all materials" (Samson 2012: 128). Paper is not always the easiest medium; it has its challenges and difficulties, largely because of its ephemerality (Samson 2012: 183). But for many, as I will discuss in the following chapter, this enhances the meaning of the work. The ephemera of the medium is precisely why artists choose to use it. Basbanes (2013: 296) explains:

Rarely do we think of paper as anything other than a material of pure utility, a marvel of happenstance that functions best when attracting no attention whatsoever to itself. While certainly this is true for the most part, there are some notable exceptions in which paper stands out on its own and becomes more than just a medium and very much a part of the message.

In particular, paper is the optimal medium to speak to themes of transience and temporality. There is no other medium, material or artefact that has transformed history, our lives and our art world as much as this mundane medium. If change is a prime characteristic of both temporality and transience, then there is no better medium to express these themes. Its physical properties of being malleable, ephemeral and fragile are the reason I have chosen to focus on paper artists who explore ideas of transience and temporality in their work. The selected contemporary paper artists and their exploration of transience and temporality will be discussed below.

## **Transience in the Work of the Selected Paper Artists**

Peter Callesen is a Danish born artist. He has studied at Goldsmiths College, London, in 2000, Det Jyske Kunstakademi, Århus, Århus Art School (Foundation Course) and Århus School of Architecture in 1993 (Biography 2012). Callesen's years of studying across disciplines is evident in his work, from performance art to drawing and finally paper cutting, for which he has become internationally known.

Mia Pearlman is a New York based artist. She received her BFA from Cornell University in 1996. She has exhibited extensively both in and around New York and internationally. Although she majored in painting, and uses other media such as blown glass, Pearlman is commonly known for her large-scale paper-cuts of cloud-like forms (Rocchi 2011).

Jodie Carrey is a London based artist. She was born in 1981 and completed her BA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College in London. She then continued onto her Master's Degree at the Royal College of Art in London in 2007 (Carey 2016). She has participated in a number of solo and group shows both locally and internationally. Although Carey is known to use a variety of techniques, materials and media in her work, ranging from traditional sculpture media to blood and bone, I will be focusing on her works made from or incorporating paper.

Whilst all the selected artists work with paper, the different qualities of the medium play a critical role in the concept and technical development of their work. "Paper holds the rare combination of qualities" (Nørskov 2009: 32) that allow it to be used in a number of ways. It can be folded, torn and creased as well as being lightweight. The most prominent characteristic of a paper-cut is its fragility. It is impossible for an artist not to acknowledge these attributes when creating paper artworks. The selected artists often highlight, or contrast, these attributes to strengthen their concepts. It is the transient nature of their conceptual underpinning, their medium and their process that drew me to the

following artists, and it is these elements that I will discuss below.

## Conceptual Approach

Although these selected artists all use paper as a medium, their exploration of transience is rather diverse. This is further emphasized by their choice of subject matter. According to Whitehead (1978, 81) everything is in a state of continuous process, only reaching a state of completion when it perishes. The selected artists explore both the state of things being in a continuous transience or process, as well as that moment it perishes (particularly in the form of death and human life) and the repercussions thereof. This section details each artists' conceptual exploration highlighting a few commonalities.

According to Nørskov <sup>30</sup> (2009: 16) “faith, hope and failure” are the key concepts that Callesen investigates in his work. His works have a ‘romantic vein’ that runs through them. Callesen “portrays the moment when dreams and reality meet. He creates pictures of the fantastic dreams of childhood and the meeting with the inevitability of reality” (Nørskov 2009: 15). Lindhardt<sup>31</sup> (2009: 7) explains that although Callesen’s work is seemingly carefree there is an “undercurrent of severity”. The humour in many of his works lighten the in-depth exploration of temporality of life, or as Lindhardt (2009: 8) puts it “life on the term of death”. “The ambiguity that frequently inhabits Callesen’s work often makes it all the more grotesque” (Lindhardt 2009: 7). It is this exploration of temporality of life that I will focus on in the selection of artworks by Callesen.

*Down the River* (2005) (Figure 19) is an example of Callesen’s use of dreams intersecting with reality and impending death. The figures, which are on a romantic boat ride, are completely unaware of the inevitable plunge down a

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<sup>30</sup> Anni Nørskov is the exhibition curator at Kolding School of Design, Denmark (Annie Nørskov Morch, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Tine Lindhardt is a Danish Theologist and lecturer. She was “selected to the office of bishop of Funen diocese” in 2012 (Tine Lindhardt 2016).

waterfall that lies ahead of them. Callesen (in Nørskov 2009: 16) explains:

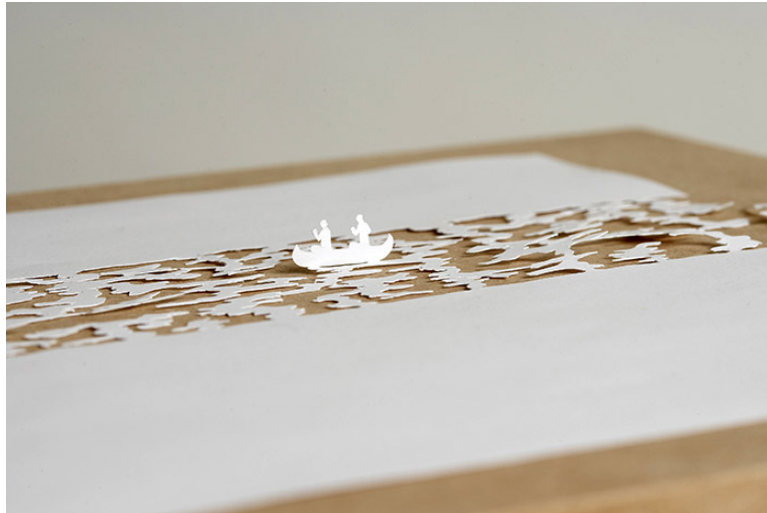
I work with the poetical and the seductive, which in some cases thematically border on the religious and the meeting with the impossible. I am interested in seducing the viewer and creating a space, pointing towards the sublime and toward a potential disappearance and death, bordering on something 'Unheimlich' [ghastly].

It is this temporal space between the 'sublime' and "a potential disappearance and death" that Callesen captures in his work, which makes it so potent; it encapsulates our existence. We are all in a rowing boat merrily floating through life completely unaware of what lies ahead, inevitably heading towards our death. Callesen manages to capture these morbid concepts of reality and life with humour. In my view this not only reflects the artist's outlook, but all of humanity's outlook on the transience of life. It is always easier to deal with weighted issues light heartedly, especially those we cannot control.



**Figure 19**

Peter Callesen. *Down the River*. 2005. Acid-free paper and glue. 21 x 29.7 cm. Provenance unavailable.



*Down the River, Detail*

Life, death and the afterlife are recurring themes that invade Callesen's work. A pertinent example of this is in one of Callesen's larger works titled *Fall* (2008) (Figure 20). The transience of life is very apparent in this work. Callesen reflects "on the relationship between life, sin and the after-life" (Rathje<sup>32</sup> 2009: 78). This work shows a tree that is formed by the negative space left from the cutting process. The positive cut out takes the form of a skeleton, joined to the base of the tree. According to Rathje (2009: 78) the apple tree "symbolizes sprouting and budding life" and also refers to "the tree of Knowledge whose fruits were part of Man's downfall". The skeleton symbolises death and mortality (Rathje 2009: 78). Religious symbols are common in Callesen's work. He uses these symbols to help interrogate themes of mankind's existence and inescapable demise that are often disguised as failures.

Within the symbolic representation of *Fall*, Callesen has created an image that links man and nature. Ironically man is presented as a skeleton while nature continues unaffected, whilst in life man is doing the harm to the environment. This idea links back to Whitehead's morals; that we must understand that what we do has effects on our environment, "that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us" (Mesel 2009: 9).

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<sup>32</sup>Gerd Rathje is the director of the Museum of Religious Art in Lemvig, Denmark (Holtze, 2013).





**Figure 20**

Peter Callesen. *Fall*. 2008. Acid-free 140gsm paper and glue. 210 x 240 x 70 cm. Provenance unavailable.

The second selected artist is Mia Pearlman. Pearlman's works make reference to weather systems "frozen in an ambiguous moment". According to Tiong<sup>33</sup>, Pearlman calls her installations "her mediation on creation, destruction, and the transient nature of reality" (Tiong 2010: 121). Pearlman uses "ideas of weather as a metaphor for the tenuous nature of existence" (Pearlman 2011: 96). I was attracted to Pearlman's work because of her ability to capture a moment in time, a cloud form or a wave about to morph into something new or into nothing. To me she is a contemporary Impressionist, and although her cloud forms are largely fabricated, she manages, as the Impressionists did, to capture the essence and fleetingness of nature. But her work is, as she intended, so much more than a mere impression or a moment captured in time. It is about "invisible forces much bigger than us that we can't control, from weather to terrorism to the stock market to death" (Pearlman in Hasher 2011). Whitehead (1978, 69) states, "every act of becoming there is the

<sup>33</sup> Tiong is a Journalist that interviewed Pearlman for the Home Concepts Magazine

becoming of something with temporal extension”. This speaks to Pearlman’s invisible forces that create havoc in our lives. We cannot control them or the inevitable repercussions of these forces. In an interview with Rocchi (2011) Pearlman states “My work is about forms constantly in flux, just like life”, this is evident in her work titled *EDDY* (2008) (Figure 21).



**Figure 21**

Mia Pearlman. *EDDY*. 2008 India ink, Paper, Paperclips and Tacks. 27.94 x 31.75 x 35.56 cm. Sears Peyton Gallery, New York.

