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Invisible Johannesburg seen and unseen: an exploration of the imaged/imagined city

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INVISIBLE:

Johannesburg Seen and Unseen

an exploration of the imaged/imagined city

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Art.

Johannesburg, 2009.

ABSTRACT:

This project has two main aims. The first and primary aim is to produce a body of paintings, which take the urban landscape of Johannesburg as subject matter. These works aim to articulate through the processes of painting the visible and invisible city, aspects of the social/urban environment that can be seen or recognised, and those that are obscured or hidden. Through an examination of african urban theory and various tropes of understanding the city, the notiot of the invisible city is revealed. The research then progresses on to an exploration of way the city has been pictured by various painters and photographers.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Mary Wafer

15th of February, 2009.

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Introduction:

This project has two main aims. The first and primary aim is to produce a body of paintings, which take the urban landscape of Johannesburg as subject matter. These works aim to articulate through the processes of painting, processes which, it will be shown, involve multiple and complex stages of translation from initiating sources: the visible and invisible city, aspects of the social/urban environment that can be seen or recognised, and those that are obscured or hidden. While the seen and unseen city is a constant subject of these works, the paintings, as paintings and not just as images, aim to assert a material and partially autonomous presence that carries meaning and significance beyond the bounds of depiction alone. The paintings produced for this research project are presented in the form of an exhibition accompanying this dissertation. The exhibition comprises a number of paintings selected from a larger body of work, along with a number of associated photographic works exploring the same territory, displayed for the purposes of illustrating the processes of translation and production.

I want to again emphasise the primacy of art making/painting as itself a mode of research generating new knowledge and insight. The claim is for a body of work to be understood as discourse, and that the written text aims to provide a framing context for and documentation of this prime area. While the contextualisation is valuable in its own right it does not make a particular claim to being especially original in its insights or revelatory of new knowledge. As such it is supplementary to the primary research presented in the exhibition of original paintings and related works. The aim of the secondary and supportive research is to contextualise this practice and to document and critically reflect on the body of paintings presented in the exhibition. This body of research forms, then, the contextualisation of the paintings.

The second section will begin with an overview of the ways in which Johannesburg has been pictured in the popular and critical imagination. A number of defining tropes are evident here: Johannesburg as distopian space, a space of crime, violence and dissolution, and a counter image of Johannesburg as a space of opportunity and progress; but of particular interest for this research project are prevalent conceptions of visibility, evidence of citizenship, ways of belonging to and possessing the physical and imagined spaces of the city. These defining tropes/images of Johannesburg, which can seem to manifest so radically differently from one another, also seem to reveal one particularly interesting theme: that of a city constantly shifting. I suggest that this constant presence of multiple imaginings and realities, dichotomies, creates a city that is at once a visible and invisible space, endlessly revealing and obscuring itself. It will be argued that these defining tropes also constitute a background of expectation which new picturings are both dependent on and resistant to.

Leading on from this, I will examine the notion of visibility and invisibility in the city with reference to current theoretical discourses dealing with urbanism and space/place studies, particularly those that examine the rapid evolution and urbanisation of contemporary African cities. I will primarily be making use of art critical discourses presented in publications related to major local and international contemporary art events and movements. In recent years there have also been a number of major publications/exhibitions that have located themselves in a contemporary African cultural realm. Art criticism and critical theory, which form the bulk of the texts I am going to be referring to, is by the nature of its subject matter, a wide-ranging discourse that draws lavishly on a multitude of theoretical fields. Among the texts I will be making use are:

Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos (2002), a publication that accompanied a conference held in conjunction with the *Documenta 11* exhibition in Kassel, Germany. The introduction by Okwui

Enwezor characterizes much of the current discourses around African cities, and the publication also contains a useful essay by Abdu-Maliq Simone entitled *The Visible and Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa*, that discusses the position of migrants in major African cities.

Filip de Boeck's *Kinshasa: tales of the invisible city* (2006), although it is referring to Kinshasa in Congo, can be easily transplanted into a discussion of Johannesburg. This book provides a history not only of the physical and visible urban reality of Kinshasa, but also, as de Boeck puts it, of a second, invisible city, composed of the local social and cultural imaginaries, and thus the imaginative ways in which the inhabitants continue to make sense of their worlds and invent cultural strategies to cope with the breakdown of urban infrastructure and stability.

Also of particular use are a number of essays, including that by Jennifer Robinson, published in *Blank__Architecture, Apartheid and After* (2000), edited by Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić. In this particular essay, titled: *(Im)mobilizing space – Dreaming of Change,* Robinson discusses the potential of an imagined space, populated by people "using the pavements of the modern city, making it, experiencing it, and imagining it different(ly)" (2002: 13). In Johannesburg the overwhelmingly challenging materiality of the city demands a constant navigation, attention and vigilance; a perpetual re-negotiation and re-interpretation of the imagined and real spaces we occupy. The city is envisioned and experienced differently by every person in it, and so the whole seems to exist almost entirely in the imaginations of its inhabitants.

Following this theoretical discussion, through a more open and wide-ranging set of references, I will attempt to connect my practice to positions established in contemporary art making, locally and internationally. These will include a discussion of the photographic work of a number of South African artists working

with Johannesburg as a fundamental subject and working with the subject matter in a way that directly relates to my own practice. The artists I will be examining are Stephen Hobbs, Sabelo Mlangeni, Guy Tillim and Andrew Tshabangu.

I will go on to discuss the work of two international painters, Carla Klein and Julie Mehretu whose paintings mirror my own in the processes used by these artists. The paintings of Julie Mehretu consist of complex compositions of imagined composite cities, part abstract painting and 'animated urbanscapes'. Meghan Dailey (2002: 239) notes about Mehretu's paintings that "each formal layer could be seen to signify a specific point of view or perspective … the active, moving composition representing the living whole". Of Carla Klein, whose paintings seem to float somewhere between abstraction and figuration, Anke Bangma notes:

> …a good painting is a work in which several layers, meanings, times and realities come together. However, this wealth of suggestion and association is not shaped by the accumulation of an abundance of signifiers. It originates in the very absence of that accumulation…paintings here balance between figuration and abstraction, whereby images are both made visible and are withdrawn from sight, meanings appear and disappear… (Bangma; 2000: 25)

Painting offers the possibility of both building up complex layers of meaning and signification, and at the same time the possibility of subtraction and distillation, enabling suggestions of real and imaged absences and presences. Because of this possibility of multiple layers of signification, and the processes of distillation and layering of information that eventually result in such dynamic wholes, I will argue that painting can and must function as a legitimate mode of discourse in and of itself. These examinations will particularly engage with a discussion of the processes of translation from the social and material reality of the image source

(or environment) to its manifestation as a signifying artwork (or intervention) dependent on yet separate from its originating source. Interwoven in the discussion will be a brief theoretical and critical discussion on the possibilities of art making, specifically painting and its relation to photography, as a contemporary discursive practice engaged with articulating responses to social realities.

The final chapter will introduce, discuss and document the body of work in painting produced as the primary product of this research. Each work will be documented visually and by way of detailed description. Information will be provided on the source and genesis of the various works. Arising out of this documentation will be a brief and more open critical and contextual discussion linking the work to a number of critical and theoretical positions in relation to contemporary painting, and to the principal theme of the unseen in the city.

Seeing Johannesburg



Guy Tillim, (Detail) *View of Hillbrow looking north from the roof of the Mariston Hotel*, 2004

As set out in the introductory section, the first and primary aim of this research project is to produce a body of paintings that take the urban landscape of Johannesburg as subject matter. These works, which are documented and discussed in the final chapter below, articulate through the processes of painting, processes which, it will be shown, involve multiple and complex stages of translation from initiating sources: the visible and invisible city, aspects of the social/urban environment that can be seen or recognised, and those that are obscured or hidden. While the seen and unseen city is a constant subject of these works, the paintings, as paintings and not just as images, aim to assert a material and partially autonomous presence that carries meaning and significance beyond the bounds of depiction alone. What is attempted in the painting, and this is for me the aspect that most deeply links the two components of this project, is that the paintings express aspects of Johannesburg not only in depicted subject but also through qualities embodied in processes of painting.

This first chapter provides an overview, or perhaps more accurately a backwards look, a glance away from the studio to the crowded space of the city outside, of the ways in which Johannesburg has been pictured in the popular and critical imagination. Much of the discussion here follows strands of debate as played out

in a number of different fields: urban studies, sociology, literature etc. (Robinson, Simone, Vladislavić) The discussion provided here, however, does not claim to contribute in any specialist way to this debate but rather draws out threads from a complex weaving, the selection of threads motivated by the resonance they have with the issues explored in the evolution of the paintings produced as part of this investigation. One of these threads is the notion of visibility and invisibility in the city. This notion, coming out of theoretical discourses dealing with urbanism and space/place studies, particularly those that examine the rapid evolution and urbanisation of contemporary African cities (to be discussed more fully in the following chapter through a brief overview of authors such as: de Boeck, F., (2006); Simone, A-M., (2004); Koolhaas, R., (2002); Mbembe, A., (2008) has provocative parallels with issues confronted "on the canvas" as it where, issues lying in the crevices between depiction and materiality: the painting as a "picture of" and the painting as a connected but independent "thing".

I will begin by attempting a broad overview of the undoubtedly various but remarkably unvarying ways in which Johannesburg has been pictured and imagined in the popular imagination. A number of defining tropes are evident here; Johannesburg as distopian space, a space of crime, violence and dissolution, a counter image of Johannesburg as a space of opportunity and progress; but of particular interest to me are prevailing conceptions of visibility, evidence of citizenship, ways of belonging to and possessing the physical and imagined spaces of the city.

Johannesburg (similarly to many African cities) is most often characterised by dichotomies and bifurcations. It is typically portrayed in the popular media as a battleground where conflicts are fought against a backdrop of 'power and impotence, wealth and poverty, corruption and hope, centre and periphery' (Enwezor, 2002: 4) Travel guides, to cite a form through which places are framed and presented for

visitors consumption, and the global media more generally, evidence a particularly dark perception of the city, with many advising that Johannesburg be avoided altogether – it is rife with danger and there is very little to see or do as a tourist. The Lonely Planet travel guide (2009):

> The city's darker personality proved the most enduring. The Jo'burg of the news flash was a city where fear and loathing reigned supreme; a city where spiralling gun crime and poverty had manifested itself in a society where one half of the population stagnated, while the other looked on impassively through coils of razor wire.

While this description is presented as a picture of a past it has a powerful and persistent capacity to frame and shape the popular imagination. Issues and images that dominate the popular imagination are almost always, it seems, defined by harsh contrasts and brutal realities. Clearly some of these perceptions are reflective of reality: poverty and violent crime with a decaying infrastructure and disorder – unrepaired roads, broken traffic lights, erratic public transport, and a lack of public cleanliness are disturbing social realities. On the other hand, it is equally evident that rapid development and growth with, to give examples, more than 3 million new houses having been built by the Department of Housing in the past 10 years, new high speed railways, glitzy shopping malls, not to mention the millions of new private developments characteristically depicted in David Goldblatt's *Dainfern* (2002) images reflect a (to some) equally disturbing reality of a growing wealthy class and conspicuous consumption.



David Goldblatt, *George Nkomo, Hawker*, 2002

The intersection of these polarities of deprivation and privilege is most starkly represented by the very high levels of crime and violence experienced not only in

the walled and burglar alarmed wealthy suburbs but also by ordinary people in more humble situations. This harsh social reality as reflected in such movies as *Tsotsi* (2005) for example is shown to be connected to and produced by rampant poverty and unemployment.



Still from *Tsotsi*, 2005

The pervasive sense that crime and violence are pressing in on good folk was dramatically illustrated by the recent 2008 outbreaks of xenophobic violence in which foreigners were brutally attacked and chased off. The "justification" for these attacks was often that foreigners were responsible for crime or that foreigners were "taking local peoples jobs". Clearly these attacks are both the product of real social stress in which the "other", the "foreigner", takes the blame for feelings of powerlessness and despair and deprivation and the result of unscrupulous politicians actions.



Journalist/photographer, Themba Hadebe:*" 8 months ago: A dead body lies on the street at a squatter camp outside Johannesburg, South Africa, Monday May, 2008. Mobs rampaged through poor suburbs of Johannesburg in a frenzy of anti-foreigner violence over the weekend, killing at least 12 people, injuring dozens and forcing hundreds to seek refuge at police stations."*

When cities grow to accommodate new people they test the human capacity for coexistence, whether the newcomers are from outlying rural areas or the other side of the world. Diversity can affect a city's social cohesion in different ways. It can foster a degree of integration amongst people from diverse backgrounds, celebrating tolerance and coexistence. On the other hand, it can equally engender segregation, with diverse groups coexisting separately, leading to a potential for social conflict and confrontation.

These apparent changes in the lived experience of the city have been the subject

of a rich and growing body of scholarship and commentary. Bremner (2007), a characteristic example, described Johannesburg as “under siege”:

> From the late 1970’s onward, Johannesburg’s economic base, along with its legislative and administrative apparatus, slowly came undone and a new city emerged. In a tangled network of transforming social and political orders, a stagnating economy, new political, technical, and professional discourses, and a host of unprecedented urban practices, many things stayed the same, whilst many things have changed quite fundamentally. (Bremner, L. J. 2007: 154)

A longer historical view however draws attention away from the death of apartheid as the explanation of when “things became undone” (Bremner, L. J. 2007: 154) to the origins of the city. As Bremner reminds us, Johannesburg was first created as a mining camp in 1886, after the discovery of gold on the reef. It grew rapidly into a boom town with all the trappings of these types of settlements – rampant greed and opportunism, sudden wealth and sudden loss, which in turn fuelled a society characterised by crime and violence and extreme differences in wealth and poverty. Despite the massive upheavals the country and the city have undergone in the time since their respective births, the Jo’burg of today has managed to retain much of its early characteristics, as well as developing a range of new ones.

These harsh contrasts, while universally characteristic of rampant capitalism in its more avaricious moments, were fundamentally constituted in the practice if not the ideology of Apartheid and before that in colonial practices of racial segregation. The effects of Apartheid ideology on the structure and functioning of South African cities and Johannesburg in particular is vividly brought out in Chipkin’s essay in *Blank__Architecture, Apartheid and After* in which he describes the characterisation of the apartheid city by Swilling, Humphries and Shubane as : “a special form of urbanisation marked by a characteristic spatial system, manifested not only in separation and division on the micro level but in decentralisation at

the macro level." (1998: 265) Jennifer Robinson in an essay titled (Im)mobilizing space – Dreaming of Change also published in *Blank__Architecture, Apartheid and After*, speaks of South African cities as theorised through political and social discourses, and her statement: "Just as 'third world cities' have been seen through the lens of 'developmentalism', South Africa's cities have been seen through the lens of 'apartheid' – as sites of domination through spatial segregation and races" (1998:167), is a view which seems to fit the dominant view of Johannesburg – a city defined by inequality and the consequent harsh juxtapositions of wealth and poverty.