Pearlman’s forms in her cloud-like installations are purposefully, visually transient in nature. Pearlman states (Pearlman in Davidson 2009) “I am interested in those moments in which it’s impossible to tell if a form is contracting or expanding, coming or going, etc.” The ambiguity of form reflects the flux of life or the “constancy of change” and our inability to control it. “The ephemeral form of the work reflects the ideas within” (Pearlman in Davidson 2009). “These sculptural and often glowing spectres appear frozen in an

ambiguous moment, bursting through walls and windows, or hovering within a room” (Tiong 2010:121). One can clearly see these ambiguous forms in her work titled *Eye* (2008) (Figure 22).



**Figure 22**

Mia Pearlman. *Eye*. 2008. Paper, India Ink, tacks, paperclips. 304,8 x 329, 2 cm. Centre for Recent Drawing, London.

The third selected artist, Jody Carey, focuses on the “fragility and vulnerability of human life” in almost all of her work (Robinson, 2012). She explores this through themes of “time, memory and materiality, absence and loss, of time passing and memories fading” (Robinson 2012). Neilson (2009) explains that Carey highlights the human nature of dealing and ignoring the “incomprehensible occurrence” of death. The works she creates are

“monuments to an inevitable process” (Neilson 2009). Street<sup>34</sup> (2016) said, “Carey’s works embody time’s passing”, seen in her work titled *The Daily Mail - Arrangement One* (Figure 24).

Although the selected artists’ conceptual exploration of transience differs, there are some commonalities. Both Peter Callesen and Jodi Carey reference *memento mori* themes in many of their works. Much of Callesen’s work presents “fresh suggestions for modern *memento mori* pictures which have served throughout the history of art to remind us of the transitoriness of life” (Lindhardt 2009: 26). An example of this can be seen in his work *Alive, but Dead* (2006) (Figure 23). The wilting flowers in *memento mori* paintings are clearly represented in this work. He, however, manages to take *memento mori* themes of the transience of life further. The only way to create the living flowers in their prime is through the cut-out, indirectly creating wilting, dying flowers. This speaks to the life cycle. From death there is always life and vice versa. The monochromatic quality of the cut-out creates a sense of memory, what once was. Again having a rather romantic idea of death, even after we die our lives will have left an impression, that in its own way lives on.

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<sup>34</sup> Ben Street is an Art Historian, lecturer and educator at a number of Universities. (Ben Street 2016)



**Figure 23**

Peter Callesen. *Alive, but Dead*. 2006. Acid free paper, glue, gouache colour and oak frame. 127 x 94 x 11,5 cm. Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Carey is known for her large bouquets of flowers made entirely from newspaper (Figure 24). Flowers are, according to Robinson (2012), seen as symbols of life and a celebration of vitality, especially when given as gifts. “Yet ironically, once flowers are cut, they are already dying, creating a potent symbol of mortality which is deeply rooted in the history of art” (Robinson 2012). Memento mori and Vanitas paintings during the Baroque period used wilting flowers in still life paintings for exactly that reason. They were a reminder to the viewer of their mortality, the transience of life. Carey, similarly to Callesen, uses flowers as Memento mori and Vanitas artists did, but manages to put a contemporary twist to this old idea. Street (2016) explains:

Jodie Carey's elaborate sprays of faded foliage have, at first, an elegiac look, like bouquets for an event long forgotten. Their colours are wan and blanched, enacting the theme of life's transience that underpins the floral still life tradition of artists like van Huysum and van Os (Street 2016).

It is hard to view the work without seeing the historical reference. But Carey manages to push the work out of that context into a contemporary setting by creating extremely large flower arrangements only found at functions such as funerals. The use of flowers at funerals was originally to mask the smell of decay, but Carey contrasts this idea, by coating the flowers with blood, the fragrance of these flowers would surely not mask but enhance the stench of decay. Williams<sup>35</sup> also believes she contrasts the flower's use at funerals with the use of newspaper "here, in contrast, the 'flowers' aggravated the stench of old news – of bad news that won't go away and our unsuccessful attempts to smother it all" (Williams 2009).

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<sup>35</sup> Gilda Williams is an art critic and teaches at Goldsmiths College, University of London. (Gilda Williams 2016)



**Figure 24**

Jodie Carey. *The Daily Mail - Arrangement One*. 2005. Newspaper, stained blood, tea and coffee, wire, oasis, concrete urn. 185 x 110 cm. Saatchi Gallery, London.

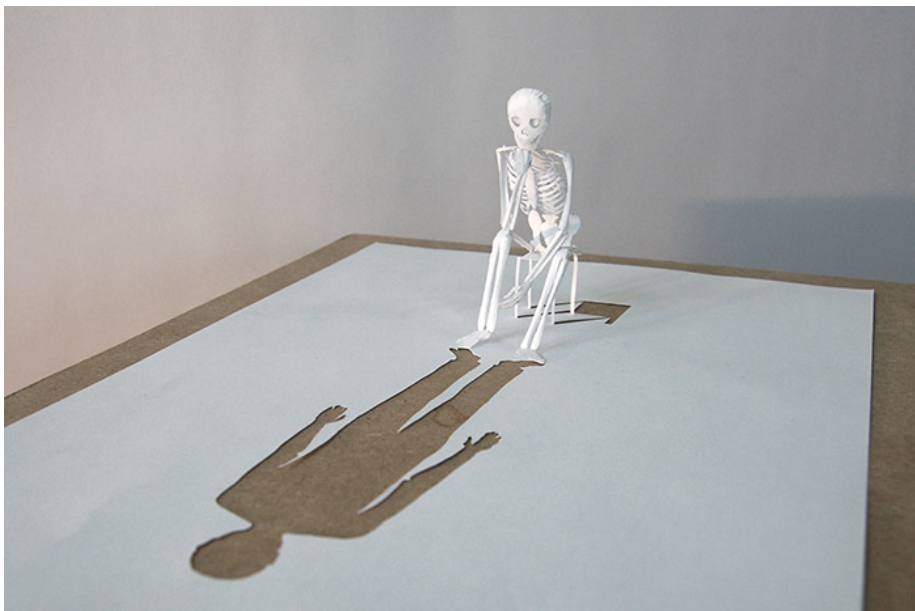
As in memento mori paintings, not only flowers but, skulls and skeletons are a recurring feature in many of Callesen's work. They are sometimes used humorously, as seen in his work *Cut to the Bone II* (2008) (Figure 25), and at other times, as a symbol of death as seen above in his work *Fall* (2008) (Figure 20). He often uses skeletons similarly to memento mori works; as a reminder to the viewer that life is transient and one must live without regrets, this is seen in his work *Looking Back* (2006) (Figure 26). In this work we see a skeleton gazing down at a cut out silhouette of a figure, presumably the skeleton's once alive body.





**Figure 25**

Peter Callesen. *Cut to the Bone II*. 2008. Water colour and pencil, Acid free paper, glue and oak frame. 139 x 107 x 13 cm. Bruun Rasmussen, Copenhagen.



**Figure 26**

Peter Callesen. *Looking Back*. 2006. Acid free paper and glue. 21 x 29,7 cm. Provenance unavailable.



## Medium

As mentioned before, paper is the dominant medium for all the selected artists and is central to their work. This was the main reason for my selection of them for this research. I have also argued that paper is one of the optimal mediums to speak to themes of transience and temporality. This section highlights my selected artists particular usage of paper and how it, and any other medium they use, aids in supporting their conceptual exploration of transience.

Peter Callesen's highlighting of the fragility in his paper cuts can be seen as "a poetic gesture to the transience and impermanence of beauty" (Peter Callesen-Unfolded 2007). Nørskov (2009: 16) noted that:

In his paper works Peter Callesen demonstrates that the flatness of paper can rise into a living three-dimensional picture. The pictures he creates out of paper are multidimensional in the sense that there is both a positive and a negative form, in which the silhouette, the absent picture, is often the most intense expression. Similarly, the unfolding tale is equivocal, stretched between the strivings of hope and the gravity of reality.

This is most apparent in the work titled *Transparent God/Gennemsigtig* (2009) (Figure 27).



**Figure 27**

Peter Callesen. *Transparent God/Gennemsigtig*. 2009. paper and glue. 350 x 450 x 170cm. Provenance unavailable.

Paper is central to Pearlman's art practice not only for its pliability, which allows Pearlman to create such dynamic installations, but also because of its transience and temporality. When speaking about her medium, in an interview with Anna Hascher (2011) Pearlman stated "I love the fact that paper is ephemeral, that it will change" because "the work is ABOUT the fact that everything is always in flux, and so is the material. Not everything has to last forever, even art---because ultimately, nothing will". For Pearlman, paper best reflects her concept; the flexibility/changeability of paper is just like a cloud form, an exhibition or anything in life. Pearlman states "I think of my work and my process as a balance between chance and control: paper provides an element of chance that is integral to this work" (Pearlman in Davidson 2009).



**Figure 28**

Mia Pearlman. *Maelstrom*. 2008. Mixed media. 365,8 x 3,4 cm. Smack Mellon, New York.

As with the above artists, the material Carey uses is of great importance. “The sense of transience is carried through in [her] material(s)” (Street 2016). According to Shea<sup>36</sup> (2014) Carey works with paper because of its ephemeral quality; It degrades over time. Carey predominantly works with newspaper. Neilson (2009) feels that Carey’s use of newspaper, specifically the Daily Mail, “holds an experience that is both communal and individual at its core”. The newspaper is distributed communally but the act of reading it is personal. This dynamic relationship of communal and individual or universal and personal is a dominant theme in Carey’s work. Life is lived communally but at its core, is very individual, and so too is death. Everyone will die, but one dies alone. “Today these printed papers disseminate many of the most harrowing images of death that we experience. The still image is somehow more acceptable than the moving when it comes to the depiction of human devastation” (Neilson 2009). Still images, possibly, dehumanize devastation and/or death, making it easier for us to deal with them. This precise idea of man’s impulsive censoring of death is what Carey is exploring in her work. The newspaper is an immensely transient object, it is read and then disposed of and sometimes recycled; it is an apt object to use to talk about ideas relating to death, the life cycle, and emotions leading up to and surrounding dying. The importance of the newspaper is seen in her works named after the Daily Mail, such as *The Daily Mail - Arrangement Two* (2005) (Figure 29).