Against these seemingly negative views of Johannesburg, there is an equally overwhelming view of the city as a place of opportunity and progress. As noted above, Johannesburg was initially a town that developed because of the discovery of gold in the reefs of the Witwatersrand. To an extent it remains a gold rush town. Johannesburg is the destination of choice for of a huge wave of economic migrants from across the country and the rest of Southern Africa and further afield. The rapid socio-economic and political changes that the inner city in particular has undergone and the (apparent) absence of any meaningful official authority has provided an unprecedented opportunity for people that were previously denied the right to live in the city by the apartheid legislation. Migrants from rural areas and townships, fleeing violence, surveillance, and poverty have flocked into the inner city, along with other individuals and groups seeking asylum from the their particular adversaries, be they social or political. New uses are being made of vacated office spaces in the city - small businesses, light industry and sub legal economic activities such as prostitution and drug trafficking, "loft apartment" conversions for the "upwardly mobile" seeking an urban refuge, young black professionals, artists studios, civic and non-governmental organisations. Informal traders dominate the streets, and the inner city has become the residential and trading home to an ever-

increasing population of African and even Asian migrants. Many of these people have fantasized a life of prosperity and endless possibilities in Johannesburg, which may or may not materialize. It is widely acknowledged that families of migrants across the globe survive on remittances sent home from husbands, sons, daughters who have been drawn to the economic metropolises of wealthier countries in search of a "better life" for themselves and their families back home.

Of particular interest in this field of study is a body of research compiled in Morten Lynge Madsen's *A Walk through Thick Bushes: an Ethnographic account of undocumented migrants in Johannesburg (*2004*)*. He reveals, through an extensive series of interviews with Mozambican migrants, a complex view of Johannesburg as a modern economic Mecca and at the same time a living purgatory, a necessary evil. A statement by one of his subjects, Luis, stands out: "estamos todos mortos" – we are all dead. (Madsen, 2004) So, for many, the sense of opportunity, the epic victory of the struggle for urban space that dominated the apartheid era, is being overshadowed by chaos, violence and exploitation and alienation. In an uncontrolled physical and psychic environment, illicit activities have thrived, drug trafficking, prostitution, slavery etc., and coupled with the abject living conditions imposed of slum landlords and unobliging authorities evoke a darkly dystopian, almost medieval city.

From a literary perspective a writer such as Ivan Vladislavić illustrates the perception held by the representative "ordinary man" of the mass immigration into the city from across the continent in his novel *The Exploded View*:

> … he had been made aware of the characteristics – a particular curl to the hair or a shade of the skin, the angle of a cheekbone or jaw line, the ridge of a lip, the slant of an eye, the size of an ear – it seemed to him that there were Nigerians everywhere. He had started to see Mozambicans too, and Somalis. It was the opposite of the old stereotype: they all looked different to him. Foreigners on every side. Could the

> aliens have outstripped the indigenes? Was it possible? There were no statistics. (Vladislavić, 2004:5)

And in *Portrait with Keys*:

> A stranger, arriving one evening in the part of Joburg I call home, would think that it had been struck by some calamity, that every last person had fled. There is no sign of life. Behind the walls, the houses are like ticking bombs. The curtains are drawn tight, the security lights are glaring, and the gates are bolted. Even the cars have taken cover. Our stranger, passing fearfully through the streets, whether in search of someone with open hands of whom he might ask directions or merely someone to avoid in the pursuit of solitude, finds no one at all. (Vladislavić, 2006:54-5).

Ivan Vladislavić's vignettes of life in contemporary Johannesburg, gathered in *Portrait with Keys: Joburg and what-wha*t (2006), and *The Exploded View (2004)*, as well as the award winning *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) reveal a number of significant tropes evident in other readings of Johannesburg, but the overwhelming feelings evoked seem to be a sense of fear and alienation, of being metaphorically abandoned in a dark alley.

In Johannesburg the overwhelmingly challenging materiality of the city demands a constant navigation, attention and vigilance; a perpetual re-negotiation and re-interpretation of the imagined and real spaces we occupy. The city is envisioned and experienced differently by every person in it, and so the whole seems to exist almost entirely in the imaginations of its inhabitants. These defining tropes/images of Johannesburg, which can seem to manifest so radically differently from one another, reveal one particularly interesting theme: that of a city constantly shifting. I suggest that this constant presence of multiple imaginings and realities, dichotomies, creates a city that is at once a visible and invisible space, endlessly revealing and obscuring itself in a swirling eddy of signification.

This leads me back to the beginning of this section, and a re-reading of the excerpt taken from Vladislavić's intimate portraits of life in Johannesburg. As indicated the overwhelming feelings evoked seem to be those of fear and alienation, but on closer inspection, I feel a strange dichotomy is gradually revealed. There seems to be a suggestion of a tension between a space that is on one hand radically over-signified and at the same time almost completely lacking in signification. The one seems to be constantly overwriting the other. The security lights, the drawn curtains, the high walls, are at once obscuring and illuminating life in Johannesburg.

The city then is in Mbembe and Nuttall's terms, an "elusive metropolis" (2008: 1) an awkward and ungainly mixture of utopia and dystopia. It was and is most often defined in the global eye as a city characterised by images of deprivation, racial conflict, urban decay and violent crime yet is to others an Eldorado, a place of hope and opportunity, of wealth and upward mobility.

In the following section I will develop a brief overview of the way African cities and in particular Johannesburg have been examined in urban theory and culture studies.

Talking City

Leading on from this broad overview of the imagined/imaged Johannesburg this section provides a closer reading and evaluation of the notion of visibility and invisibility in the city, with reference to current theoretical discourses dealing with urbanism, space/place studies and anthropological examinations of city environments, particularly those that examine the rapid evolution and urbanisation of contemporary African cities. This will be followed by a brief analysis of Johannesburg specifically, in the context of the preceding section. At the beginning of this discussion of the complex character of the city of Johannesburg, it is necessary to understand a little about urban theory in general before moving on to a more focused discussion about African urban theory and then a closer reading of Johannesburg as it has been analysed in recent writings.

There is an enormous volume of research around these concepts, and it is necessary to remind at this point that this is not a study located in these fields and hence not a critical contribution to this developed discourse but rather a series of forays into areas which have some correspondence to my larger project. Firstly I will give a brief explanation of a number of current readings of the fundamental paradigms of any city, particularly the notions of space and place. At the centre of urban theory are ideas of place and space since, without initially designating a city as a place it would be difficult to refer to it in the first place. In an attempt at contextualising and getting closer to these terms, I will briefly outline the concepts set out in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (1988) Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space,* (1992) and Miched Foucault's paper *Of Other Spaces*. (1967) These seminal works have formed some of the premises of the texts I will refer to in describing the character of Johannesburg further below. This is a purely explanatory chapter and I will attempt to be as brief as possible.

The word place has some fundamental meanings – location, locale and sense of place. It could be a portion of space occupied by or designated to someone, a particular point on a larger surface or in a larger object or area, or the particular location of something. All places though are located and have a material and hence visual form, and some relationship to humans and our capacity to construct and derive meaning. Place as a location is the answer to the question 'where?' A locale is a place where something happens, or that has particular events associated with it. It is the concrete form of the setting for social relations, the actual shape of a place within which people carry out their lives. On the other hand a sense of place is a subjective and emotional attachment an individual has with a concrete location or locale. Places can range from the corner of a room to the whole earth, and so it can become rather obscure and hard to define. Place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world. There are attachments and connections between people, meanings and experiences that have a rich and complicated interplay. (Cresswell, 2004)

However, the words space and place have intersecting meanings – a space can also be a location or the idea of a location. Space though, is more abstract than place. A space is an empty area left between one-, two-, or three-dimensional points or objects. But, it has dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move. Space has area and volume, it has a geometry. (Cresswell, 2004)
From here we deduce that places have space in-between them. Space is often seen as a realm without meaning, as a principle that in a similar way to time makes up the basic facts of human existence.

De Certeau outlines the way individuals unconsciously navigate everything, but for the purpose of this study, particularly city spaces. He uses the term "strategies" to

explain the organisation of structures of power, and “tactics” as the way individuals create spaces for themselves in environments defined by strategies. He describes the city as a concept based on a planned physical structure that describes the city as a distinct physical place. The person at street level however moves in ways that bypass and reconfigure the utilitarian layout of the city. (Robinson, 1998)

The particular aspect of Lefebvre’s argument in *The Production of Space* (1992) that is useful to this study, is the theory that space is a social product, a complex social construction which affects the way people move in and imagine the spaces they occupy. Lefebvre argues that these constructions or productions of urban spaces are specifically unique and fundamental to the character of a city and its inhabitants.

Michel Foucault uses the term “heterotopia” to describe places and spaces that are simultaneously physical and mental, spaces that have more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than are immediately visible. A heterotopia is a physical representation or approximation of a utopian space that is not possible to realise because it contains physical or metaphysical elements that do not correspond to the utopian ideal. A heterotopian space or place is based on reality and unreality, and so contains dualities and contradictions. (Foucault, 1967)

From these ideas it is possible to infer that the body, the unconscious and our inner worlds clearly play an important role in the production or meaning of a space, and in its potential transformation. Every time we move around in the city we potentially use and imagine spaces differently and construct multiple differing realities. Different people though, have different resources, different histories, different positions to draw on in their imaginative reuse and reconfiguration of the city, and so the conception of a static city becomes impossible.

These established positions on space and place theory have resonance for more particular discussions of cities in Africa. In this section I will refer to a number of writers and theorists work, some of which is included in Okwui Enwezor's *Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (2002): AbdouMaliq Simone's 'The visible and invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa'; Rem Koolhaas's 'Fragments of a lecture on Lagos' as well as the introductory chapter by the editors. I will also look at Achile Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall's *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008) and Jennifer Robinson's work in a number of books but most particularly '(Im)mobilising space: Dreaming of Change' in *Blank__ Architecture, Apartheid and After* (1998). Also of particular interest is Filip de Boeck and Marie-Francoise's *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City.* (2004) Significantly many of these texts were presented in the form of exhibition catalogue essays, or in relation to artistic or architectural projects.

The African city is typically an amalgam of different histories deeply marked and structured by European colonial rule and by the changes that the post- colonial era has brought. While there may be cities which are still formed around pre-colonial ways of living most of the large urban metropoli are a mixture of the plan associated with European cities, an ordered grid of streets organised into precincts around a hierarchical centre, and areas which have grown more organically in and around these. In this European model transplanted to the colonial, the visibility of relations; centre, periphery, residential, commercial, rich, poor, colonist, colonised, white, black, public, private; expressed the "masters voice" of controlled and controlling order. "Crossing the line" was both an act of physical transgression and a destabilising challenge to the established order of things. This clear structure was, however, something which had to be constantly shored up. The reality of lived experience as played out in the supposedly invisible back yard or roof top servants quarters, the vacant lot, the bus stop, the back door to the doctors rooms, the squatter

settlement beyond the town limits was not going to go away however many lace curtains covered the windows. The post colonial or post liberation city inevitably bears the traces more or less evidently of this past in a very different present. Most writers describe the changes that African cities have undergone in terms evocative of invasion, attack and destruction.

Under Siege: Four African Cities: Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos (Enwezor: 2002), is a publication that accompanied a conference held in conjunction with the Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany. In the introduction, Okwui Enwezor overviews much of the current discourse around African cities, and sets out some of the issues and problems facing African cities. He begins by stating that African cities are in crisis, that the contemporary African city is seen as a site of

> ...serious spatial entropy, decline in infrastructure, the unravelling of traditional institutional and social networks, the erosion of state capacity to provide adequate social amenities, inequality of access to economic and political capacities etc. (Enwezor 2002: 14).

All of these issues, it is claimed, pose serious problems to the viability of establishing a sustainable urban stability. While these crises are seen as generally applicable to all of these cities Enwezor acknowledges that each city has its own specific characteristics and sets of differences, complexities, urban ethics and creativity that make specific readings necessary.

Enwezor goes on to say that African urban paradigms are caught between two paradoxes – that of a city that is a series of "spatio-social-temporal sites ruled simultaneously by exuberance and dynamism on the one hand and baseness and obsolescence on the other", (Enwezor 2002: 15) and that of a city caught between hope and hopelessness, between its past and its future. African cities are on one hand losing distinct identities to globalisation and on the other developing their own

unique paths and methods for dealing with rapid change. New forms of culture, politics and authorities are emerging distinctly differently in different centres. Enwezor suggests that there can be no neat histories of urban dwelling in Africa, that cities globally in their present manifestations are modern inventions. African cities specifically are opening up new pathways of agency, creative re-appropriations of resources and new subjectivities.

> It is in the polymorphous and chaotic logic of the African city that we find the signs and new codes of expression of urban identities in formation.(Enwezor 2002: 18)

The Documenta volume also contains a useful essay by AbdouMaliq Simone entitled: *The Visible and the Invisible: Remaking cities in Africa*, (2002:23-44) which discusses the position of migrants in major African cities. Simone points out how "temporalities, sectors, representations, and economies are intersected in ways that produce indiscernible fields of social collaboration and livelihood. In each of these cities, little can be taken for granted, as their destructive capacity and the labour intensity of everyday survival amplifies a capacity for "getting by" and an achievement of "sustainability" that largely remains inexplicable.

> In cities where livelihood, mobility, and opportunity are produced and enacted through the very agglomeration of different bodies marked and situated in diverse ways, the challenge is how permutations in the intersection of their given physical existence, their stories, networks, and inclinations can produce specific value and capacity. (Simone 2002:29)

He suggest that in these cities it is often difficult to discern exactly which social practices, relationships, and knowledge can be mobilised at which time to produce predicted outcomes, and similarly to predict which resources and impressions will become fixed in the popular imagination. (Simone 2002:29) The lived experience is such that "social interactions are constantly shifting – dichotomies – ruthlessness and kindness, cruelty and tenderness, indifference and curiosity." The migrant or

person entering into the city requires in the face of this opaque or invisible set of patterns of movement and relationship a capacity for "creativity and inventive social manoeuvring." In this Simone points out the "micro-politics of alignment, and interdependency" (Simone 2002:29) in which notions of common citizenship and common purpose are problematised. In a struggle for survival in which your foreignness acts as a barrier to, or disqualification from, access to otherwise available social services people form micro networks of support, networks which, paradoxically, may increase a larger sense of dislocation and alienation. A counter or mirror set of authorities determine social relations: the informal leader of ethnic communities settling disputes according to homeland custom, the market strong man allocating trading spaces, etc..

Achile Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal (Mbembe & Nuttall 2008) discuss architect and theorist Rem Koolhaus's 'Lagos: How it works' in which Koolhaas argues however that African cities have actually achieved what western notions of the city have been aiming for - a complete reversal and an encompassing of new ideas of a global city characterised by "informality" (Mbembe & Nuttall 2008: 8) Koolhaus argues that the "conflict between formal, unformed and informal, the centre and the periphery, the constant push and pull between edge and centre" creates a new material reality of urban form: "Informality creates urban form." (Mbembe & Nuttall 2008: 8) In this Koolhaus seems to be arguing for a sense of the city returning to its origins as it where. The modernist planned city is seen here as the aberration rather than the norm, an imposition of a structured and structuring grid onto the lived and living, the inevitably shifting and changing patterns of human activity. If a city is to be a reflection of, a production of, lived relations it needs to be flexible and changing, organic and responsive. For Koolhaus then the African city is the inversion of the Modern city, it provides a model in which an "assembly of informal structures creates the shape of the city", (Koolhaas 2002: 175) in which the material reality

of urban form is not manufactured through a recognisable morphology but through a process of systematic layering – that is an arrangement, intersection and mutual confrontation of people and infrastructure"(Mbembe & Nuttall 2008). Buildings reinvent their purpose, public spaces adjust to new needs, transport modes and routes bypass the formal highway, shops spring up in living rooms, vegetables grow on apartment roof tops, animals may be tethered in unused parking garages.

These are some of the realities of contemporary Johannesburg most stridently visible to the older order who have either fled to enclaves in the further suburbs or are left stranded among these changes. *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*, (de Boeck 2004) although referring to Kinshasa in Congo, could easily be engaged in a discussion about Johannesburg. From the title of the work it is clear that de Boeck is referencing Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities (1974)*, in which a traveler tells tales of the incredible cities he has seen. In Calvino's telling he speaks of a city of memory, a city of desire, a hidden city, a trading city, a city of the dead, a city of signs, a city of words, a dream city, all of which are in fact multiple layers of one city – Venice. The city that is described is in fact not visible, it is a city that has no real existence. It is a city of mirage, a mirror, an invisible city. De Boeck picks up this idea of multiple refracted cities, and looks at the various levels of mirroring which fracture Kinshasa's urban world into a series of multiple but simultaneously existing cities. Some of these levels of mirroring are: between Kinshasa and its extensive diaspora, between the city and the rural hinterland, between local and global realities, or between the qualities of the "traditional" and the "modern" (2002: 243).

De Boeck proposes that an understanding of the 'urban-scape' requires not only a reading of the visible, geographical, and physical aspects of the reality but also a reading of the local imagination. It is in the 'slippage between visible and invisible, between life and death, between reality and its double, its shadow, specter, reflection, or image', that urban reality is constructed. He quotes Foucault speaking about

Heterotopias:

> Real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society which are something like counter-sites, and kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (de Boeck, F & Plissart, M. 2006: 254)

As de Boeck describes it, Kinshasa is constantly subject to destructive and regenerative forces, a "baffling" city sometimes in which the built form increasingly appears randomly produced – as a living space – always growing and decaying. Importantly de Boeck draws attention to the ways in which the city is more than its built form, the ways in which the city is more than its architecture, to the ways the city is a performed space, in which the social dynamism and use of space is the lived city. The activities of people acted out in the spaces of the city create the meaning of the city and these fluid and changing performances of daily life drive in turn the almost constant rebuilding of the physical environment.

Johannesburg is South Africa's largest city, with a population of about million people, and is one of Africa's most rapidly urbanising regions. The city is relatively dispersed and has a poor public transport system. Attempts to dismantle the social and spatial legacy of apartheid are underway, but elements of an unjust geography are resurfacing. Unregulated settlement and increased crime have driven jobs and people out to the suburbs, creating a hole at the city's heart around Hillbrow, now inhabited principally by immigrants from other African states. The financial and corporate centre has largely moved from the modernist downtown centre to the amorphous suburbs of Sandton and Rosebank. Within these area's shopping centres, walled hotels, and businesses and residential complexes defended by security

gates, CCTV cameras and armed guards, a range of social groups converge. The townships of Alexandra and Soweto house hundreds of thousands of people in sometimes substandard conditions. Informal settlements with high levels of social disadvantage are growing along the city fringes. The residents of these townships and informal settlements often struggle to obtain adequate shelter and face arduous journeys to work on informal transport systems. But some of these settlements now have tarred streets and basic services, including schools, running water, electricity and shopping malls. Since 1994, the new South African government has planned almost two million low-cost homes under the Reconstruction and Development Programme. In recent years there has been an increase in immigration from the rest of the continent to South Africa, particularly to Johannesburg. This has visibly affected many dimensions of city life, including its economy, housing and infrastructure demands, and social integration.

Lauren Kruger in 'Filming the Edgy City: Cinematic Narrative and Urban Form in Postapartheid Johannesburg' published in the Journal *Research in African Literatures (*2006*)*, writing from a film studies perspective also characterises Johannesburg as "interpreted and outlined by the apparent chaos of the everyday, where forms of self-organizing procedures, parallel and informal economies, and the resilience and inventiveness of urban dwellers have relentlessly kept (Johannesburg) still functional." In Johannesburg, all is not necessarily what it seems, and the city appears ultimately to find ways of impressing its own reality on any visions and hopes of a different urban future. It is to these shadowy spaces, these spaces of in-between, and the hybrid that the character of the city inscribes itself.

Two writers who have made an ongoing and distinctive contribution to the study of the city and writing as residents of the city are Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall. In *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008) Mbembe and Nuttall describe the

city as allowing for “juxtapositions at all kinds of levels – the meeting in the street, the rich and poor areas cheek by jowl” (2008: 18). These juxtapositions, contrary to the tone of Enwezor (2002) and contrary to the “forces that may conspire to nullify these juxtapositions”, are “ also a great generator of novelty”, a novelty, evidently from the tone of the article as whole, as exhilarating and stimulating as it is exhausting and debilitating. (2008: 23). While it is apparent that Johannesburg, contra Paris for example, is a city less characterized by “ practices of flanerie and drifting than by a set of divisions contrived by law, surveillance and threat, hostile to errant and nomadic meaning,” the city remains a place of becoming.(Robinson 2002: 165)

The experience particularly of the poor in the city is one of almost constant uncertainty but also resilience. Despite the sometimes almost non-existent government and state authorities life seems to carry on – and in fact to develop social and economic structures that seem to grow along previously unknown pathways. Inner city areas such as Hillbrow and Berea with their large apartment blocks and street café culture were in the 1960’s spaces in which a white cosmopolitanism could briefly flourish. Most urban black people were either living in the small single unit township houses or crammed into single sex hostels outside of the central city. Now the buildings of Hillbrow are home to a polyglot of people: immigrants from the rest of Africa, people moving closer to town from the township or from smaller towns with the odd remnant from previous times. As Mbembe and Nuttall point out, these new spaces and places call for African urban social life to be reshaped (2008: 9). Again, he draws attention to the “constant interplay between the visible and the invisible ” (2008: 9), to the apparent continuation of the old order to a greater or lesser degree (the same apartments but with new tenants) to radical shifts and changes responsive to the needs of new communities living in new situations. Underground parking garages are of little use to car-less families but excellent locations for taxi holding

areas or for warehousing goods for street traders or, perhaps more problematically, as a space for the homeless to erect cardboard shelters. While to many outside observers these are symptoms of a disintegrating and collapsing social structure to others these are symptoms of the capacity of the city to respond to lived experience. One mans chaos is another's opportunity perhaps.

Jenny Robinson in her essay *(Im)mobilizing Space – Dreaming of Change* (2002) draws on Lefebvre's ideas about space as socially produced to frame a reading of Johannesburg. She refers to his concepts of "abstract space" or "representational space" and suggests that in South Africa we have inherited from the Apartheid system cites that are constructed as abstract spaces that signify a "geometric and homogenous space of separation and power, built upon dominance of the visual, of formal relations amongst objects" (Robinson 2002: 169) and that these kinds of spaces have dominated South African cities. This is illustrated by the "homogenisation and division involved in the commodification of land and the construction of alienating environments in which the possibilities for alternative spatialities are repressed". But the movement of people in cities is not necessarily about material resources and needs but about reimagining identities, "using creative cultural capacities to remake the meanings of places and communities"(Robinson 2002: 169).

Robinson suggests that the metamorphosis from the apartheid urban space to the contemporary city questions the fixity of these historically divided cities. She suggests that the apartheid city was also a place of "movement, of change, of crossings" (Robinson 2002: 164), a space in which, although the forces of order and control had a tight grip on ones movement and behaviour, the same forces had little hold over the imagination or the inner life, the dreams and imaginings of a different and better world. Importantly for this study Robinson illustrates this alternative yet co-existant reality through reference to the character Toloki in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995). Tokoli, an unemployed yet professional funeral goer walks through

a town in which:

> the rhythms of urban life have left the city centre deserted, the taxi rank quiet, the pavements devoid of shoppers and workers. Not only has the space of the city centre been changed by schedules and routines; it is changed by Toloki himself as he walks along, imagining himself a king…he imagines he owns the whole city – the skyscrapers, lights, roads. The modern city is part of the things he loves, the things and places and feelings which are part of himself…All this belongs to him, and he makes himself, his sense of who he is, through his experience of it (Robinson 2002: 163)

As Robinson points out "experiences of space are never one-dimensional. Places of exclusion might be the same places that someone makes their home, goes to work. There is still the creative potential of modern urban life" (2002: 170) They (townships) are places where people build everyday lives, imagine and reimagine themselves, and make homes from which they set out to negotiate – and change – the city spaces. Robinson draws a useful distinction between what Lefebvre calls representational space (2002: 165) and this imagined space of possibility. Representational space is "space as directly lived through its associate symbols and images…a dominated and hence passive space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate." ref….to redraw and imagine outside of the conceiving spaces of planned visions. This imagined and imagining space is however not just an alternate and secondary reality but transformative and productive of the new. This capacity to imagine and reimagine is, as the example of Tokoli shows, not a matter for the professional artist, poet or writer alone although these of course have the means to give public voice to these images, poems or novels but of every person negotiating and renegotiating, making and remaking the city "through small waves of creative manoeuvres" (2002: 170). Robinson again: "The city of everyday experience and imagination is already a different space; it is already a space of difference." (2002: 170)

Imaging Johannesburg

In this chapter I will make an attempt at exploring the varying responses of local artists engaging with the city and particularly those that reflect on the idea of the "seen" and "unseen", the visible and the invisible, in Johannesburg. The artists selected for discussion: Stephen Hobbs (b.1972), Andrew Tshabangu (b.1966), Guy Tillim (b.1962) and Sabelo Mlangeni (b.1980) are all contemporary Johannesburg based artists working primarily in the medium of photography. All are deeply engaged with the city as subject and content in their work but each has a particular and distinctive approach. Hobbs has been and continues to be a leading proponent of art in public contexts primarily as a conceptualiser of projects and as facilitator of other artists work. His own exhibited work in video, installation and photography comes out of this close engagement with the city. Tshabangu's work is located in a photo-documentary and reportage tradition in which the use of Black and White photography has been favoured. Tillim's work straddles a photo journalistic and fine art print context and his work has been presented in a series of books. Mlangeni is the youngest of these. Trained at the Market Photo Workshop, his work documenting the street sweepers of downtown Johannesburg has both a photo-documentary and more personally expressive focus.

Although there are a number of artists making work in and about Johannesburg[1], it is perhaps not purely accidental that much of the art practice engaging with the city that I have found particularly resonant with my own work is photographic. While photographs are seldom the end point in my creative process they are crucial at a number of stages. These, which I will discuss more fully in Chapter 4 below, include the initial stages of transforming the seen into image, of documenting

[1] There are a number of contemporary South African artists that have dealt extensively with Johannesburg as a subject, such as David Koloane, Sam Nhlengethwa, Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, Maja Marx etc.

and remembering, and later, after extensive selection and processing, being used as a more direct reference for the paintings's structure and form. The ability of visual media to make visible what is otherwise invisible or unnoticed is one of the unrecognised and under utilised strengths of visual art. This act of making visible, in the form of the photograph, has a potency that goes beyond plain representation. Bester suggests:

> It is in these visualisations, in this making visible, that mediums such as photography can begin to claim an important place in urban studies, and more specifically, thinking around the meaning of cities (2008: 5).

Photography has played a significant role in not only imaging the city, but also exposing these different conceptions of the city. As Bester points out the photograph can function as a means of "thinking" the city rather than just reflecting it. (2008: 5) It is generally accepted that a photograph is not just a record of light on film but that this recording, however mechanical, is produced by a particular agent at a particular time and place, and however bland it may be, it is the product of decisions made, points of view assumed and acted upon. However unaware or unselfconscious these may seem to either maker or viewer none of these decisions are "neutral" but are all bound up in social contexts, values and ideologies. Even the traffic camera triggered by the movement of traffic operates in a social and political context. What this suggests is that the photograph and its subject are a lot further apart than often presumed and that processes of translation are core to the relation between the two. The discussion which follows will particularly engage with a discussion of the processes of translation from the social and material reality of the image source to its manifestation as a signifying artwork dependent on, yet separate from, its originating source.

My interest in the particular images by specific artists/photographers is not necessarily

based a similarity of imagery but rather the conceptual and methodological processes involved in imaging the city. The reason for this might lie in awareness that photographic practice can be seen as a "series of visibilities in which seeing advances and retreats at different moments" (Bester 2008: 8) and I will argue in the following section of this paper that the process of painting operates in a similar manner. The distinction between visibility and invisibility lies at the heart of photographic process – the images produced seem to mark the point where the invisible becomes the visible. Bester's observation alerts us to the various kinds and purposes of photography: scientific documentation, journalistic commentary, artistic expressiveness, family portraiture, product advertising, etc. all of which give different weight to the general expectation of recording and presenting an image of something seen.

Johanna Burton (2005: 176) in her discussion of the artist Carla Klein quotes Barthes' suggestion that the nature of photography is that of a physical document of the "that-has-been". She suggests that this notion of Barthes' succinctly expresses all that photography is and is not. The photograph can only show what is gone; it cannot, in terms of its own material and temporal limitations, show what stands in the present. It is a marker of what came before, an absence/void. At the same time, the photograph has been generally understood as evidence of things, as the result of an existential act, an encounter between film and subject, an event that happened at a particular moment and place. While it is true that photographs are made not only at the moment of exposing the film to light by pressing the shutter release, but also subsequently in the darkroom or on the computer screen with all the selection and mediation which is possible in this transition, this sense of the image having been formed, of it becoming an image at the moment of exposure is compelling.

A case in point may be drawn from what on first sight may seem to be a practice

contrary to photography's reliance on the existential fact. The work of Jeff Wall (1946) to cite one example from what is a common contemporary practice consists of large-scale colour photographs, which seem to be clear depictions of people in various social and environmental contexts. What is revealed on closer looking is that the situations are impossible or at least unlikely to have been spontaneously witnessed by the photographer. They are instead constructed images, simulacra, in which digital technology enables disparate visual elements to be seamlessly integrated creating the semblance of believability. What is central to his practice is that the seamlessness of the joining, the invisibility of the processes of construction, is contradicted (in a sequence which lags behind the initial believability) by the awareness that we are experiencing an artifice. So, while the photograph is often heralded for its fragility, its ephemerality, its barely-thereness, its tenuous hold on reality, one should also consider that such slipperiness stands not only for the vulnerability of the medium but for its strength (and stubbornness) as well.


Jeff Wall, *Mimic*, 1982

Hobbs's *Mirage City* (1995-2007) series consists of photographic images of skyscrapers' glass exteriors reflecting off each other and presenting the resulting visual distortions in these reflections. Hobbs's Johannesburg is a synthesis of temporality, subjectivity, memory and hope, which both refracts and reveals aspects of economic, political, social and individual conditions and transitions. The monumental architecture of the metropolis, rooted in an untidy history, lacks substance not in reality, but in the reproduced image.