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<sup>36</sup> Clair Shea is the Director of the Cass Sculpture Foundation in West Sussex, UK. (Clair Shea 2016)



**Figure 29**

Jodie Carey. *The Daily Mail - Arrangement Two*. 2005. Newspaper stained with blood, tea and coffee, wire, oasis, concrete urn. 185 x 110 cm. Saatchi Gallery, London.

Carey doesn't just stop with the newspaper; she stains her flowers with blood, coffee and tea. "The domestic inference of the tea and coffee seems to evoke death's presence in daily life" (Street 2016). The use of paper gives the flowers a crisp dried up appearance, seemingly dead and forgotten but amazingly still intact. This creates an interesting dynamic of preservation and death. The monochromatic tones of the flowers made from the tea, blood and coffee stimulates a sense of memory, while at the same time evoking something forgotten. The staining of the flowers and use of blood "pulls the work into an intimate and unsettling sphere" (Street 2016). The blood evokes suffering, "it nods to the reality of illness and bodily decay, running as a counterpoint to the flowers' elision of the actuality of the end of life" (Street 2016).

The idea of the mundane is central to all of Carey's works. Not only are some of the acts of creating her works purposefully mundane but so too are the

materials and items used in creating her work. These include flowers, lace, chiffon, bone, found objects and newspapers. “Her interest is in the consistency of such materials, as part of the everyday fabric of our lives; but also on their fleeting materiality as individual objects” (Shea 2014). The materials therefore enhance her themes of transience of both everyday life and human life. This can be seen in her work *Untitled (Still. Life)* (Figure 30). In this work, she incorporates a cabinet, lying on its side, as a pedestal for the bouquet of flowers. The flowers are placed on and in the sideways piece of furniture. The everyday object, found in many homes, turned on its side becomes unusable. A Bouquet placed on top of the object simultaneously memorializes the object and the imagined deceased person.



**Figure 30**

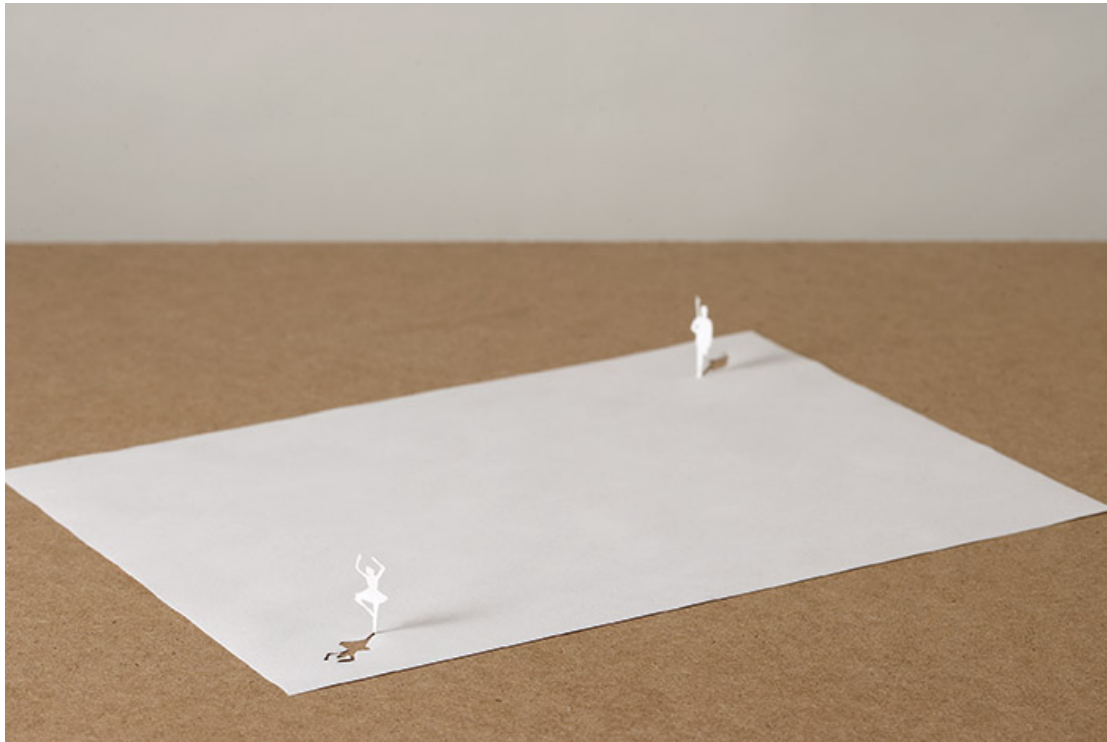
Jodi Carey. *Untitled (Still. Life)*. 2008. Mixed media. 200 x 120 x 120cm. Alexa Goethe Gallery.

## Process

Art making is dynamic. The viewer normally only sees the end product, and is not privy to the journey that got it to that point. For many artists, as with the Process artist Robert Morris discussed in Chapter 1, the selected artists and myself, the physical process of making the work plays a large role in the end product. It is prevalent in the success of the communication of the concept and therefore the success of the work. This focus on, and importance of, the process of making to enable understanding of the final product is similar to the concepts of process philosophy; the process of anything is fundamental to understanding its existences. This is explained when Whitehead states, “every ultimate actuality embodies in its own essence... its becoming” (Whitehead 1978, 28).

Callesen’s medium, as mentioned above, plays a large role in conveying his themes. The fragility and manipulability of paper is a perfect medium to reinforce ideas of inevitable death and living on the edge. Many of Callesen’s works not only speak to themes of temporality and transience, but are physically temporary. They are sometimes created specifically for an exhibition and are then destroyed. Other works are temporary as they are “a mere sneeze away from disappearing in their original form” (Nørskov 2009: 28). Often, as seen in Callesen’s *The Impossible Meeting* (2005) (Figure 31), the entire artwork is created with a simple fold of the paper, turning a two-dimensional image into three-dimensions. The impermanence and fragility of the fold, seemingly a simple gust of wind could collapse the ballerina and the soldier, makes the work and the title all the more poignant.





**Figure 31**

Peter Callesen. *The Impossible Meeting*. 2005. Acid Free paper and glue.  
29,7 x 21cm. Provenance unavailable.

Callesen's performance pieces further emphasize his concerns with temporality. Not only is the work temporal, due to its performativity and time restrictions, but Callesen explores ideas of impermanence and transience, as seen in his performance work *Castle* (1999) (Figure 32). In this work Callesen dressed up like a king and found an empty grass area to build a castle made entirely out of tape and cardboard boxes. He persisted for 10 days to create this castle but it inevitably "collapsed in the rain" (Lindhardt 2009: 23). This artwork encapsulates his theme of faith, hope and failure. By making a structure from such an ephemeral material it was doomed to fail from the beginning. The bigger he built the castle and the wetter the environment got the more the castle collapsed. This artwork resonated with me as it spoke of mankind's relentless desire to counter the inevitable temporality of existence. It also expressed that even man-made structures, which are seemingly solid and robust are often considered symbols of strength, but will inevitably erode with time.



**Figure 32**

Peter Callesen. *Castle*. 1999. Performance. Goldsmiths College. Provenance unavailable.

Pearlman works intuitively in both the process of making and the installation of her artworks (Heyenga 2011: 10). In an interview with Leda Cempellin for *Juliet Art* magazine (June 2014: 85) Pearlman stated “My work is entirely site specific, my response in real time to space: the dimensions, architecture, light, traffic flow, other artworks, etc.”. Her installations are extremely ephemeral; they are created very intuitively in the gallery for a specific exhibition. They are “based on spontaneous decisions in the moment” (Pearlman 2011: 96) and then taken down “never to exist again, which gives them a quality of performance: to see them you had to be there” (Pearlman in Cempellin 2014: 85). Pearlman explains that this adds to the essence of her cloud forms “Existing only for the length of an exhibition, this weightless world totters on the brink of being and not being, continually in flux” (Pearlman 2011: 96). Pearlman often reuses paper pieces in different works allowing her work, much like cloud forms, to morph and take on a life of their own, adapting to its environment, “metamorphosing into a new state of being.” (Pearlman in Hascher 2011). This is, to a degree, true of nature and people; one never



stays the same throughout a lifetime because the world around us is in constant flux, we have to change and move with it.

Carey not only confronts themes of transience through her process of art making as well. Quality, skill, time, labour and the materiality of her works are without a doubt central to experiencing her work. Through her meticulous craftsmanship “Carey offers beauty whilst simultaneously confronting us with the ugliness of life” (Still Life 2008). For Carey, the process of making the art object is close to, if not of the same importance as the product in itself. According to Shea, “it is extremely important to her that she be able to exercise control over the process, much like the ‘process art’ of the mid-1960s. In Carey’s works, the end product always directly relates to the process” (Shea 2014). This cannot only be seen in her meticulous work in creating paper flowers but in the act of arranging the flowers (Figure 33). This act of flower arranging reinforces the idea of death being inescapable, through its mundanity. Carey finds solace in this inevitability by setting out to “celebrate the signs that record that invisible female life – in the arrangements of flowers” (Williams 2009).



**Figure 33**

Jodi Carey. *The Daily Mail*. 2005. Newspaper, blood, tea, coffee, concrete urn. Dimensions variable. Saatchi Gallery, London.

## Conclusion

I selected these three contemporary paper artists for the diversity of their exploration of temporality and transience: Callesen for his humorous investigation of man's inevitable demise and the inexplicable, relentless need to persist against the inevitable; Mia Pearlman for her micro investigation of transience and temporality, not of life and death but of moments, reflected in a single morph of a cloud. Jodi Carey was selected because of her completely opposite interpretation of transience to Peter Callesen's. Her approach is more sombre and her exploration makes use of funeral flowers, blood, coffee and tea. But, as discovered through the research, these artists are unified in many ways. This is seen in: Callesen and Carey's incorporation of memento mori themes, to remind the viewer of their mortality; the artists' use of paper and other media to strengthen and reinforce concepts of transience; their process of art making, emphasized in their final product, which accomplishes a physical and conceptual transience. But most importantly, although conceptually they may differ, they are all attempting to highlight and examine different aspects of human existence; whether the persistent nature of our personality, despite the odds of the transient world, the fragility of human life, or using moments to examine the transient nature of reality. They are unified, like the Process philosophers, in seeing human existence through transience. I too share similar approaches in my body of work as a way of exploring themes of transience. This will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four

# An Exploration of Transience in my Art Practice

This chapter consists of a reflective discussion of my art practice (2013-2016), which includes an analysis of my work, various working processes and conceptual underpinnings. My art practice has been largely influenced by my life experience, supported by research. The selected artists, discussed in chapter three, have been both significant and inspirational to my practice.

My work explores transience within urban spaces. It attempts to interrogate dichotomies such as construction and destruction, life and death, manmade and nature, development and deterioration and the tensions created by these incongruities. My exploration is an endeavour to understand my reality and my existence, in a similar manner to the aforementioned process philosophers' ideas and my selected artists. I achieved this by examining transience in the context of the binaries mentioned above.

The imagery I use is drawn from my surroundings, mostly referencing construction sites, often in conjunction with natural forms. I have focused on construction because of its brutality and beauty. For me, construction and the processes around it are an apt subject matter to use as metaphor for the complexities of life's transience. The process (of building) is often far more interesting than the goal or completed work itself, which in this context works as a truism to life itself.

This body of work was influenced by two main factors. The first was my previous path of visual enquiry. I explored a view of life within suburban spaces; suburbia, being the middle ground between the city and nature, the public and private, ergo the space 'in between'. I focused on threats to suburbia as well as suburban paranoia caused by these threats. I referred to

these threats by using the language of the objects that represented the defence mechanisms as well as the suburban ideal: patterned foliage, barbed wire, pylons, concrete and decorative wall surfaces, which all began to speak a common visual language, especially when cut from paper. Once isolated in the artworks, this referenced the many barriers we create between ourselves as individuals and the outside world (Figure 34). Although I have moved on from the theme of suburbia, similar imagery seemed to re-emerge in my new body of work, specifically the intricate man-made structures such as fences and internal metal frameworks of buildings. The environment I live in is, and clearly has been, hugely influential for my art practice; from the insides and outsides of suburban houses and cityscapes, to the creation and the processes of building. Through reflecting on my art-making I intend to interrogate the complexities and contradictions that exist by looking at a transient world.



**Figure 34**

Karla Nixon. *Placemats*. 2012. 19,5 x 25 cm each. Paper cut-out on placemats and pins

The second influence on this body of work was the immediate experience of death. The close involvement during the last days of my beloved and dying grandmother, her vanishing body functions and the experiencing of her final moments changed my perspective and evaluation of life. This forced me to reflect on life's transient nature, particularly our biological transience.

In the beginning of this study I was, and currently still am, on a life threshold. Big decisions relating to my future career and private life need to be made. I started to reflect on these decisions in the context of transience. Unlike the experience of the death of my grandmother I realized there is still so much more to come, more to change. All these important decisions would greatly mould my personality. I believe this was the first time I fully grappled with what I only was able to articulate through the course of this study, as Hammer's (2012) 'interpretable transience' (discussed in Chapter 2).

Even the subject matter of my artistic practice is deeply rooted within my personal experience. Building and remodelling was an important part of my childhood memory of my family. It was a family task, never outsourced. These experiences of physically watching and being part of transforming the houses we lived in influenced my initial interest in the imagery. My brothers' involvement in construction management of big projects such as roads and shopping centres was a further influence. Both my brothers and their sites have been a major source of subject matter, materials and guidance, as many of my images and objects are sourced from construction sites they are/were working on. My brother's involvement in construction work influenced my art making.

My initial interest in paper as an art medium began in the third year of my Diploma (2011), after being given a brief to create a stencil. While researching stencils, I came across a street artist named Swoon (Figure 35). Her paper-cuts gave me a new outlook on paper. I began to see it as a medium with endless possibilities, opposed to a substrate for traditional art practices. In my perception of art, I have always felt aesthetic appeal and skill should be the first order of concern, followed by concept. Both are to my mind inseparable, but the order may vary depending on the artist. As a result, I viewed paper-cutting as an appropriate discipline to achieve this. It demands precision and control due to paper's fragility. The use of silhouetted shapes and patterning



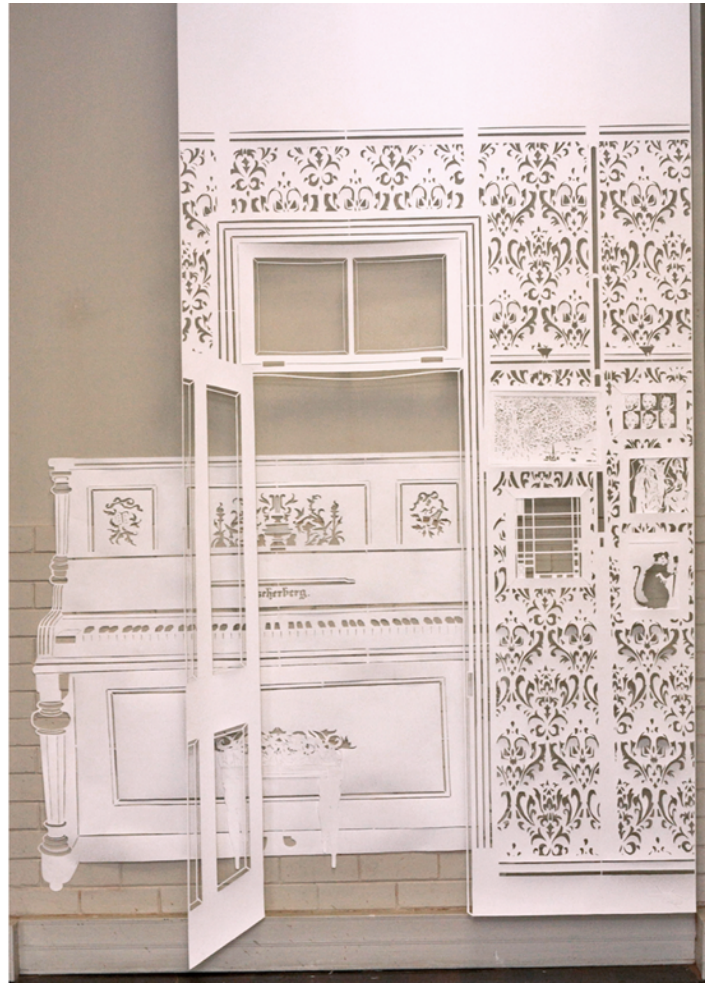
lend themselves to paper-cutting, making the technique a seductive medium.

Paper is central to my practice because of its fragility, it's everyday usage, recyclability, and because it is one of the most consumable commodities of our time. I make use of it as my primary medium whether it is cut, embossed or sculpted. This choice of medium refers to the fragility of the transient state of our lives and our environment. The more the paper is cut into, the more fragile it becomes.



**Figure 35**

Swoon. *Unknown*. 2008. Size variable. Mixed media. San Francisco.



**Figure 36**

Karla Nixon. *Untitled*. 2011. Hand cut Fabriano. 300 x 198 cm.

When I began paper-cutting in mid 2011 I focused on the subversion of suburban ideals (Figure 36). This, as detailed above, led me to my current body of work, which attempts to tackle the complexities of the transient nature of existence. I attempted to do this through three seemingly distinct aspects of reality: the self, the natural environment and the man-made environment. I explore the complex relationship they have on each other, the differences and the commonality of each existing in a state of transience. Below I argue that I too, like the selected artists, explore themes of transience. As with my selected artists, it is the transient nature of my conceptual underpinning, medium and process that I will discuss below.

## Conceptual Approach

As mentioned before, this body of work explores transience within urban spaces, using imagery from and relating to construction. It attempts to interrogate dichotomies such as construction and destruction, life and death, manmade and nature, contradictions and deterioration and the tensions created by these dichotomies. While creating this body of work and exploring these dichotomies a number of themes emerged. These include: negotiating transience and our desire for transience and change.

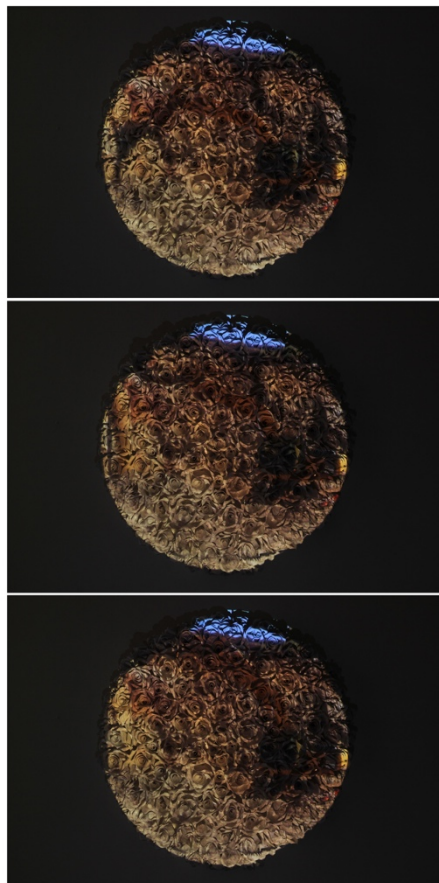
### Negotiating Transience

We exist in a state of transience, biologically and interpretably. We grow and develop and then age and degrade. Through these processes we change and transform physically and mentally. It is these ideas that a number of my works explore.