The built structure in the image below, *Glass Camouflage* (2002), distorts and seems to melt into itself. The image is a kind of double reflection – one



Stephen Hobbs, *Glass Camouflage*, 2002

building reflected in the glass of another. The photographer is exploring the effects of the passing of time, the idea of camouflage, what conceals itself in the "invisible" city. What is interesting here is that the photograph, as photograph, is used in a direct and relatively unproblematised way (given the Wall example above). The photograph is presented as, and read as, an accurate depiction of its subject. Rather the subject itself is chosen for its "slipperiness", its evasion of its "normal" identity. The mirrored façade literally throws off, reflects, the surroundings and in so doing becomes itself invisible. It is only the distorting ripple effect, the non-continuity of the reflection that draws attention to the subject's own materiality. It is this simultaneity of the visible and the invisible that produces the visual and conceptual content of the work.

Continuing this theme of the simultaneity of the visible and the invisible, of the destabilising of the conventionally "normal", are a series of works influenced by the type of views seen by surveillance cameras. It is perhaps not well known that the

central city is extensively covered by cameras and monitored on a 24-hour basis. This surveillance, which is increasingly becoming common practice in cities around the world in response to both crime and the threat of "terrorism", is in Johannesburg



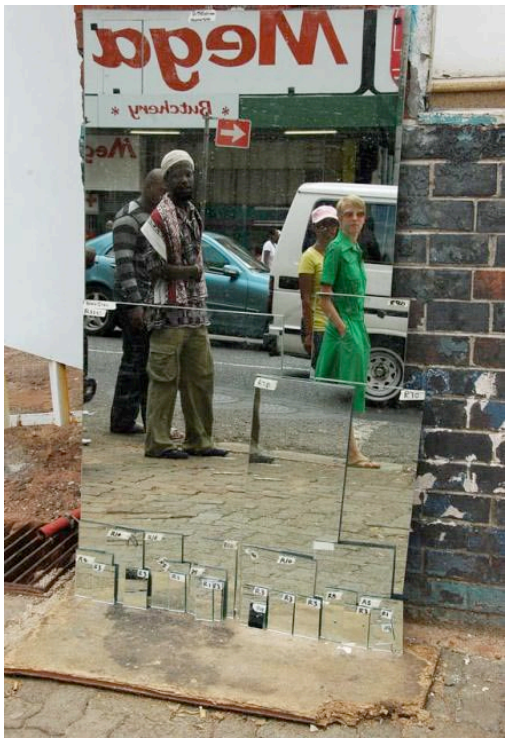
Stephen Hobbs, *Citizens of the Mirage City, 2002*

directly linked to perceptions that the city is in danger of economic and social decay. Clearly surveillance serves to help control by revealing potential and actual disorder and lawlessness. The figures in the triptych *Citizens of the Mirage City* (2002), seen from above, seem more shadow than substance. The figures are inverted, walking, it almost seems, backwards across the strip of grey static that is the road and which references the grainy image of a surveillance tape. The title of the work reveals a paradox: the "citizens" occupy a city that is just a reflection of itself while they are themselves ephemeral shadows in the harsh built environment.

Hobbs's mirages seem at a double remove from people we might imagine in the street below these tremulous, spectral structures and the images convey a powerful effect of the alienating quality of loneliness in this vacated city. He extends this idea to suggest that the very idea of fixity, the very possibility of describing the city is under question, since it is mirage-like, eludes representation. In *Ten Years, 100 Artists: Art In A Democratic South Africa* David Brodie states: "Hobbs dissects and

maps, documenting the (dis)functional systems, visual codes and imperfect patterns of urban spatial re-creation" (2005, p. 156)

All of these photographs are suggestive of a dysfunctional city, uncontained by physical, visible structures, reflected and fragmented, and transcending the ordered structural grid of the city. It is as if contradictory realities coexist: the ordered grid reads as a kind of base pattern, the set of laws and social agreements constitutive of a well ordered society with common values and patterns of agreed behaviour. This grid though is overlaid, blurred, by the messy reality of people's lives that seem at times to run counter to the official view of reality. The contradiction between the grid and the organic, between regulation and the contingent, is played out in the constant and seemingly futile attempts by the authorities to "clean the city". The clearing of so-called illegal tenants out of dysfunctional city buildings, or the arrest of street traders, is clearly a project of "making invisible" that which disturbs the desired image of a prosperous modern city.



Stephen Hobbs, *Hillbrow Walk*, 2008

Andrew Tshabangu's series, *A City in Transition* (2007) though it documents the moving, teeming life on the streets, is, as its title suggests, a contemplation of the radical shifts in the historical, economic and socio-political paradigms of the city. Tshabangu has been recording the various character shifts of Johannesburg starting with the Apartheid urban centre through to the contemporary city.

Tshabangu's images of Johannesburg in *A City in Transition* are seen through a haze of traffic fumes, smoke from street vendors' fires, rain splattered glass, and often from a slightly elevated position. Although on a superficial level these images record the minutiae of daily life and the ordinary citizens of the city in an almost documentary style, these veils of smoke and glass have the effect of constructing something around the subjects in the frame, a filter between mere observation and interpretation. The mediation of the haze, smoke, and rain between the viewer (and photographer) and the ostensible subject, while clearly documenting the visual verity of the scene is sufficiently fore grounded to demand to be considered as a signifier of more than the visual. Rather, what seems to be suggested is that these things are, as his title suggests, "in transition". Tshabangu's images and style suggest an experience of Johannesburg that is multi-layered and multi-dimensional, a city that is constantly re-configuring and re-inventing itself. More specifically, as these images are produced and read at a particular time and place, a time and place charged with a self-awareness of change, the "New South Africa", so they may be read not as a celebration of this new thing but a reminder that this is still work in progress, a thing not yet attained.



Andrew Tshabangu, Johannesburg Public Transport, 2004

In the image above the photographer has positioned himself directly above a queue of commuters waiting for a taxi, the ceiling lights of the taxi rank reflected in the window of one of these taxis. The people in the queue are chatting, holding bags of groceries, waiting for the ride home. The viewer cannot see the faces of the commuters, but is led to imagine their individualities and their commonalities for himself. Tshabangu's photograph reveals the tension between the narrative of the everyday and the broader chronicle of the city. Although the photographer's position is constantly shifting, both focally and perspectivally in his work as a whole, he always maintains a metaphysical and physical distance from his subjects. He alternates between long shots and extreme close-ups, shooting into the distance in some images and framing what is close at hand in others; and by thus making apparent the juxtaposition of foreground and background, he is alluding to his own position in the moment of the photograph.



Andrew Tshabangu, City: Informal Trading Place, 2004

This positioning, both physically and metaphorically, is brought out in *City: Informal Trading Place* (2004) above. The image is foregrounded with the side

mirror of a car, in the middle ground a ragged, abandoned tract of land is shown littered with rocks and dustbins, the ubiquitous pigeons and a street vendor selling hot food, and the crowded Johannesburg city skyline of concrete and billboards fills the distance. In the mirror is the reflected image of a towering building (the up market Parktonian Hotel). The rhetoric of the image rests on this juxtaposition of the immediacy of the piles of junk, against the facades of distant buildings, both as a backdrop to the immediate scene and, more anxiously, in the mirror, as a presence looming over ones shoulder. The buildings signify prosperity and capital value but these are immobile, faceless, distant and inaccessible, at least to the people occupying the messy square. The position, both literally and metaphorically, of the viewer/photographer is however more ambiguous. Are we/they sitting in the front passenger seat of a car, looking on but not in the scene? Does this physical distancing parallel a psychic distancing?

On the one hand, these black and white photographs record the photographer's contact with street vendors, harassed taxi drivers and the ordinary people on the streets, but on the other hand, the impact of these images resides in their proffering of the city as a space of something larger than the daily rush and grind of the people populating it and the built form of its streets. Tshabangu's Johannesburg is not a beautiful or romantic city. It is aggressive and gritty, uneasily shouldering its burden of exploding wealth and mass immigration, constantly changing its shape, and never at rest. The city through his lens seems to be feeling it's way blindly, groping in the dark and tripping over itself in the darkness.

In *To-let 378 3200 Eloff Street (*2004*)* the position of the photographer, inferred from the camera angle, is strongly emphasised by the close-up and blurred left hand side showing parts of the interior of what seems to be a taxi. The photographer and by implication us as viewers are passengers, onlookers passing through the



Andrew Tshabangu, To-let 378 3200 Eloff Street, 2004

city. Outside we see snatches of activity, people crossing the road, standing around, unaware of the on looking eye. This is figured in the image by the fragmentariness of their depiction, the cut off dark suited figure moving to the right, the woman crossing the street seen behind the glass of the taxi window. The viewer is looking out from the taxi engaged yet disengaged, part of the scene yet separated from it. We question what if anything the photographer is seeing or, more accurately, what he is making of what he sees. What is the subject of the picture? Is it the black car across the street or the “to let” sign on the building opposite? So while this seems to be a random subject-less snatch of life, the image in evading the expected focus on a framed subject highlights the cities resistance to interpretation, the separation between form and meaning, between the visible and the invisible.

And below the view through the window, a unauthorised looking in on someone’s privacy, is made possible by the broken window, a disruption and inversion of the normal function of the window who’s transparency is compromised by neglect but

which is paradoxically opened by a violent smashing through. It is however unclear which is the inside and which the outside, are we looking in on someone unaware of our intruding gaze or looking out from the safety of the room to an "outsider?" It is this unsettling quality of self-awareness, of being implicated in the photographers gaze, that make these images so disturbingly powerful.

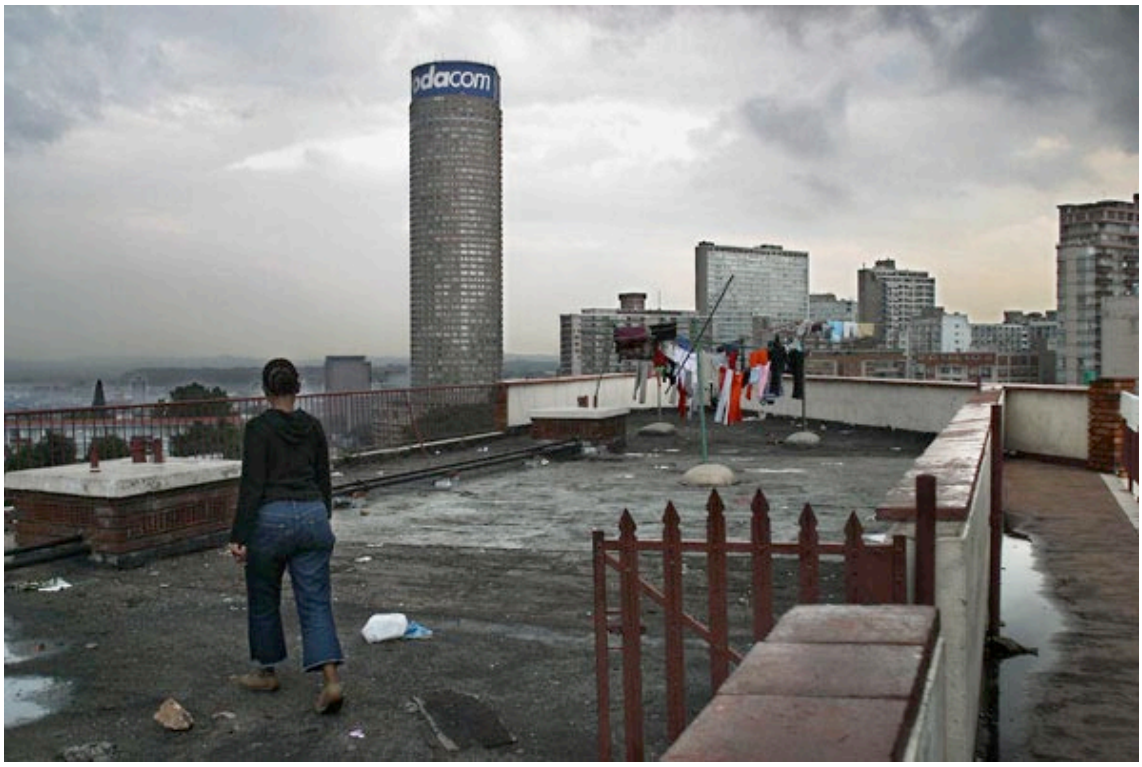


Andrew Tshabangu, Unemployed Man, 2004

*

Guy Tillim's series of images *Jo'burg* (2004) tell a complex social and political story through glimpses into the lives of residents of Johannesburg's inner city. Tillim photographed this series over a 5-month period in 2004 during the time that the city council implemented its contentious policy of evicting and reclaiming Johannesburg's inner-city apartment blocks. Many inner city building were at that time abandoned by their owners after the abolishment of the Group Areas Act in 1991. Left at the mercy of negligent managing agents and slum lords and living

in abject poverty and decay, the people in these photographs often live without electricity or water as their living spaces deteriorate around them. Similarly to Tshabangu's Transition series, these photographs also straddle the uneasy divide between documentary images and mediated scenes, reflecting on rather than merely picturing a lived reality.