Within this topic there are a number of works that attempt to interrogate the negotiation of life and the inevitability of death. An example of this exploration is seen in the work titled *Delicate Grind* (Figure 37). This work looks at our biological transience, particularly the moments surrounding death. This work, similarly to the work of Jodi Carey, is an arrangement of flowers that are reminiscent of funeral flowers. Instead of the roses forming a bouquet they are placed in a circular shape alluding to a funeral wreath. This reference to funerals is emphasized by the white rose, which is the most common funeral flower, symbolizing remembrance and purity. Like Vanitas paintings and Jodi Carey's work, it intends to remind the viewer of one's mortality. The wreath serves as a projection surface for a video installation, which is of a looped video of CAT construction machinery working on a construction site. The machines continuously break down and move rocks and gravel. The beauty and fragility of the roses has been contrasted with the ugliness and robustness of the subject matter of the video. This aims to encourage us to



confront the ugliness of death and the relentless grind of life. As Rescher (1996) explains, life is simply “a manifold of continual change, engaged in an inexorable transit leading from birth through maturation to decline and destruction”. As with building, the process of creating our life is ironically filled with destruction. We throw out the old to create space for the new and work hard to improve our social standing at our body’s peril. Like the construction vehicle, we spend our entire life working. The vehicle’s movements, however, seem almost graceful, like a dance that shows the sense of beauty in the process, the beauty in the life cycle and the process of existence. The circular shape of the roses reiterates this, in its harmony and representation of the cycle of life.



**Figure 37**  
Karla Nixon. *Delicate Grind*. 2016. Mixed Media. 65 x 65 cm.

The complex negotiation of life is also seen in a work titled *Yesterday* (Figure 38). During the course of making this body of work, although exploring ideas around transient existence, I tended to only imply the human element. On occasion a figure is featured, but is of little importance to the overall work. However, I felt that to speak about our transient existence without showing the human element in this body of work would be a missed opportunity. As this body of work is conceptualised from my lived experience, and my interpretation of existence, I felt it apt to turn the lens on myself. The resulting work was a self-portrait titled *Yesterday* that I hope the viewer will identify with. The viewer can easily replace themselves for my portrait and become the essence of the work.

*Yesterday* is created by ripping and removing the smooth layer of corrugated cardboard, revealing the corrugations. The work focuses on the destructive aspect of creation and the balance between these actions. The destructive action of tearing away, similarly to the 'destructive' action of cutting away seen in my other works, is contrasted by the act of creation that is achieved through this process; In this case, the creation of the self-portrait. This dichotomy of destruction in order to create becomes symbolic of the complexities of existence. Physically and mentally one grows and develops with age. But, at a certain point, biologically, one's physical being does the opposite. Birthing a child, for example, is a creation of life, but the process of carrying the baby for nine months often damages the mother's body. Nature is no different, one thing dies or gets eaten for another to survive. Every transient moment is replaced by another; this is reflected in Whitehead's writing (1978, 69), but he substitutes 'transient moment' with 'act of becoming', and is always proceeded by a 'temporal extension'. This is important in making us who we are.

The image has rips of paper half attached to imply that the work is still in process, or incomplete. While it has this effect, if the ripping processes were

continued the figure would be entirely lost. The implication of incompleteness references transience, and our mortality. The brown colour of the corrugated image evokes a feeling of loss and of memory. The minimal, flat colour and implied features reinforce this; as though the figure has already disappeared, leaving behind a ghost-like memory.

The corrugated cardboard, which is used for packing and protecting fragile objects, speaks to the emotional and physical fragility of a person. We are not immortal, soon all that will be left is a memory.



**Figure 38**

Karla Nixon. *Yesterday*. 2015. Torn corrugated cardboard. 91 x 145 cm.

Biologically we are transient beings. This means aging is inevitable, but sadly not regarded as optimal. The elderly often become an unwanted burden and are often neglected. It is this neglect and decay that *Eventually* (Figure 39) attempts to explore.



**Figure 39**

Karla Nixon. *Eventually*. 2016. Hand cut Hahnemuhle Paper. 93,5 x 72,5 cm.

*Eventually* is a paper-cut artwork of a broken-down garage door. Although not evident in the image, it is a scene in the midst of new, expensive property development. This extraordinary decaying garage door is situated in one of Durban's newest developing areas, and is close to one of our biggest tourist attractions, uShaka Marine World. The entire area is built for the financial elite containing accommodation and commercial properties. Somehow, this decaying garage door, slowly succumbing to the sea air, gravity and its overly packed contents, has slipped through the cracks. The 'beauty' of this destructed object seemed to embody my conceptual interests. This object is

going through the opposite kind of transformation intended for the new developments being built around it.

The image of the garage door, when cut out of paper, became abstracted as it was stripped down to its essence. The marks created in this work were, for me, different to other works, as the cuts were small and fragmented. The action of cutting made me the disease, the rust, eating away at the page. The more I cut, the more fragile the page became. The garage door stays connected to the page by thin strands of paper. In the same way as the actual garage door, the page is barely holding itself up.

The attributes of this work's content resonate with some of the work by both Diane Victor and Jason Yarmosky. Aging is not generally considered beautiful. The elderly, frail and unimportant are often placed in old age homes and neglected by their families. The garage door has received the same treatment, neglected for the new and improved developments around it.



Aging is always followed by death. Death, being a physical and conceptual epitome of life's transience, became a recurring concept in a number of works. An example of this can be seen in *Renovation* (Figure 40)



**Figure 40**

Karla Nixon. *Renovation*. 2015. Mixed media. 54 x 21 x 12 cm.

*Renovation* (Figure 40) is a paper sculpture of a bird, hanging limp from a metal hook that is attached to a block of cast cement. The emphasis of this work is on death and decay. The bird is made entirely from paper. The body of the bird is partially covered in feathers, revealing the framework/armature of the sculpture. The white armature alludes to bones, suggesting that the bird has been dead for some time. Both the size and the colour of the bird is similar to that of a pigeon ('a city rat with wings'). Pigeons are one of the few animals that have managed to adapt and coexist with man in the city, even after we destroyed its natural habitat. This speaks to the resilience of the animal, how it has adapted, transformed and changed, and continues to do so in a state of transience to survive.

The metal hook, line and concrete hanging device that suspends the bird makes reference to the urban environment. Despite the bird's resilience it has still managed to find its demise in the clutches of man, and our obsession to build and develop despite the consequences. The title *Renovation* echoes this. The cement block, seemingly pristine and clean on the top seems to be decaying and broken on the bottom. Cement is used for its strength and longevity in the construction of buildings, yet even something made to last can't escape the inevitability of transience.

The work as a whole was inspired by, and therefore references, Vanitas still life paintings; specifically, the paintings that feature dead birds (Figure 41). In these Vanitas works, the birds are often hunted and hung, similarly to this work, from the leg. Like all Vanitas paintings this device was used to remind the viewer of the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death. By using the pigeon, and a bought hook and wire, I attempted to contemporize these works. Although this work directly incorporates a historical reference, the ideas are still pertinent today.



**Figure 41**

Jean-Baptiste. Oudry. *Nature morte avec trois oiseaux morts, des groseilles, des cerises et des insectes*. 1712. Oil on Canvas. 31 x 23,5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Agen, Agen.

Another work that deals with similar ideas of death, but focuses more on the concept of memory, is a work titled *Builder* (Figure 42). This work attempts to be a reminder of the past, remembering the people who changed and transformed our urban environment before us, and the people before them.



**Figure 42**

Karla Nixon. *Builder*. Concrete tissue paper and glue. Size variable.



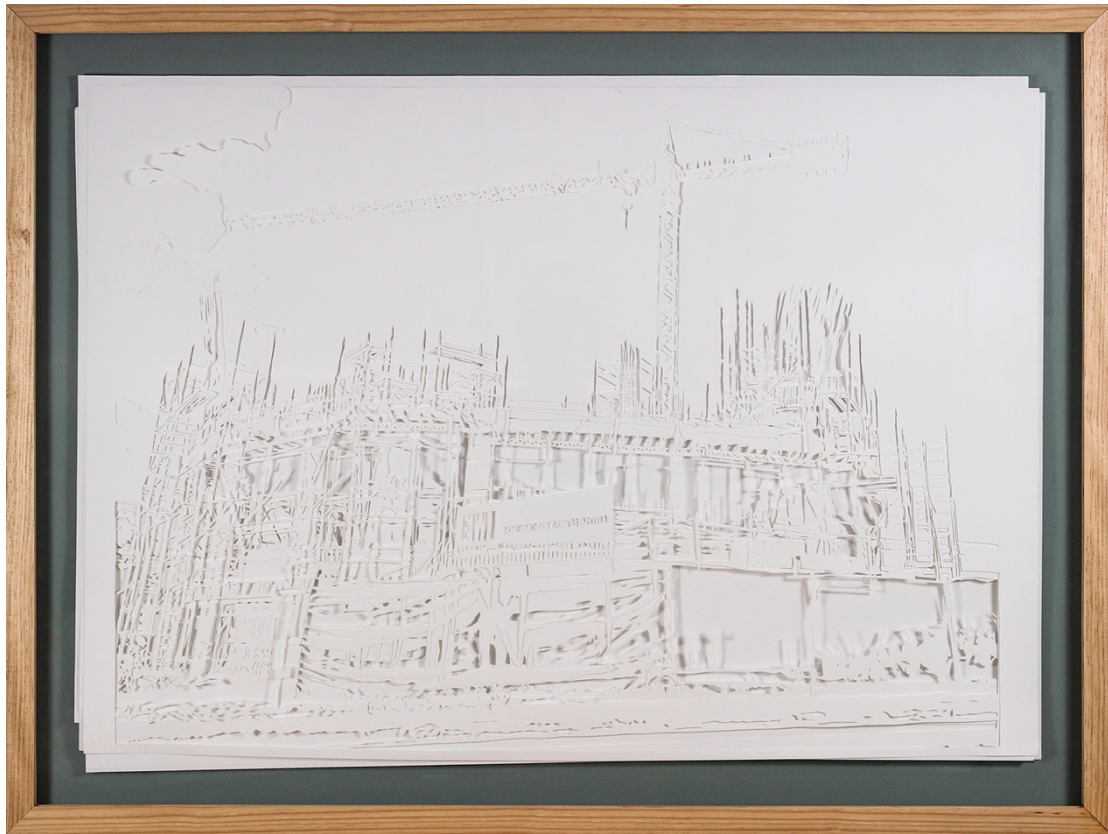
*Builder*, Detail.