Guy Tillim, Al's Tower,a block of flats on Harrow Road, Berea, overlooking the Ponte building, 2004

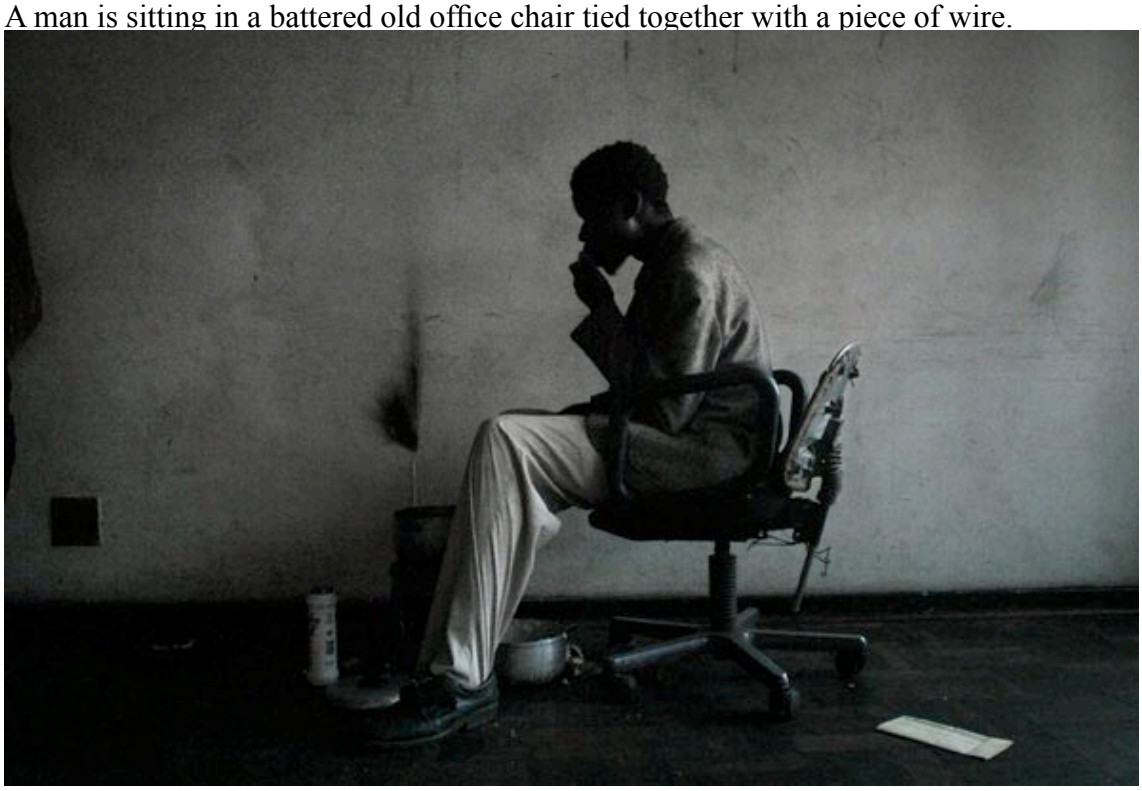
In this series of photographs the physical structures are largely in the background, and the meaning of the spaces/places is primarily extracted from the presence and movement of the people who inhabit these buildings. As Bester (2008:) notes:

> This photographic visibility is one of a peopled collation of the city, in which there is an abiding sense of a temporality that is bound by the temporariness and transition of human habitation. (Bester 2008:)

The image of a woman on a rooftop in *Al's Tower, a block of flats on Harrow Road, Berea, overlooking the Ponte building* captures an ominously dark moment, the rain passing, the fragility or temporariness of the tottering clothes line, and

the unknown destination of the woman. She seems is not walking directly to the clothes, which seem rather to be a counterpoint to her, one of the two characters on the roof, both temporary and wind swept. The sky is dark with storm clouds, and the puddles on the roof suggest a recent downpour. The view of the Ponte Tower beyond is an iconic image of a particular kind of Johannesburg. Ponte Towers was built at the moment of the collapse of high apartheid as a desirable modern urban living conglomeration, but the changing demographics of the neighbourhood and the flight of capital from the city led to the buildings deterioration. This shift can be seen as emblematic of a change seen as a rapid deterioration of the possibilities of the "New South Africa."

A man is sitting in a battered old office chair tied together with a piece of wire.



Guy Tillim, Mathews Ngwenya at his place in Sherwood Heights, Smit Street, 2004

The chair is significant, a throwaway of a different lifestyle, the smart office desk suggesting a work in pleasant air-conditioned surrounds, contrasted to this rudimentary situation. On the floor sits a cooking pot and a container of salt, beside a paraffin burner that has left a sooty burn mark on the bare wall. The man is sitting close to the wall and is positioned just off the centre of the image. The photograph

is taken from a slight distance, but close enough to give the sense that there is a wall behind the viewer/photographer, and so the viewer gets the sense of being with the sitting man in the confined space of a room but not part of his world. The viewer seems to be looking on rather than interacting with the moment.

Tillim's photographs in the series *Jo'burg* attempt to dislocate or surpass a construction of the city as a coherent geographic space. In these images that address a ragged and embattled social and economic aspect of the city, Tillim uses particular tactics and techniques that allow him to attribute or restore agency to his subjects. There is often a dramatic manipulation of colour and saturation which seems to infuse a cinematic "noir" into the lives of the subjects creating the sense of the subjects as "characters" rather than just anonymous subjects. He also alternates points of view, obscuring and revealing, sometimes partial views of a person through a cracked window, a still life of a room, or a candid shot that seems stolen in a moment of unawareness. These are strategies that both allow the photographs to offer an image of an individual or group of people in physical space as well as providing a commentary on their location in metaphysical space.

*Manhattan Court, Plein Street (*2004*)* clearly demonstrates Tillim's strategy of foregrounding a glimpse. The ironic contrast between the name of the building and the obvious degradation of the actual place is stark. A woman's hand is shown resting on a windowsill where the windows have long since lost their glass panes. The photographer is clearly standing close to the red jersey'ed person whose left furthest arm is visible. A girl, seemingly unaware of the photographers gaze, leans on a parapet, framed through the broken window frame. In the courtyard there is evidence of domestic routine with washing dripping on the line. The windows in the corridor behind the girl are boarded up with scraps of cardboard and plastic, the institutional grey enamel walls chipped and scuffed, bearing the scars of human traffic in the dilapidated building.



Guy Tillim, Manhattan Court, Plein Street, 2004

As in the first image, *Sherwood Heights, Smit Street* (2004) reveals an exploration of the idea of the top of buildings as marginal spaces, the space of the hidden; washing lines, servants quarters, lift motors; but despite, and perhaps because of this, places where these "in-between" people find a place however temporary. This rooftop scene is set against the anonymous façade of the building on the left, which, at first presents a face of order and efficiency, but later raises questions of how the building is actually being used behind the ordered façade.



Guy Tillim, Sherwood Heights, Smit Street, 2004

This series by Sabelo Mlangeni, unambiguously foregrounds the theme I am exploring in its title, *Invisible Women* (2006). The series documents the female street cleaners who are the guardians of a dark world of decay and chaos. They are "on the brooms" sweeping and bagging the swirling piles of garbage in the early hours of the morning when the city has been emptied of its daytime traffic and the occupants have retreated into their spaces.

In *Uniform* (2006) below, the figure has been cut in half, and all that we are presented with is a body armoured with plastic bags, workman's shoes and big rubber gloves. The darkness seems to be creeping down the alley and the armoured figure suggests an uneasy truce with the dangers lurking in the dark recesses of the city.

The blurred figures in *Invisible I, II and III* (2006) (I*nvisible I* and *II a*bove) seem to



Sabelo Mlangeni, Uniform, 2006

be waltzing along the street with their brooms. There is a frenzy of activity captured in the stillness of the dark. Mlangeni captures the surreal quality of Johannesburg's

late-night, littered streets and the overwhelming nature of the work facing these women. Armed with brooms and spikes, and wrapped in protective plastic, they seem to merge with the trash that they are trying to clean up.


Sabelo Mlangeni, Invisible I , 2006


Sabelo Mlangeni, Invisible II , 2006

His methodology adds a particular quality to the purely documentary, so that the women he describes as invisible are indeed spectre-like, resident in shadows, hidden by darkness. Mlangeni is exposing those things which happen that no one sees, an just assume will be done somehow, he tries to engage with the actual people working in dangerous spaces, normally invisible but here engaging with the photographer in an unusual situation. Mlangeni humanises his subjects, individualises them through his framing and direct engagement with the woman in the image, but at the same time he comments on how invisible they actually are, blurs at the edge of our vision, in a constant round of cleaning night after night, a task never complete.


Sabelo Mlangeni, MaMthethwa, 2006


Sabelo Mlangeni, MaNdaba, 2006


Sabelo Mlangeni, MaXulu, 2006

Mlangeni's work also demands comparison with the other photographers I have selected that are dealing with aspects of inner city life. Despite the common perception of the city as a frenetic bustle, they all have in common a fascination with emptiness.

In this chapter I have surveyed a number of works by artist/photographers working with Johannesburg as subject. Hobbs, Tshabangu, Tillim and Mlangeni are all in different ways working with the themes of visibility and invisibility evident on both formal and conceptual level. Building on this analysis I am going to go on to discuss the work of two contemporary international painters. This will act as a transitional chapter to my own work as a painter in the final section in that I have chosen two artists whose work in painting engages both with the city as subject and with photography aIn this section I will shift focus somewhat to introduce a discussion more closely directed to painting. This intervening section will make some space for a consideration of the relation between painting and photography both in general conceptual and historical terms and more particularly in relation to my own use of photography as part of the painting process.

I am going to argue that painting can be as or if not more of a valid medium for engaging with critical debates and discourses around social realities. Painting's specific concern with depicting social landscape is not about reportage but interpretation. The photograph can only show what is gone; it cannot, in terms of its own material and temporal limitations, show what stands in the present. It is a marker of what came before, a witness to absence and the void. The photograph's strength lies in its fragility and ethereality, but such slipperiness also stands for the vulnerability of the medium.

Painting the City

In this section I will shift focus somewhat to introduce a discussion more closely directed to painting. This part, intervening between the discussion of Johannesburg as subject in the first section, and a discussion of my own work done as the central part of this project in the final section below, will make some space for a consideration of the relation between painting and photography both in general conceptual and historical terms and more particularly in relation to my own use of photography as part of the painting process. I have selected two artists Carla Klein (b. 1970, Netherlands) and Julie Mehretu (b. 1970, Ethiopia) working in an international context for discussion as case studies. The choice of these is motivated in the case of Klein by the ways in which her paintings use photographs of urban situations as a source in ways that bears close comparison to my own processes, and in the case of Mehretu by the ways in which her work responds to the subject of the city.

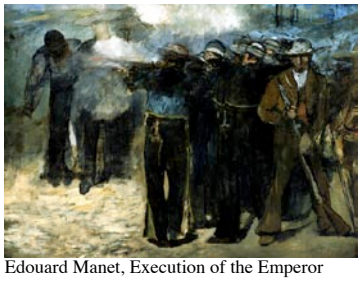
The relationship between the photograph and painting has been strained since the invention of photography in the 1830's when the validity of reproducing an image in paint was questioned. This fraught relationship has been played out between the "objective" and the "subjective", the reductive and the additive. I am not going to delve deeply into this discussion, since it has been very thoroughly covered in numerous studies over the past century. A seminal text surveying the theme, however, is that of Aaron Scharf whose *Art and Photography,* first published in 1968, provides an extensive discussion on the impact photography had on painting since its development in the 1830's.

Scharf provides extensive documentation on the ways in which photography radically affected artist's attitudes to both composition and to subject matter. A particularly cogent example (Scharf, 1968:66) is that of Manet's original painting of *The Death*

*of Maximilian (*1867*)*, the composition of which is shown to be closely influenced by contemporary newspaper photographs of the event. This influence is most clearly seen through a comparison with an earlier painting, by Goya, of a similar subject, the *Execution of the Defenders of Madrid 3rd May 1808* (1814). Manet's composition avoids the pictorial rhetoric of Goya's heroic martyrs, brightly lit in the centre left of the composition, counterpoised against the dark ranks of anonymous soldiers on the right, in favour of a bland evenness of handling in Manet's case. Clearly the move between these two is in the direction of an objective realism, an apparent lack of commentary, encouraged by the example of the photograph.


Francisco Goya, The Third of May, 1808: The Execution of the Defenders of Madrid, 1814


Detail: original collage of press photograph-source for Manet's first Execution of Maximilian 1867

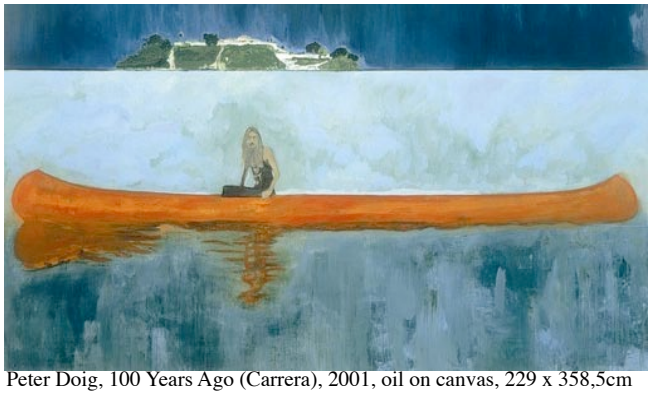

Edouard Manet, Execution of the Emperor Maximilian, 1867

There are numerous examples in 19th century European painting of similar influences: these include the informality of Impressionist composition in which arbitrary cropping and partial inclusions of figures and objects bear the marks of the unselective photographic frame as seen in contemporary snap shot images. Equally, the effects of transient movement evoked through blurring derive from effects typical of contemporary photography's slow film and shutter speeds. (Scharf,1968:170) In this, photography could be seen as enhancing the capacity of painting to represent the world in a veristic way.

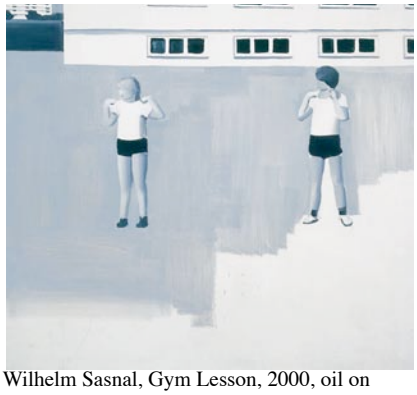
The broad history of subsequent European painting however moved in the opposite direction, conceding the field of naturalistic representation to photography. It is not my task here to detail this history apart from noting the Modernist moves from Post Impressionism through Cubism to the positions adopted by High Modernism

in the 1960's. A seminal text for this position is Clement Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting' from 1965, published in the *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000* (Harrison, J & Wood, P., 2002: 785-787). Here Greenberg argues for a situation in which each art form strives to "entrench itself more firmly in its area of competence", in those aspects of its material practice which are unique to itself and which then act as a guarantee of independence and quality. (Greenberg 1965: 785) It would do so by focusing on that which was unique and irreducible, that which was unique to the nature of its medium: paint, colour, mark, the flat surface of the canvas and the fundamental visuality of the experience offered. (Greenberg 1965: 786) For painting this would inevitably lead to the abandonment of the representation of recognisable objects and more generally a rejection of narrative.

This essentialising impulse, characteristic of the Modernist project generally, did not survive the radical changes of thought introduced by Structuralist and Post Structuralist thinking which gained general acceptance from the 1970's onwards. At the risk of extreme generalisation, this train of thought emphasised the relative and contingent nature of meaning production as an active social process located in specific historical, social and political contexts. For painting this encouraged a re-evaluation of narrative and of depiction seeing these now not as unproblematic "natural" ways of representing the world but as specific languages located in history and culture. Hence the so-called rediscovery of painting in the late 20th C emblemised by the famous 2005 exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery, London: *The Triumph of*



Peter Doig, 100 Years Ago (Carrera), 2001, oil on canvas, 229 x 358,5cm



Wilhelm Sasnal, Gym Lesson, 2000, oil on Canvas, 150 x 150cm

Painting which showcased artists such as Dumas, Tuymans, Havekost, Sasnel and Doig among others, all of whom had established oeuvres as "representational" painters to varying degrees.