*Builder* is a work that, turns the focus on to the people who assist in transforming and building our urban environment as we know it. It is a sculptural installation that comprises of one construction hard hat made of white tissue paper placed on a concrete platform. This work is paired with an unorganised pile of tissue paper hard hats. The concrete platform is made up of nine square concrete blocks, each further divided into nine equal parts by way of an indented grid. The nine blocks are arranged to mimic the pattern on the individual blocks. The aim is to emphasis the inherent grid pattern. This pattern undeniably resonates with the modernist grid. According to Margarita Tupitsyn (2009) "In Western art history the grid has been positioned as an emblem of modernism". But perhaps more specifically it references city maps and urban spaces. The hard hats represent the transient lives that have passed through the urban environment to make it what it is today.

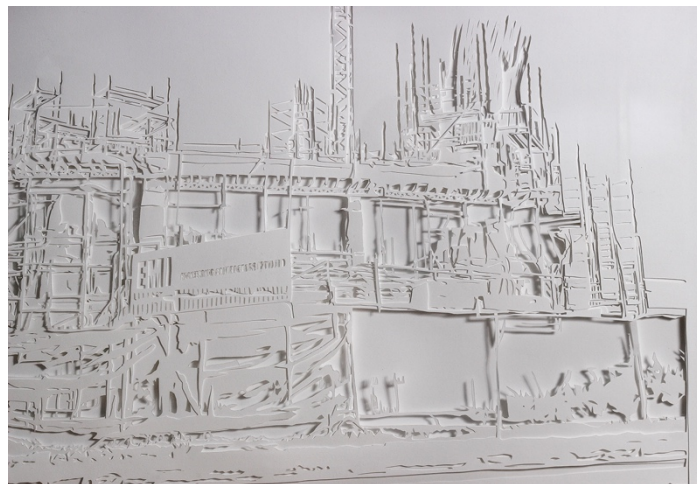
The fragility of the tissue paper used to make the hard hats, which are meant to protect, renders the helmets completely useless for their purpose. This is symbolic of our fragile, transient existence and being, despite or attempts to control or resist these aspects. The translucent hardhats have an ethereal quality, that gives a sense of memorialization. The singular hard hat, contrasted with the pile, speaks to both our transient desires and general way of life; there is an endless cycle of discarding and replacing.

Negotiating transience is complex and continuous, although most obviously seen in death, our entire life is a series of change and development. *Develop* (Figure 43) explores the transient nature of building, which is symbolic of becoming who we are as people.



**Figure 43**

Karla Nixon. *Develop*. 2016. Hand cut Fabriano and glue. 87,3 x 116 cm.



*Develop*, Detail.

*Develop* is a multiple layered paper-cut artwork of a building in the process of construction. The layers, the subject matter and the purity and whiteness of the paper, were important of the success of this work. I will expand on these concepts below.

The layers of the artwork became a representation of the transient nature of the building process, each layer is part of a whole, and brings clarity and detail to the image. The building in the process of being built is both a physical example of transience as well as a more metaphorical example of our existence, which is created through layers of lived experiences.

In this artwork, the imagery of a building has been frozen in time, halfway through construction. The subject matter being what it is, implies that there is movement, that change is about to take place. In this way, this work, and all my paper-cuts, are similar to Mia Pearlman's frozen cloudlike forms. We have both used static objects that give a sense of transience and a fleeting moment captured.

The process is central to the work, the more I cut away the more the image appears. I cut, and in a sense destroy, the page to create an image. The cut paper weakens the rigid page. Each layer has more and more cut out of it, making the pages increasingly fragile. The potentiality of it ripping or breaking reinforces the ideas of transience. The use of fragile cut paper contrasts the strength that the building represents. The entirely white artwork gives an impression of a memory or something left behind, a ghostly feeling that reinforces the idea of inevitable transience.

## Transient Desires

Construction is no longer just about providing shelter, a necessity. Building development is seen throughout the city. Often perfectly good buildings get knocked down, to provide space for a new building. This happens for many reasons; the growing population and housing demands, functionality or for mere aesthetics. Regardless of the reasons, the outcome is the same. Zigmund Bauman (2000: 28) said, we destroy and change, for greater capacity to merely repeat the same thing. It is ideas around this concept of obsessive development that influenced a number of works.

Our obsessive development is often ill considered of the surrounding environment. Construction and development of urban spaces has taken its toll on our natural environment. The work title *Finding the Cracks* (Figure 44) attempts to explore both man's relentless desire for development and the effects it has on nature.



**Figure 44**

Karla Nixon. *Finding the Cracks*. 2016. Paper, Glue and concrete. 36,5 x 33 x 126 cm.



*Finding the Cracks, Detail.*

*Finding the Cracks*, seen above, is a sculptural work that speaks about the conflicts between the man-made, built environment, and nature. It is made from a standard ream of A4 printing paper. I drilled a hole through the entire stack of paper, sealed it and finally filled the hole with cement, to create a pillar like form. The ‘pillar’, placed right through the ream, removes the original purpose of printing paper. A pillar, designed to be a supporting structure, becomes redundant and doesn’t support anything. This speaks to the transient nature of man’s desires and obsessive need to build and transform, no matter the cost. The grass, growing from the once natural object references the persistence of nature and its ability to survive and resist despite the many changes man has made to the natural landscape. Ironically, the grass is made out of paper, which is made from trees; this transformation of trees to paper adds to our abundant waste, destroying our environment and our existence. According to Samson the “world paper consumption is now approaching a million tonnes per day – and most of this, after its short useful life, ends up in landfills” (2012: 25). The continued environmental destruction will leave us with heaps of useless products, such as paper, which won’t be useful in an uninhabitable environment.



Another example of a work that explores our obsessive desires for transience in development is seen in the diptych titled *Before and After* (Figure 45).



**Figure 45**

Karla Nixon. *Before*. 2014. hand-cut Fabriano. 104 X 79,5 cm.



Karla Nixon. *After*. 2014. hand-cut Fabriano and spray paint. 109 x 79 cm.

This diptych comprises of two paper-cuts, both of construction sites. The work titled *After* is of a bridge being constructed, it is a pale blue paper-cut with a dark, almost black, background. The dark background gives a sense of night time. Whilst the second paper-cut of a desolate and abandoned construction site is white with a light blue background, which gives a sense of the light of day. Day and night are an interesting concept in itself as it is a manifestation of time and therefore of transience.

The titles *Before* and *After* imply states of transience. The first implies that something is going to happen and the second implies that something has just happened, but the vague imagery becomes unclear as to which really came first. *Before* is of a site in the beginning stages of construction, it appears abandoned, in a state of neglect and decay, almost apocalyptic. The lack of figure, or living thing gives the image a sense of loneliness and yet it was actually in a state of development. Where *After* is very clearly being developed. Both images are in the same process, but appear to be at opposite stages, this is representative of the cycle of life, and our existence.

Both of these works are made from a single sheet of paper, which is then box framed to allow the work to cast a shadow, adding a third dimension to a two-dimensional artwork. This speaks to the false illusion of simplicity in our existence, which is actually a complex negotiation of transience. The shadows reinforce the idea of transience; they are fleeting, constantly changing and transforming depending on both object and light.

Another example of a work that explores our desires for change and development and the relationship it has with nature is seen in the work titled *Out of Flight* (Figure 46).



**Figure 46**

Karla Nixon. *Out of Flight*. 2015. Mixed media. 99,5 x 22,5 x 92 cm.



*Out of Flight*, Detail.

*Out of Flight*, seen above is a sculptural installation that includes six fragile dead paper birds laid in an orderly fashion on a metal scaffolding plank which is held up by one trestle leg. This work is a comment of the destructive force of man's development. Mankind has destroyed much of the environment and



killed a lot of nature in the name of progress. The trestle leg and scaffolding plank that the dead birds lie on references the process of building, the built environment and man's detrimental effect on our natural environment. The birds are all created out of white paper and glue, some have volume and details whilst others are flat and two dimensional with the form merely implied. This was done so as to create a sense that they are each in a different state of decay. At the same time the birds seem almost alive, with wings spread out unable to do what's natural to them, take flight. I have used multiple birds to speak to the experience of death in a similar way to Jodi Carey's use of newspapers, being communal yet private. The different birds suggest that death and transience, although experienced alone, are experienced by everyone. The birds placed in a neat row on the scaffolding plank give a sense of order, which speaks to man's futile desire to control the uncontrollable, to command transience. A scaffolding plank usually used to build, create and support is instead used to display death and decay.

## Medium

As mentioned, paper is central to my art practice. As with the selected artists, I find it the optimal medium to explore themes of transience because of its fragility, transformability and banality. But, paper is not the only medium that I use in this body of work. Pairing paper with other materials, particularly materials used in and around construction, created interesting dynamics. Paper, which is not commonly known for its strength, is coupled with materials known for being robust. The pairing often highlights the fragility of paper, reinforcing ideas around transience. But sometimes, like in the work titled *Shaped* (Figure 47), all of the materials begin to speak the same language, and this reflects the inevitability of everything going through transience.



**Figure 47**

Karla Nixon. *Shaped*. 2016. Concrete, steel, paper and wood. 29,5 x 20,5 x 21 cm.

This work is symbolic of the process philosophers' belief that everything, without exception, exists in a state of transience. Whitehead states this when referring to an 'eternal object', which can be interpreted as anything and

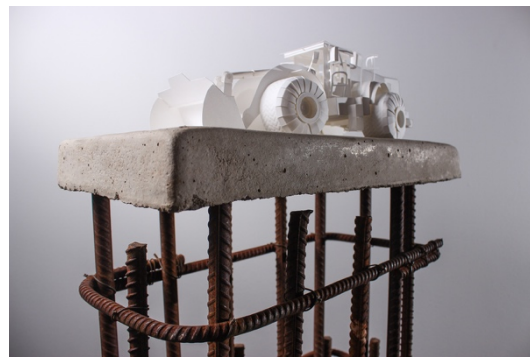
everything. He states, “That an eternal object can be described only in terms of its potentiality for ‘ingression’ into the becoming of actual entity” (Whitehead 1978, 23). The ‘becoming of’ means that the object is in a state of transience and it is only through its transience that we can describe and understand it. This work attempts to strip down both concept and medium to their essence. I used the basic materials utilized in construction and my dominant medium, paper, by treating all materials in the same way, giving them the same shape and form, they all began to speak a common language. This commonality implies that despite the individual characteristics and functions of each material, they are all the same. All objects, the steel, the wood, the cement and the paper have been manipulated to be the same size – that of a ream of A4 paper, in order to emphasize this point. Despite the strength of concrete and steel, the natural form of wood and the fragility and mundane nature of paper, they all went through, and still will undergo, transience. These materials will degrade and perish. Although seemingly so different, the materials in this work are known and used because of their transient qualities and ability to be transformed and manipulated.

The contrast of materials to reinforce ideas of transience can be seen in the work *Heavy Load* (Figure 48). The work consists of a paper front loader, which is placed on a plinth made out of reinforcing steel, sourced from a construction site in Durban. The steel framework is made in the same style, material and technique used in construction.



**Figure 48**

Karla Nixon. *Heavy Load*. 2015. Fabriano paper, glue, concrete and steel. 40 x 56 x 130 cm.



*Heavy Load*, Detail.

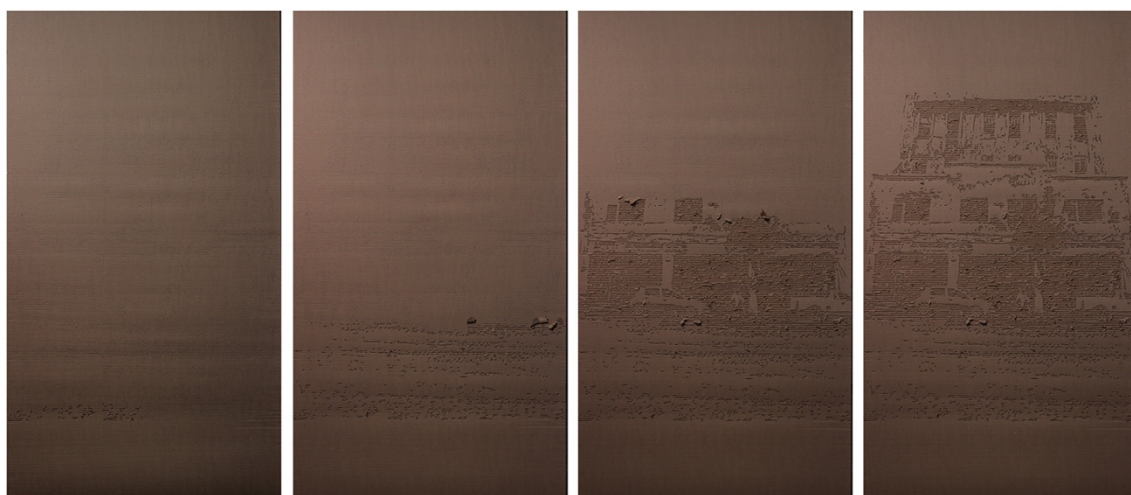
The steel frame supports a small concrete slab, which becomes the base for the paper sculpture. The purpose of the construction vehicle, which serves to handle heavy loads and to move the very material it rests upon, is subverted by constructing it out of fragile paper. The construction vehicle embodies ideas surrounding construction, development and progress, yet the vehicle can achieve none of these. The lack of ability on the part of the paper sculpture is meant to resonate with the underlying concept.

The plinth, made from robust heavy materials, used for its longevity and stability, supports an extremely light fragile sculpture. This references our relentless attempts at prolonging and stopping transience, whether a personal endeavour attempting to stop aging, or in our environment, rebuilding, repairing and renovating. This work comments on the extraordinary, yet futile, lengths people are willing to go to achieve permanence.

The steel framework, which in construction is usually completely covered by cement, is left exposed. Exposing the steel to the elements speeds up the process of rust and deterioration. Even an object that carries the illusion of strength will ultimately succumb to transience. The rusting steel bars intrigued me as a construction material, as this decaying object is used to build and create a new object.

This grouping of material and imagery seeks to highlight the processes of building, the materials and ultimate redundancy.

Although paper is used in some form or another in every work in this body, it is not the only medium I used to speak to ideas around transience. Video artworks also feature in this body of work. One of these is a recording of construction machinery digging and set on a continuous loop. This is seen in *Delicate Grind* (discussed previously) and the other a stop-motion animation of a building emerging and disappearing titled *Moved* (Figure 49) (discussed below). Both works are transient in nature not only because of the subject matter and concept but because of the transient nature of video. Both events shown on these looped video installations are documentation of events that have past, and will never again be repeated.



**Figure 49**

Karla Nixon. *Moved*. 2016. Video installation Stills. Size variable.

*Moved* is a stop-motion animation, of a derelict building, found in Durban. It is significant that in the animation the same building reappears time and time again. In reality, the designs of buildings may change but it is just another building, occupying the same function as before. This work was influenced by, and reflects Bauman's (2000: 28) statement, we destroy and change, "all for the sake of a greater capacity for doing more of the same in the future ". The animation shows the process of the building being built and then vanishing as the process is reversed. The building, like many of my artworks that use buildings, comments on our built environment and the processes that

continuously happen within a city. This in turn transforms the city that we once knew. Due to property development, new buildings are constantly being built, which in turn means old buildings are constantly being demolished or revamped. As with the cycle of life, everything that is built with one generation will age and then often be replaced with new ideas by the next generation. This is reflected by the looped video. We see the building being created and just as quickly destroyed again.

The choice of medium is equally as important. The corrugated cardboard references packaging and removal boxes; both relate to the process of moving objects from one place to the next. This evokes ideas of change. Corrugated cardboard is used to wrap and protect fragile objects. This particular medium is used to emphasize the fragility of the building. The layered construction of corrugated cardboard allowed me to rip one layer off revealing the corrugation. This action of ripping, a rather violent gesture, is symbolic of the destruction and decay of the built environment.

The form the artwork takes as an animation, further emphasizes the exploration of transience. The animation changes the focus from the finished product to the process of creation and destruction. This reflects the ideas proffered by process philosophers; process, rather than physical objects, best represents existence. Whitehead explains this when he states, “its [anything in existence] ‘being’ is constituted by its ‘becoming’”. This is the principle of process” (Whitehead 1978, 23) and the main principle of process philosophy.

## Process

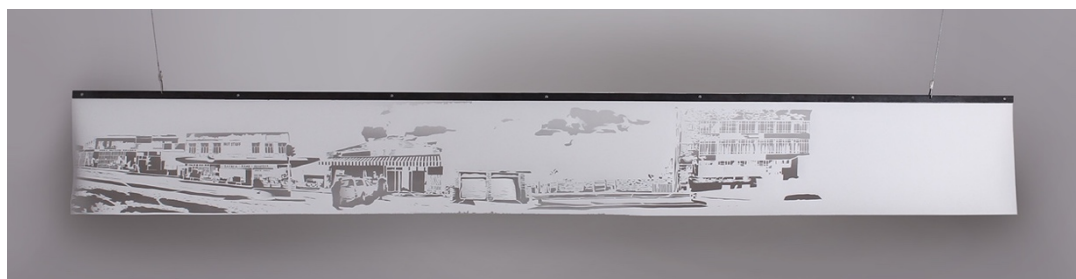
My process of creating a work is often as important as the final product, although not always plainly evident in the final presentation of the work. Paper cutting and sculpting is quite a technical medium. Through my experience the viewer is almost always first fascinated by the process of creating the work before unpacking the conceptual underpinning. This is largely because of the use of unconventional art techniques and mediums, and the fragility of the art work. Instead of fighting against this, it became important for me to consider the process that the viewer goes through. Conceptually, it became rather fitting. Considering that in almost all my work I use building as a metaphor for life's processes and transient nature. The viewer's attempt to unpack the process of creating the work is similar to my artistic exploration, when considered metaphorically.

I enhanced the concept of unpacking the art making process by making the process more visible in some of the works. This is seen in *Out of Flight* (Figure 46), exposing the inner woven structure of the detailed bird and the more gestural shapes of the other birds. *Renovation* (Figure 40) is another example of the conscious decision to leave the process of sculpting visible, exposing the framework. *Moved* (Figure 49), is a stop motion animation, that allows the viewer to watch the process of the image being created, and then disappearing on a continuous loop. This work, which is the process of making on display, is probably the type of work one would assume would feature more in my body of work, as it speaks directly to my chosen theme. Instead many works, other than the ones mentioned, are 'complete' works preserved in frames and presented on plinths. This preservation was a conscious choice for two reasons. The first being a personal choice; A painter makes use of paint to explore a multitude of themes. In some cases, the paint speaks to the concepts being explored, at other times it does not. For me, paper has been my selected medium of choice. The second reason for completing and preserving rather than creating physically ephemeral artworks to explore themes of transience is because I believe it is conceptually fitting. The



obvious route of physically ephemeral work is not, to my mind, a true reflection of how one experiences transience. As discussed in chapter 2, we don't necessarily see life as transient while it happens. So instead I chose to focus on a more metaphorical representation by capturing glimpses of life's processes. In this way, I preserved those moments of transition, allowing for reflection and analyses. This also reiterates ideas around attempted control over transience.