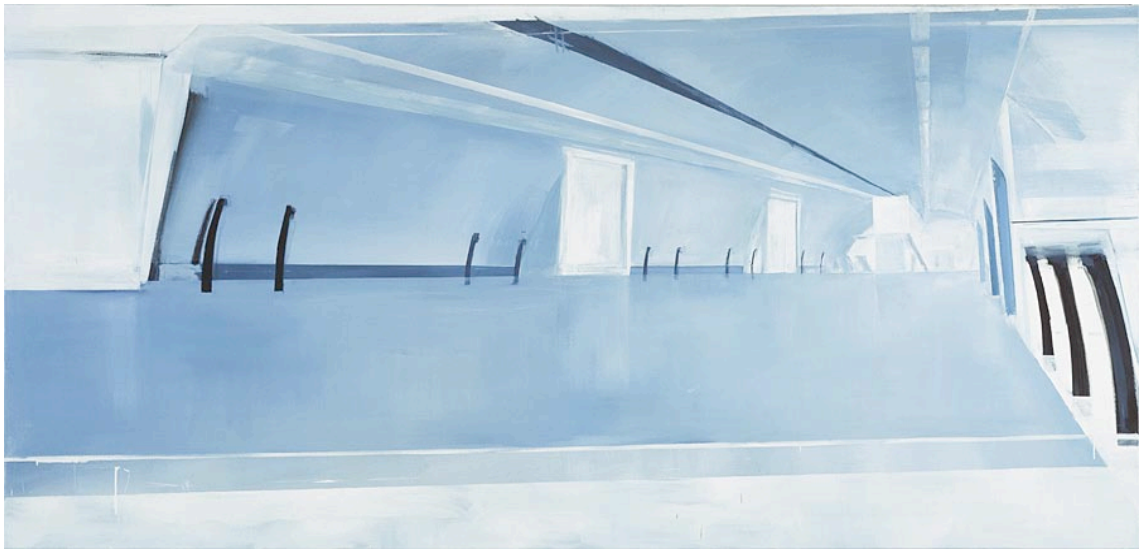
Certainly it is these painters, who actively embrace a heterogeneous and pluralistic approach to painting which allows for complex mixtures of verism, abstract mark making, accumulation, invention, photographic depiction, collage, drawing etc, who provide the immediate set of references for artists of my, subsequent, generation. Two of these are the painters Carla Klein and Julie Mehretu. As mentioned above, my choice of these as exemplary artists for this project is motivated in the case of Klein by the ways in which her paintings use photographs of urban situations as a source in ways which bears close comparison to my own processes, and in the case of Mehretu by the ways in which her work responds to the subject of the city.

> …a good painting is a work in which several layers, meanings, times and realities come together. However, this wealth of suggestion and association is not shaped by the accumulation of an abundance of signifiers. It originates in the very absence of that accumulation. …paintings here balance between figuration and abstraction, whereby images are both made visible and are withdrawn from sight, meanings appear and disappear… (Bangma, A. 2000: 25)

Carla Klein uses a predominantly monochromatic palette to present images of anonymous, empty containers and architectural spaces. Her subjects include anonymous sites and structures that become points of departure, or concepts of form, that become filtered through the works abstract construction. At once expressionistic and emotionless, the works suggest more than they reveal. Primarily devoid any clear living presence, the paintings instead reflect traces and residues of life and movement. They exist between abstraction and representation.

The particular paintings I am interested in examining are based upon images of underground parking garages and anonymous architectural sites such as airport

terminals and vertiginous views down office buildings. The spaces she depicts seem almost intangible; the locations are often points of departure, or transitory landmarks. The works are primarily devoid of any clear living presence, yet the paintings do reflect artefacts of life and movement. These images reflect more the imagined reality than a site of real space or actual experience.



Carla Klein, Untitled, 2001, oil on canvas, 129,5 x 200,66cm

In the painting above *Untitled*, (2001) Klein has made use of her characteristic monochromatic palette, the subtle blues and greys blending into one another to create a shimmering ephemeral space. The interior is given some structure by the linear perspectives of the floor and the ceiling, and the curved stripes of the walls. It appears to be a corridor in an airport, but it could just as easily be a tunnel in the underground railway. The almost total lack of any significant features asserts the feeling of an obscured reality.

In *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, (2002: 176) Johanna Burton speaks of Klein's paintings with reference to linguist Roman Jakobson's notion of 'shifters', words that are meaningless until we activate them, words like you, me, here, there that 'slide indexically from referent to referent'. These kinds of words are virtually invisible – they remain meaningless until they are used. In the same way

she suggests that paintings "…can be filled with meaning only because they are so empty to begin with." (Burton 2002: 176)

Klein uses her own photographs as preliminary sketches for her paintings. The initial photograph and its subsequent abstraction represents a layered approach to inducing visibility, and reveals the levels of mediation that frame the experience of an urban 'reality'. (Burton 2005). By this I mean that her paintings reveal that which is not visible through a purely representational image. The images are initially captured by the camera and then re-thought, re-invested by the paintbrush.

In the painting below, Klein has used a much darker palette than in the previous work, but still it is almost a tonal study in the monochromatic deep blues and white. The image appears to be a view down the interior shaft of a multi-floored building. Again though, there are almost no hooks to give any indication of the real architecture. One can just make out some circular objects clinging to a wall on the left, which may or may not be coiled fire hoses. There is a definite sense of vertigo and a vague malevolence.



Carla Klein, Untitled, 2001, oil on canvas, 160 x 200,66cm

However, Klein's unreal architectural spaces do conceptually blur the border between painting and photography. The photograph could be a metaphor for her work: empty, formal constructs that attempt a mirroring but become an enigmatic filter through which the actual reality must be translated. Klein's paintings therefore highlight the camera's role as a mediator and not just a direct capturer of 'reality'. This use of the photograph is common in much contemporary painting and is close to my own working process. In *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960's to now* (2007), Ralph Rugoff, in his essay: 'Painting modern life' (2007: 11) quotes Charles Baudelaire's examination of the painter's role as a capturer of the "transient, the fleeting, the contingent" set out in *The Painter of Modern Life*. According to Rugoff, Baudelaire advocated a way of painting that would not compete with photography, but would instead "fuse reportage with the 'high philosophical imagination' of art". (Rugoff 2007: 11) and that the modern painter should explore and confront his social context rather than merely reflect it. Rugoff argues that the layering of information in a painting: the drawing, under-painting and multiple layers of paint, requires more time to process than the immediate flat surface of a photograph, thereby allowing painting to extend its "conceptual reach". (Rugoff 2007: 15) By drawing on these "traditional elements of craft", painting, Rugoff argues, can "critically decelerate" our reading of social and urban contexts. (2007: 16)

The flicker between photography and painting, in Klein's hands, offers up access to a quite liminal space and time — one that is neither now nor then; here nor there but somewhere suspended between them. (Burton 2005)



Carla Klein, Untitled, 2001, oil on canvas, 150 x 260cm

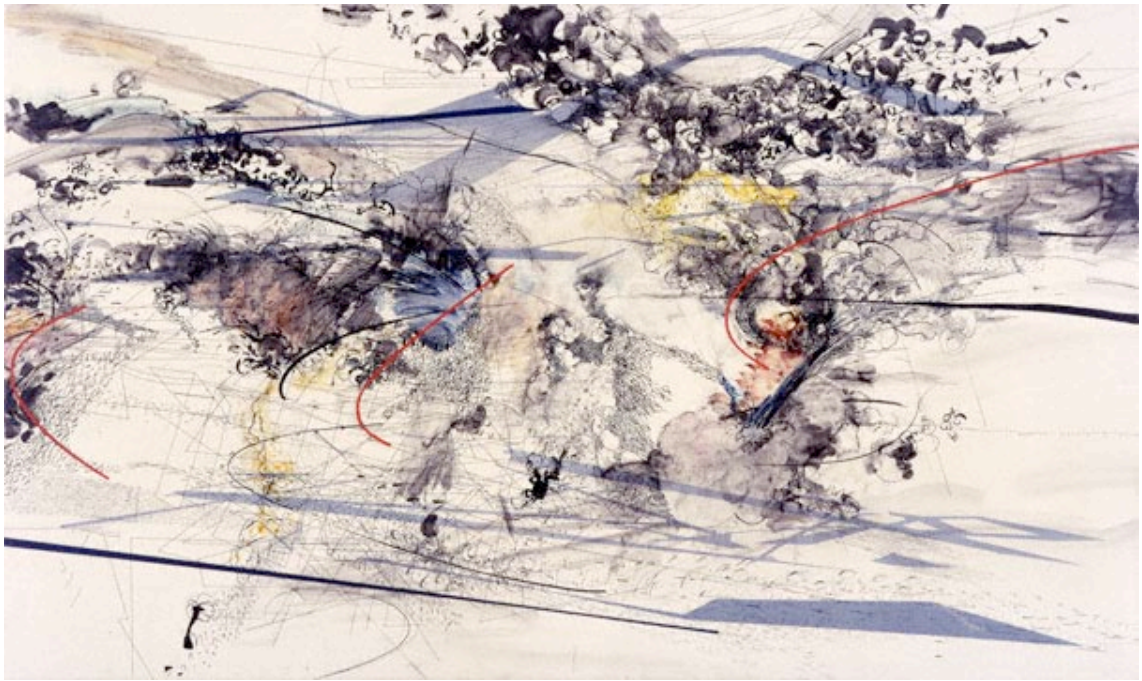
The paintings of Julie Mehretu consist of complex compositions of imagined composite cities, part abstract painting and part ‘animated urban-scapes’ (Dailey 2002: 214). Her large, abstract paintings explore the issues of mobility, social organisation, political conflict, and the anxiety of globalising cities. They are gestural paintings, built up through layers of paint on canvas overlaid with pencil, pen and ink drawing and thick streams of paint. Mehretu’s work presents a layering and compression of time, space and place. In her highly worked paintings, she creates new narratives of cities, histories and geographies. These images become a way of “signifying personal social agency”, as well as unravelling greater social constructions. (White Cube: 2009)



Julie Mehretu, Congress, ink and acrylic on canvas, 178 x 260cm

Mehretu’s initial starting point reflects the compressed architecture of densely populated urban environments. She overlays specific architectural structures,

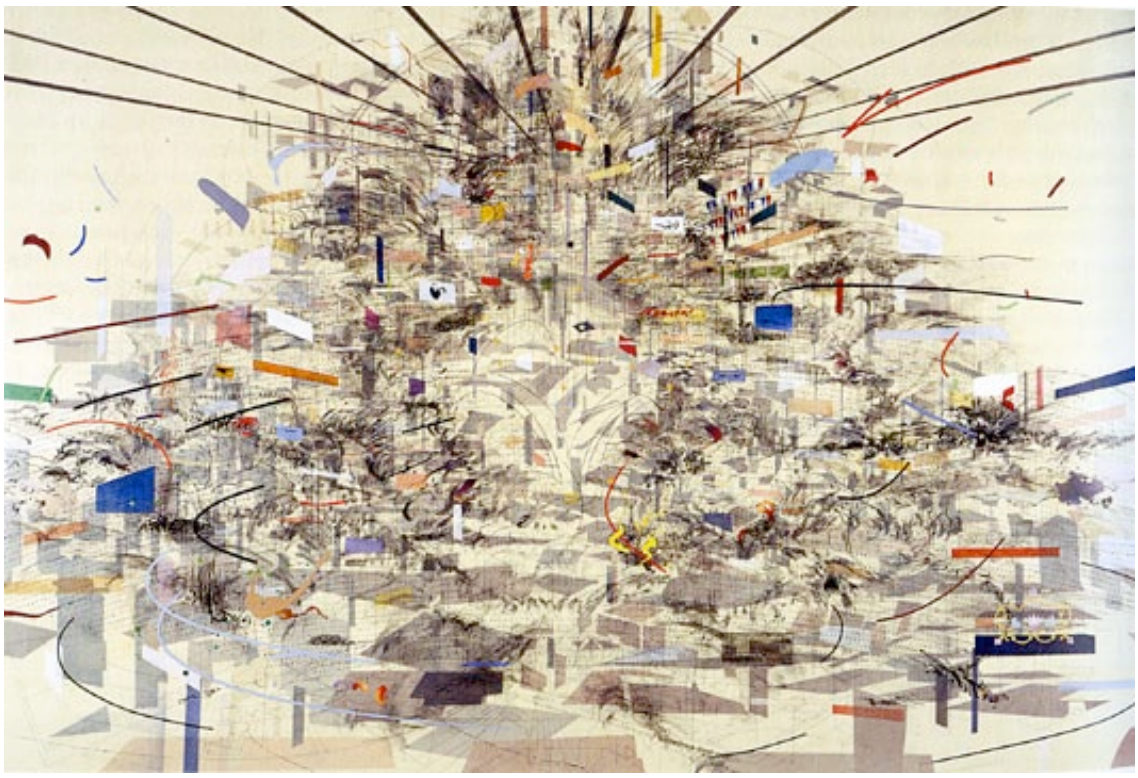
building plans, city maps, architectural drawings and geographical charts, all seen from different perspectives. Lodged in her abstracted images are elements of unknown architectural blueprints, maps and specific sports arenas. Mehretu's overlays and erasures of information show how each new level becomes a foundation for new iterations, stories, and identities. Dailey (2002: 214) suggests that Mehretu critically scrutinises "organising models of rigid urban planning, reflecting the notion that it is possible to impose a rigid structure on some thing as fluid and unstable as a city and its inhabitants"The resulting images are dense constructions of aerial views, cross-sections and isometric diagrams. Mehretu has described her works as 'story maps of no location', as pictures into an imagined, rather than actual reality. (White Cube: 2009)



Julie Mehretu, Trancending, The New International, 2003, ink and acrylic on canvas, 271 x 600cm

Trancending, The New International (2003) above, presents a tumult of visual signs: a gridded city becomes fluid and flattened, with multiple, often conflicting, viewpoints. The image is composed of layers, fragments of architectural drawings, airbrushing and ink wash circulating as a process of describing spaces that coalesce

as they fall apart. In *Vitamin P,* Meghan Dailey notes of Mehretu's paintings that 'each formal layer could be seen to signify a specific point of view or perspective… the active, moving composition representing the living whole'. (2002: 214)



Julie Mehretu, Empirical Construction, Istanbul, 2003, ink and acrylic on canvas, 294 x 457cm

In her *Stadia* paintings such as *Empirical Construction, Istanbul* (2003), Mehretu depicts urban imaginaries, cities as built, dismantled, and rebuilt over time, yielding structures and spaces that reflect ongoing urban change. In the centre the viewer can see the building of the stadium. Towards the edge of the image the stadium begins to falls apart and the viewer finds himself looking at it from the exterior and the interior simultaneously. Mehretu uses swirling dashes and calligraphic marks to create masses of characters that seem to be battling against the architectural structures. These marks of people appear to be simultaneously constructing and deconstructing the structure. The painting draws the viewer into the structure, at the same time as turning the structure inside out, exposing multiple viewpoints. At the heart of Julie Mehretu's paintings is a question about the ways in which we

construct and live in the world. However " when asked whether she sees herself as a political artist, Julie Mehretu replies that she is a painter" (Schuppli 2006: 60)

*

What does it mean for a painter to think? I hope to have gone some way to showing ways in which painting can be a valid medium for engaging with critical debates and discourses around social realities. Painting's specific concern with depicting social landscape is not about reportage but interpretation. The photograph can only show what is gone; it cannot, in terms of its own material and temporal limitations, show what stands in the present. It is a marker of what came before, a witness to absence and the void. The photograph's strength lies in its fragility and ephemerally, but such slipperiness also stands for the vulnerability of the medium. My interest in contemporary painting is as a conceptual practice that operates as a platform for investigating social realities. Painting then, offers the possibility of both building up complex layers of meaning and signification, and at the same time the possibility of subtraction and distillation, enabling suggestions of real and imaged absences and presences. I suspect that because of this possibility of multiple layers of signification, and the processes of distillation and layering of information that eventually result in such dynamic wholes, painting can and must function as a legitimate mode of discourse in and of itself, a theoretical and political practice in which the act of making visible is a political act against invisibility. The visible withdraws as much as it advances. The significance of painting as a critical act of creating visibility, allows for the possibility of making a meaningful contribution to urban and social discourses through visual media. So by exploiting this potential, painting can aspire to playing a substantial and significant role in public discourse.