Although not always blatantly showing the process of art making, a few works reveal it through elements. Both of the corrugated cardboard works, *Moved* (Figure 49) and *Yesterday* (Figure 38), are made by ripping and tearing the cardboard to create the image. Bits of torn paper are left on the artwork half torn off to reveal the process. There are two particular works other than the ones mentioned above, which I will discuss below, that I feel the process was of importance to the success of the final piece; These include *Where I've Been* (Figure 50) and *Wall* (Figure 51).



**Figure 50**

Karla Nixon. *Where I've Been*. 2014. Hand-cut Fabriano. 342,5 x 44 cm.



*Where I've Been*, Detail.

*Where I've Been* makes use of unknown, roadside buildings, which are composited to form an imagined street. The images of the buildings were all taken in Queensburgh and neighbouring areas, some of Durban's more neglected suburbs. This use of nondescript buildings aims to bring focus to the lesser known or neglected.

We are constantly learning, developing and bettering ourselves as people whilst often neglecting everything else around us. The nature of existence is complex; we achieve yet we lose. We build and develop our landscape often at the expense of someone or something. *Where I've Been* was created in 20 hours of non-stop cutting. The process of creating this piece in one sitting was important. The about the act of continuously creating, despite how much I wanted to take a break. This was symbolic of the relentlessness of man and continuous development. The process of creating and building a street, referencing something new, is contrasted by my subject matter of neglected buildings. This work was created while under discomfort, fatigue and pain. The road is often difficult and at the end, all we are left with are memories. The white paper, and the process of cutting away is symbolic of these memories. This work attempts to encourage the viewer to stop and consider the importance of what is left behind.



**Figure 51**

Karla Nixon. *Wall*. 2016. Paper, glue, cement and polystyrene. 30 x 30 x 115 cm.



*Wall*, Detail.

*Wall* is a paper sculpture of stacked, miniature bricks. The wall appears to either be in a process of being built or being broken down. The dichotomous

relationship of development and decay is the focus of this work. The bricks are symbolic of life's processes; developing and achieving, biological growth and aging, losing and decaying. The monotony of the little bricks speaks to the monotony of life and the routine we create in an attempt to be in control of our transient existence. The fragile paper bricks are contrasted by the cement pillar-like shape that forms the plinth for the sculpture. The bricks are precariously stacked and, similar to the precariousness of some of Peter Callesen's work, could easily be blown over with the smallest gust of wind. The stacking of the bricks without gluing them together makes the work not only conceptually transient but its potentially imminent collapse makes it physically transient as well. Despite the plans one has made and the foundation, in this case the cement pillar, one has laid down, we are not in complete control of our existence.

The small scale of the bricks forces the viewer to tower over the object, reversing the role of a brick wall. The viewer has the ability to protect the sculpture from any wind blowing in the space, in the same way that walls protect people from natural elements. But, the viewer also has the ability to unintentionally or intentionally break the object with the slightest bump or breath. This work subverts the ideas of protection and a safe space. The aim here is to encourage the viewer to think about how unprotected and vulnerable we can be to life's transience.

## **Conclusion**

The creation of this body of work and exploration of transience, as mentioned before, is my endeavour to understand my own existence within contemporary society. As with process philosophy, the contemporary thinkers, artworks and artists I have discussed, I see the investigation of transience as the best line of approach to understanding existence, which echoes Whitehead's idea of a things 'being' not being disconnected from its process of 'becoming'. In each of the works that make up this body of work, I have attempted to utilize materials that speak to the effects of change and transience in modern society. This is further emphasized by referencing structures and subject matter that are resultant or causal to transience, temporality and change. In each work, I ask of the viewer to appreciate and sometimes question the transient nature of our lives, our environments, our desires and the products we use. I feel that I have only scraped the surface of this exploration of the ontological approach to change and transience in my work.

## Conclusion

This investigation of transience as a fundamental approach to understanding existence through art making, in the work of selected artists, was achieved by exploring various aspects of transience; from a concept to a physical outcome of material or time, as well as how artists, myself included, have chosen to explore it thematically.

Through this research, I have come to the conclusion that we all seek to understand our existence. The study has shown that I, and many others recognise that everything around, and including, us is temporal and transient; This recognition brings us one step closer to understanding our existence and purpose on this earth.

The study explored process philosophy as a way to provide a context for my selection of artists and the importance and relevance of the topic. Process philosophy saw the need for a new metaphysical approach to understanding the world around us. Philosophers, such as Alfred Whitehead, saw the world and everything in it not as static isolated objects, but as an organism. With each part connected to the next as integral parts of the whole. One cannot fully understand one thing without considering everything else. This organism philosophy was conceptualized as Whitehead felt the need for society to see that they are connected to their surroundings and that one's choices and actions affect everything. It is our moral obligation to be mindful of our choices, especially those which affect our natural environment. In this lies the core of this philosophy, that everything is best understood in a state of process rather than as a static substance. Everything, from the human body or the self, to objects about us (both natural and man-made) and to actions of cognition such as perception of 'things' (like colour), according to process philosophy, can only truly be described in a state of process; if it is not going through transience it has perished and cannot exist. These ideas, outlined by process philosophers, echo similar ideologies explored in my selected artists

and my work. Whitehead, my selected artists and myself use and explore transience to understand existence.

I looked at a diverse set of artists and artworks, from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century to more contemporary examples, that explored different aspects of an ontological approach to change, transience, and temporality. In addition to exploring these aspects, artists, artworks and genres had to communicate similar notions to that of process philosophers. Process philosophy explains that looking at process, which I have interpreted as transience and temporality, is the optimal way to understand reality and our existence. I have argued that this ontology has been explored for thousands of years in art. Through research, I found that there were philosophers, belief systems and art movements that had similar notions to that of process philosopher's; many of this occurred way before process philosophy even existed. These include, but are not limited to, Heraclitus, Buddhism, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese art, Impressionism, Baroque, and memento mori art.

I then demonstrated that this exploration is not only relevant today, but is still an important form of visual enquiry. I did this by interrogating the work of selected contemporary thinkers and artists who explore themes of transience. Through the research I found a number of themes within transience that both these contemporary thinkers and contemporary artist have explored. These include: the transient being, consumer transience, and the influence the Web and globalization has had on accelerating flux. Works by contemporary artists, such as Jenny Saville, Jason Yarmosky, Diane Victor, Banksy and Jon Rafman, were discussed in relation to these themes. Exploring these thinker's ideas about temporality, as well as process philosophy, not only provided context for the study, but helped define my conceptual framework for the selected artists and my own body of work.

I narrowed the selected artists down to artists who, like me, specialize in using paper as a primary medium. Because of this delimitation, it was important to

explore the connotations of paper before detailing the work of my selected artists. I examined a selected history of paper and looked at its relevance as a medium that speaks to transience and temporality. This chapter outlined the importance paper has played, and still plays, in both our daily lives and the art world. This mundane material is not only physically transient, being used for packaging, which is thrown away and/or recycled, but allows us to capture transient moments in writing, drawing and other forms of documentation. As an art medium, paper has transformed the art world as we knew it. It's initial and continual use allows for documentation by artists to be used by new artists to learn from. It has been a catalyst for new art movements; having been central to the work of artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. The transient quality of paper has become the reason for so many contemporary artists using it as their dominant medium. Paper's flexibility, ephemerality, fragility, and malleability has allowed many artist, including myself and my selected artists, to create art that uses these attributes to strengthen their work.

An investigation into the work of Peter Callesen, Mia Pearlman and Jodi Carey, helped establish how these artists explored transience. My primary focus was on how each artist explored transience through their subject matter, medium and process. Callesen's work is transient through his use of performance art and the impending collapse of some of his artworks. Mia Pearlman works very intuitively, installing her work in a site-specific manner, which means that each work is never repeated, no matter how many times it may be exhibited. For Jodi Carey, the various processes of making the work is evident in, and important to, the final product. By doing this she captures the transient act of creating. Although these artists differ from one another, their works all have a common conceptual thread; their focus is particular to the transient nature of life. The selected artists were all influential to my work: Peter Callesen and his physically fragile paper-cuts, Mia Pearlman's ability to capture fleeting moments/objects in transience, and Jodi Carey's use of flowers and concepts of death.



This research informed my art practice by aiding me in the creation of a body of work that explores transience within my urban environment. I explored this through the use of imagery that focusing on the development and construction within this environment. I used this imagery as a metaphor for the complex, transient nature of our existence. Paper was used as my primary medium, because of its fragile, transient nature. I often paired paper with other materials that reinforced the ideas and processes of construction. As with the chapter on the selected artist, I focused on my exploration of transience through concept, material and process. Conceptually my work was divided into two themes: negotiating transience and transient desires. Although the creation of my body of work guided the direction of the research, it was also directly influenced by the research findings. Examples of these influences include, but are not limited to: *Shaped* (Figure 46), was largely influenced by process philosophy and the concept of everything, without exception, being in a state of process; *Renovation* (Figure 39) was influenced by Baroque Vanitas artworks; And *Delicate Grind* (Figure 36) was influenced by Jodie Carey's use of roses to reference ideas around death.

This post-graduate journey, from initial conception, to researching and creating a body of work has been filled with enormous struggle for me. Because it is such an elusive topic, which is often secondary to the main focus of many research outputs, the task of figuring out ways to best represent and explore this topic was a challenge. But, through the struggle I have grown enormously. I have pushed my own boundaries with my medium, from sculpting to paper-cuts that were more intricately detailed than ever before. The integration of other materials has been an exciting new venture for me, one that I will continue with. I also ended up experimenting with different types of paper, Fabriano Academia, Fabriano Artistico, Hahnemühle, corrugated cardboard, bond and cartridge, which enabled me to fine tune my skills and use the type of paper that is appropriate to an idea.

This research not only guided me with my art practice, but helped situate my work within the contemporary art world. Areas of future research suggested by this investigation include an exploration of the combination of digital (virtual) and traditional (physical) media as a means to further interrogate ideas of transience in contemporary society.

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