Painting Johannesburg

I lived abroad for a number of years, and returned to Johannesburg two years ago. Travelling gives you a new perspective on where you have come from, and you almost only begin to understand a city once you have left it. It gradually became apparent to me while I was away that there were aspects of Johannesburg, my hometown that almost eluded definition. I began to explore more carefully what exactly made Johannesburg so particular. The first thing I realised was that the city is made up of so many diverse realities and experiences – just walking down the street where I live in Braamfontein, I hear so many different languages spoken, so many inadvertent and overt displays of cultural difference. I started to see that despite the physical geography and architecture, there was very little that could be directly pointed to and claimed to be Johannesburg. From ¬here I began to explore the idea of Johannesburg being a city that existed in the minds of the inhabitants, a city that was made up of these multiple realities, sometimes intersecting and sometimes diverging.

The *Dark* series are a number of paintings made during the first half of 2008. They all have their origins in a huge body of photographs taken from the balcony of my 15th floor apartment in Braamfontein, mainly during the night. I have a spectacular view north that stretches all the way across Johannesburg and to the Magaliesberg Mountain range. At the time I was working on these paintings Johannesburg was going through a series of blackouts (so called scheduled load shedding), and on those evenings the city would be plunged into a pitch-black darkness, absolutely no depth of field or visible landscape. There was a definite sense that life had stopped for that time of darkness, that everyone was literally ‘in the dark’. The only lights were from cars moving on the freeway and the Johannesburg Hospital on the horizon. It seemed that everyone was waiting, holding their breaths until there was light

again. No one seemed to move. Then suddenly after a few hours the power would come back on with a thunderous bang, and the lights seemed to shine so much brighter, so much more luminously. Suddenly too, there was evidence of life. People moving around in their apartments silhouetted against the lights inside, security guards in the office blocks and complexes, street lamps illuminating the tramp who lives on the corner, and the BP petrol station's green glow lighting the petrol attendants. Floodlit football fields meant the roar of crowds blowing vuvuzelas, and then there was the ubiquitous police and ambulance sirens, and the occasional gunshot from Hillbrow. Everything came alive. Visually it was a remarkable experience, and seemed worth documenting.

It is important for me to note that although I work almost exclusively from photographs, I am not a photographer. Photographs operate for me as preliminary sketches and studies. I will often shoot the same scene night after night, gradually looking for subtleties and homing in on details that take time to reveal themselves. Out of the process of taking these images there grew a sense that there were more 'skins' to these scenes than where visible in the photograph. I began experimenting with pure black oil paint , trying to find the texture and subtlety of the darkness through modulations of matte and gloss surfaces. I have since also started working with more subtle monochromes and harsh contrasts.



Dark (Astroturf), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 150 x 180 cm

Astroturf was the first painting of the series, and turned out to be the quite different from the works that followed directly after it. I used a much closer or more focussed composition, leaving out almost all depth of field, as well as locating the focal point in the centre of the canvas. The canvas is large and almost square, which draws the eye to the centre of the composition. It was probably the static-ness of this particular composition that I found most disturbing and so I began shifting my compositions to the edges of the canvas. However the monumentality of the ersatz green field, with the one bright floodlight does have a hypnotic pull. The difused light just catching the trees on the left of the field are very thin washes of a dirty grey black linseed oil. The silhouetted trees in front of the field are quite thickly built up, and form physical ridges on the green paint suggesting a minor perspectival shift.



Dark (Pirates vs. Chiefs), 2008 oil and enamel on canvas, 120 x 166 cm

This was the first painting that I feel achieved a real sense of the city at night. The foreground is rather bare, but the structure of the street grid is described in the modulations of gloss and matte areas of paint. The bright white of the stadium lights is harsh against the pitch-blackness – what other details there may have been are outshone. I chose to work on a smaller canvas with this image because I wanted the distant details to be more intimately experienced, for the viewer to get a sense of involvement.



Dark (Officepark), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 135 x 165 cm

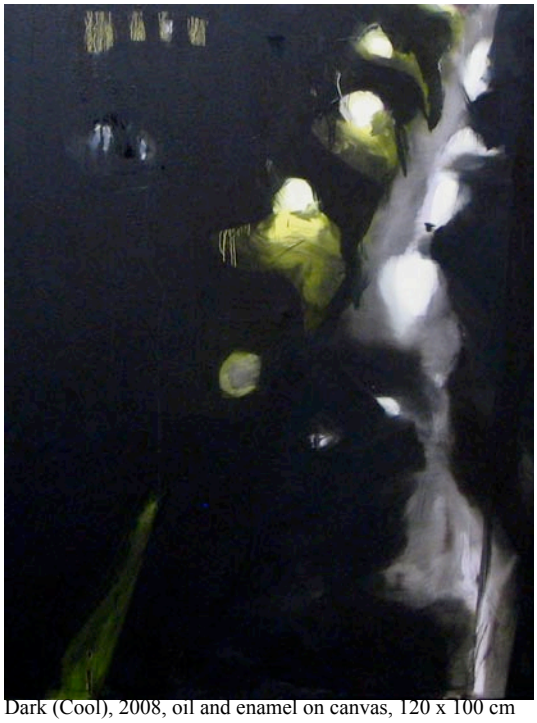
This is a large painting, 135 x 165 cm. The view is looking east from my balcony onto an office park across the street from my apartment. Further to the right is Constitution Hill and then Hillbrow. The glossy angular shape outlines the roof of the adjacent building. The centre of the painting is virtually empty of any signifying structure, but the illuminated blue driveway suggests the area surrounding the office block. The orange streaks at the bottom right corner are the pavements of my street lit by the sodium vapour streetlights' orange glow. The modulations in the tone of the black areas are in fact light reflections on the gloss areas of paint, and are not actually differences in colour.



Dark (Pirates vs. Chiefs II), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 165 x 180 cm

Dark (Pirates vs chiefs II) was extremely difficult to paint, and never seemed to get anywhere until I erased a big chunk of the field, leaving a big black patch of dripping black gloss enamel paint. (detail) Part of the problem with this painting is also the central focal point, which draws you eye immediately to the centre of the canvas, in the process of which you give only a cursory look at the rest of the composition. This seems to work against what I am talking about in this series of paintings, that of trying to see what is invisible. Like *Dark (Pirates vs Chiefs)* these photographs were taken on the evening of March 18th 2008.



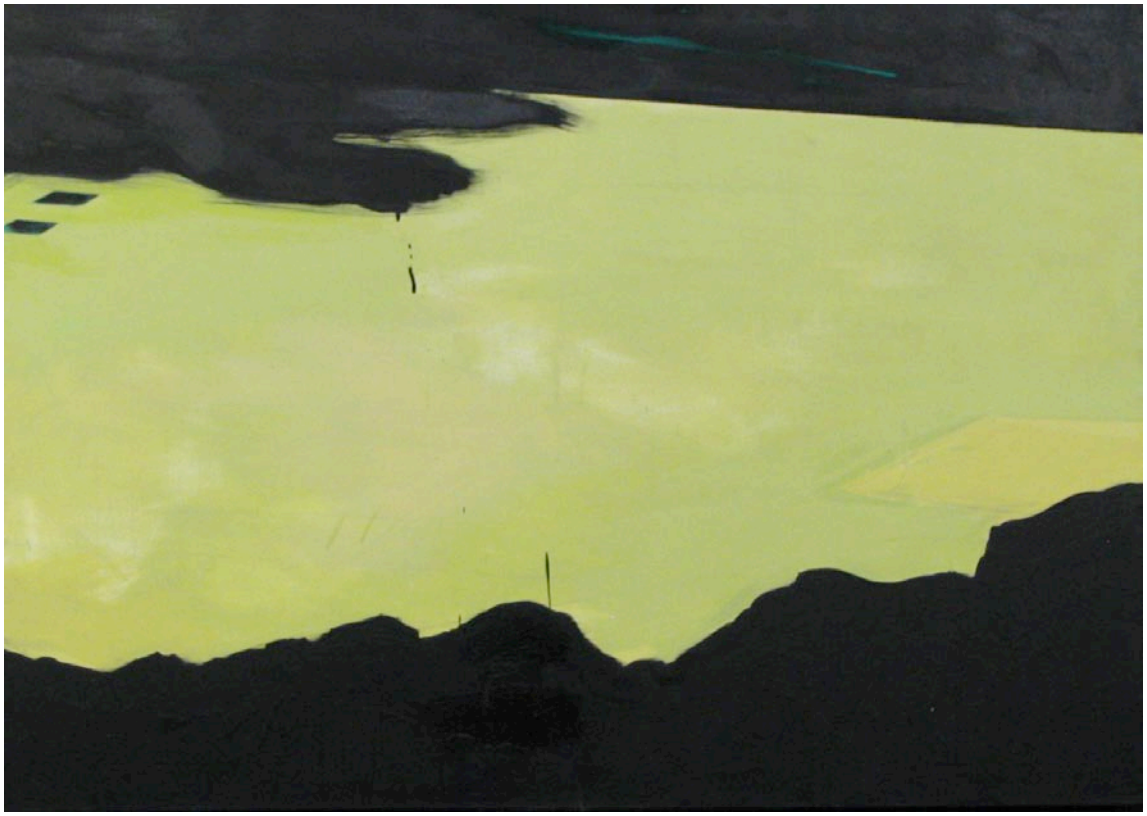


Dark (Cool), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 120 x 100 cm



Dark (Warm), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 120 x 100 cm

These two paintings were painted together and are far smaller that the other work in the dark series. These began as studies in different colours of light – between the sodium vapour orange and the halogen white, and the different effects on the mood of a painting. In 'Warm', a pair of headlights emerge from the shadows, and the streetlamps cast an eirie gloom on the otherwise empty street. In 'Cool' the luminescent white light falls over trees, and onto wet tarmac. I was trying to get the sense of the swish of tyres on a wet road late at night, that slightly melancholic isolation of the warm car speeding through space. In both of these paintings I have tried to invoke the same malevolent darkness as in Mlangeni's *Invisible Women* series, the sense of a movement in the dark suggesting some hidden activity unseen by most.



Dark (Track And Field), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 150 x 120cm

This painting developed out of a number of different photographs. The initial image was a plain floodlit field, but during the time I was working on the painting, I began photographing a series of images of people in various formations and processes of movements, parades, football matches, spectator crowds, etc. The photographs below influenced the composition strongly, in that they helped clarify for me the importance of an invisible focal point. As is the other works in the series, I was consciously trying to suggest the empty space that formed the visual focus of the activities on the field.

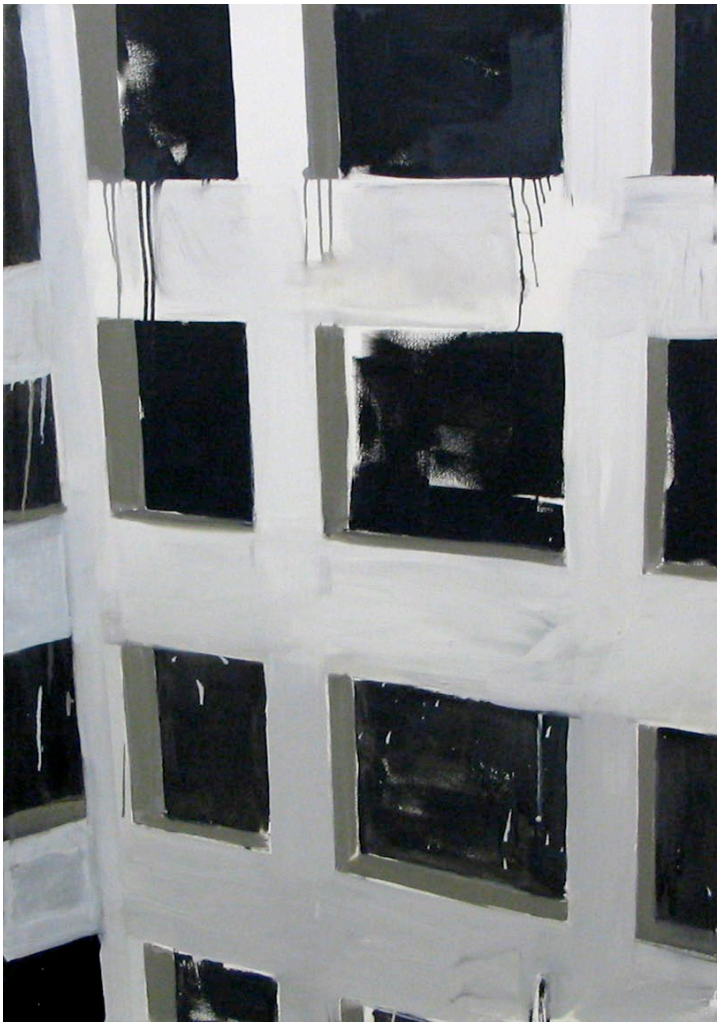






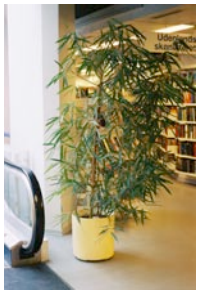


These are part of the series of photographs that became the secondary sourse for *Track and Field.*



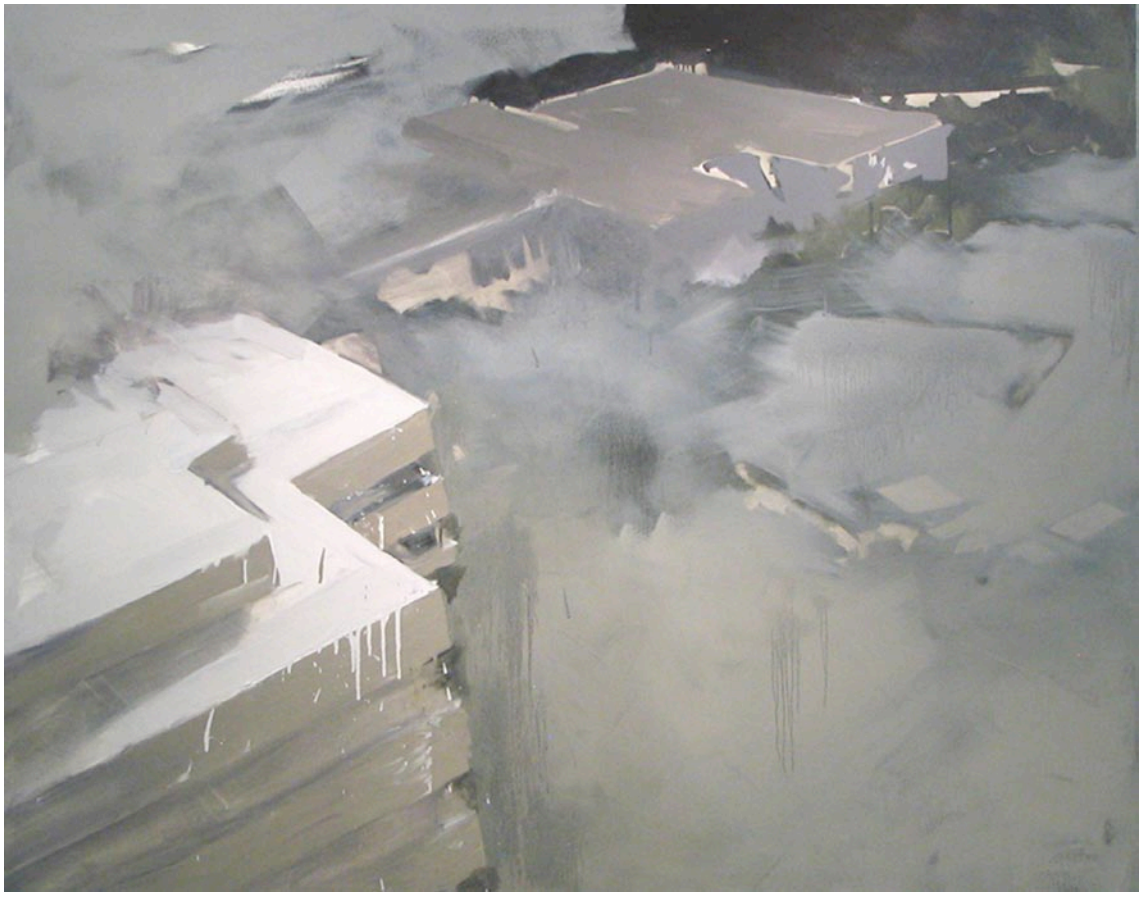






Grey (An End Has A Start), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 105 x 150 cm

The work that followed the dark series is a progression from the pitch black night to the grey fog of the very early morning. The images are taken from the same balcony with the exception of that above. This painting developed out a a series of photographs I shot whilst still in Copenhagen. It is the main public library, the only place that had any books in English, which became a kind of refuge for me when I was overcome with that deep melancholy of being a foreigner in a strange country. The sense of alienation I felt at times was very similar to feeling that I in fact didn't exist in that reality. I was completely out of time and place. So this painting is as monochromatic as I could get, trying to develop the idea of a bleached out reality, an ephemeral suggestion of tangibility only. The title, *An end has a start*, as with the other works in the *Grey* series, is based on the title of a song from an album by



Grey (Loose In The Air), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 130 x 165 cm

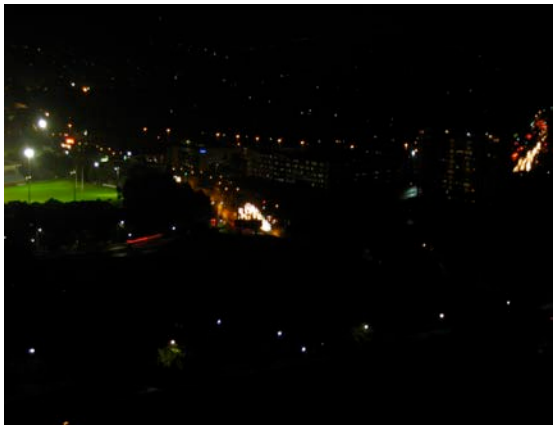
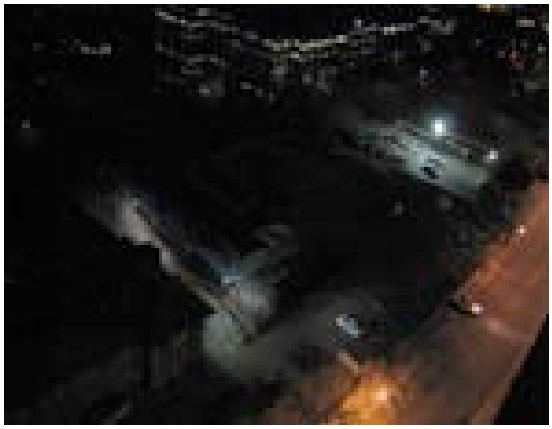
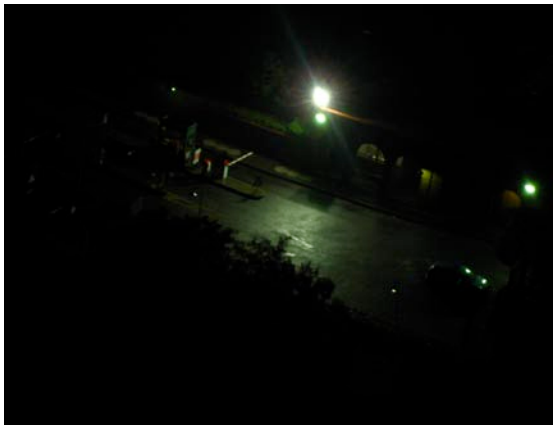
Editors that I was listening to at the time I was painting. The following two works are part of the same progression - *Loose in the Air* (above) and *Everything All the Time* (overleaf). Below each painting I have placed the originating image, which shows the progresion in the transition between the *Dark* series and the *Grey* series.

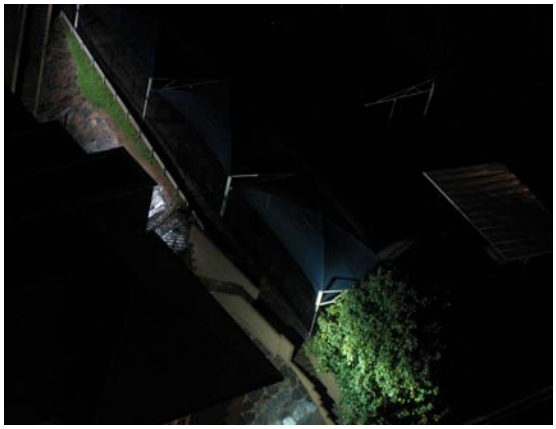
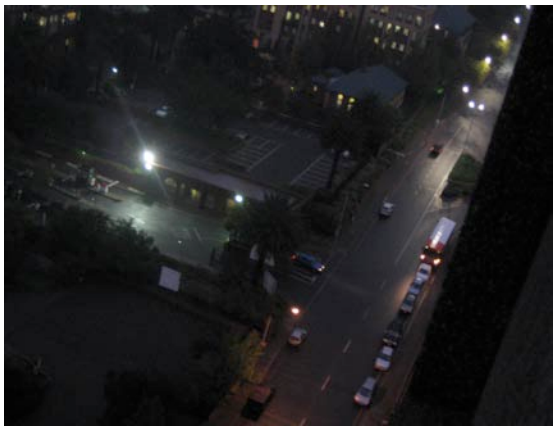


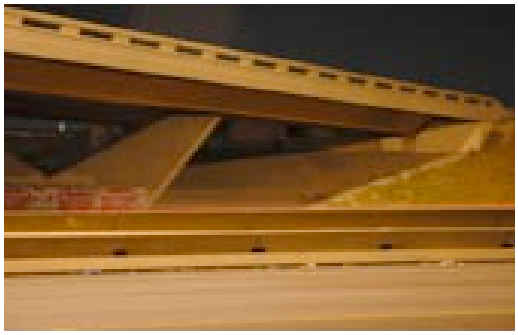


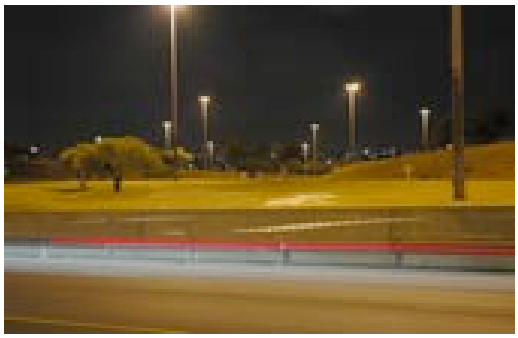
Grey (Everything, All The Time), 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 105 x 150 cm

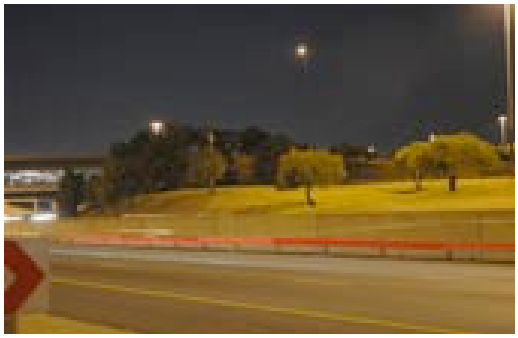


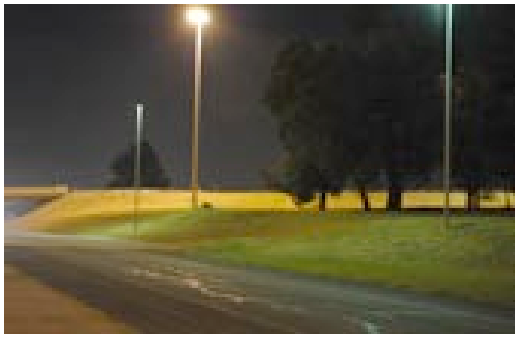




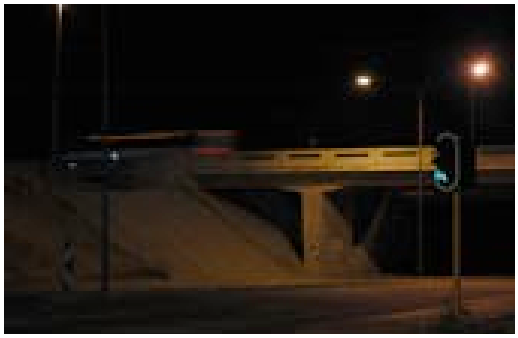












This series of photographs was the intersection between the previous bridges and overpasses. I began photographing the empty freeway in the early hours of the morning, before the major commuter traffic began. There was such an eirie atmosphere, the total silence, and then the occasional whoosh of a pantechnikon. The floodlights cast such a vivid glow, and the colours were so remarkably crisp. I never used any of this series as source for any actual painting, but they were the spark for the conceptual shift actual empty space to an implied lived reality and suggestions of movement, ie I began to think about what was actually happening in the empty characterless constructions I had been examining.

These alien structures marked the beginning of my interest in space, and non-place. It arose out of my own lived experience of Johannesburg, and the way I moved around and imagined other peoples' movement patterns through the city. The Apartheid era contributed to a massive infrastructure of freeways around the city, mostly directed north with the purpose of allowing the white middle class to spread into expanding suburbs. This was at the time when cities across the globe were being designed with the suburban commuter in mind, travelling from areas with large properties and quiet streets, far away from the hustle and bustle of the city.



Bridge (Heavy), 2005, oil and enamel on canvas, 150 x 165cm



Bridge (Beautiful), 2005, oil and enamel on canvas, 125 x 165cm



Bridge (Light), 2005, oil and enamel on canvas, 120 x 165cm

conclusion:

The primary aim of this research report was to contextualise, document and critically reflect on the body of paintings, which take the urban landscape of Johannesburg as subject matter. By doing this I meant to articulate the processes of producing this body of work that involves multiple and complex stages of translation from initiating sources: the visible and invisible city, aspects of the social/urban environment that can be seen or recognised, and those that are obscured or hidden. While the seen and unseen city is a constant subject of these works, the paintings, as paintings and not just as images, aim to assert a material and partially autonomous presence that carries meaning and significance beyond the bounds of depiction alone.

I began with an overview of the ways in which Johannesburg has been pictured in the popular and critical imagination. I discussed a number of defining tropes: Johannesburg as distopian space, a space of crime, violence and dissolution, and a counter image of Johannesburg as a space of opportunity and progress; with a particular focus on conceptions of visibility, evidence of citizenship, ways of belonging to and possessing the physical and imagined spaces of the city. I concluded that this constant presence of multiple imaginings and realities, dichotomies, creates a city that is at once a visible and invisible space.

I continued the exploration of the idea of a city being constructed in the imaginations of its inhabitants by looking at a number of current theoretical discourses dealing with urbanism and space/place studies, with a particularly focus on those that examine the rapid evolution and urbanisation of contemporary African cities. Filip de Boeck, for example, in *Kinshasa, Tales of the Invisible City*, developed an image of an invisible city, composed not only of the physical and visible urban reality but also of the local social and cultural imaginaries, through which the inhabitants

continue to make sense of their worlds and invent cultural strategies to cope with the breakdown of urban infrastructure and stability.

I also examined the work of a number of South African writers, among them Jennifer Robinson, Achile Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall and AbdouMaliq Simone, all of whom discuss in one way or the other, the potential of an imagined space, populated by people using, making it, experiencing it, and imagining of the modern city differently. The city in the minds of these authors is envisioned and experienced differently by every person in it, and so the whole seems to exist almost entirely in the imaginations of its inhabitants.

From there I continued to expand on the idea of an imagined city through a discussion of the photographic work of a number of South African artists working with Johannesburg as a fundamental subject and working with the subject matter in a way that directly relates to my own practice. Stephen Hobbs, Sabelo Mlangeni, Guy Tillim and Andrew Tshabangu all worked with images and imaginings of Johannesburg in a way that has parallels with my own practice. I also discussed the work of two international painters, Carla Klein and Julie Mehretu whose paintings mirror my own in the processes and subjects used by these artists. These photographic and “painterly” examinations prompted me to try and shed some light on how the relationship between painting and photography has developed in the past century, and on the current understandings of the relationship between the two. I concluded that since a return to “representational” painting, which both builds on and breaks down the photographic image as a source, and that the processes of translation from the social and material reality of the image source to its manifestation as a signifying artwork dependent on yet separate from its originating source, is of critical importance.

Painting offers the possibility of both building up complex layers of meaning and signification, and at the same time the possibility of subtraction and distillation, enabling suggestions of real and imaged absences and presences. Because of this possibility of multiple layers of signification, and the processes of distillation and layering of information that eventually result in such dynamic wholes, painting *can* function as a legitimate mode of discourse in and of itself.

The final part of this research report is a discussion and examination on the body of work that has prompted this document. The works here are a selection from a larger body of work and are documented visually and by way of detailed description of the source and genesis of the individual works. The paintings themselves will be presented in the form of an exhibition that comprises a number of paintings along with a number of associated photographic works exploring the same territory, displayed for the purposes of illustrating the processes of translation and production.

The research that comprises this report has been compiled over a number of years, and this is I think evident in the development of the paintings. My very early interest in the architectures of the conduits of the city, freeways, overpasses etc, gradually led to the ideas I have presented here, and to a clearer understanding of the processes involved in the production of a specific work. This body of work is by no means at an end, and I intend to extend even further my examination of this city, through a deeper exploration of specific trajectories of imaginings, and a tracing of the paths that are constantly tracking across the urban scape.

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