

GWENNETH MILLER

MEDIATED SYSTEMS

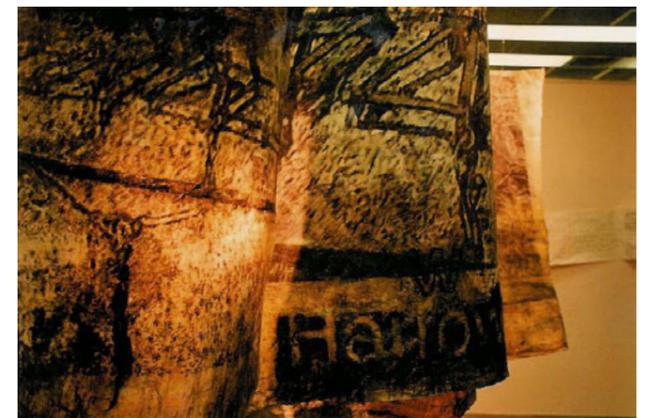
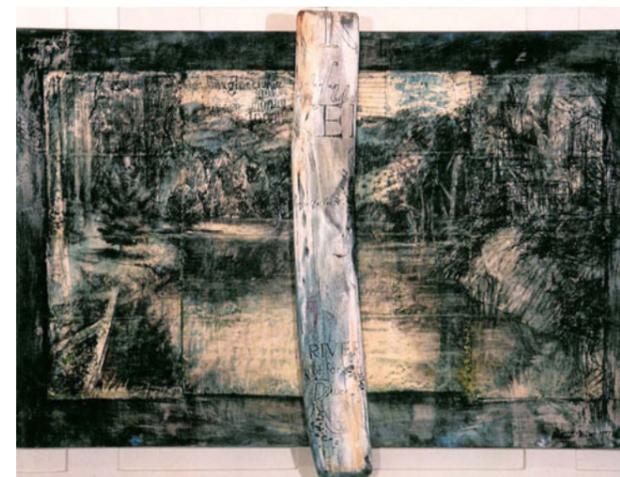
The act of visualising the *relationship between different systems* forms the conceptual base of the current body of work that I am developing. One can trace this idea to some of my earlier works that were created whilst I was working towards my MVA. Works such as *Life water* (1996) and *River of forgetfulness* (1996) revolved around the background of systems of seeing and systems of understanding. Both works formed part of an exhibition that explored strategies to embody a contemporary sublime, in the sense of presenting the impossibility of understanding. In some ways this seems like a lofty ideal, but for me it dealt with a very common striving that I experienced – the ability for a person to make some connections and have particular insights into the world, yet at the same time accept that much of our complex world lies beyond comprehension.

The visual systems that I looked at were based on an analysis of Romantic portrayal mechanisms and how we build up references to help us observe the world. The layering of systems of understanding is usually not acknowledged by the viewer. In the *River of forgetfulness* (1996), it was of interest to me how the pictorial presentation of a site in nature (like a dam I photographed in Mpumalanga), became heavily saturated by all the images presenting nature that I knew as an art student. Therefore

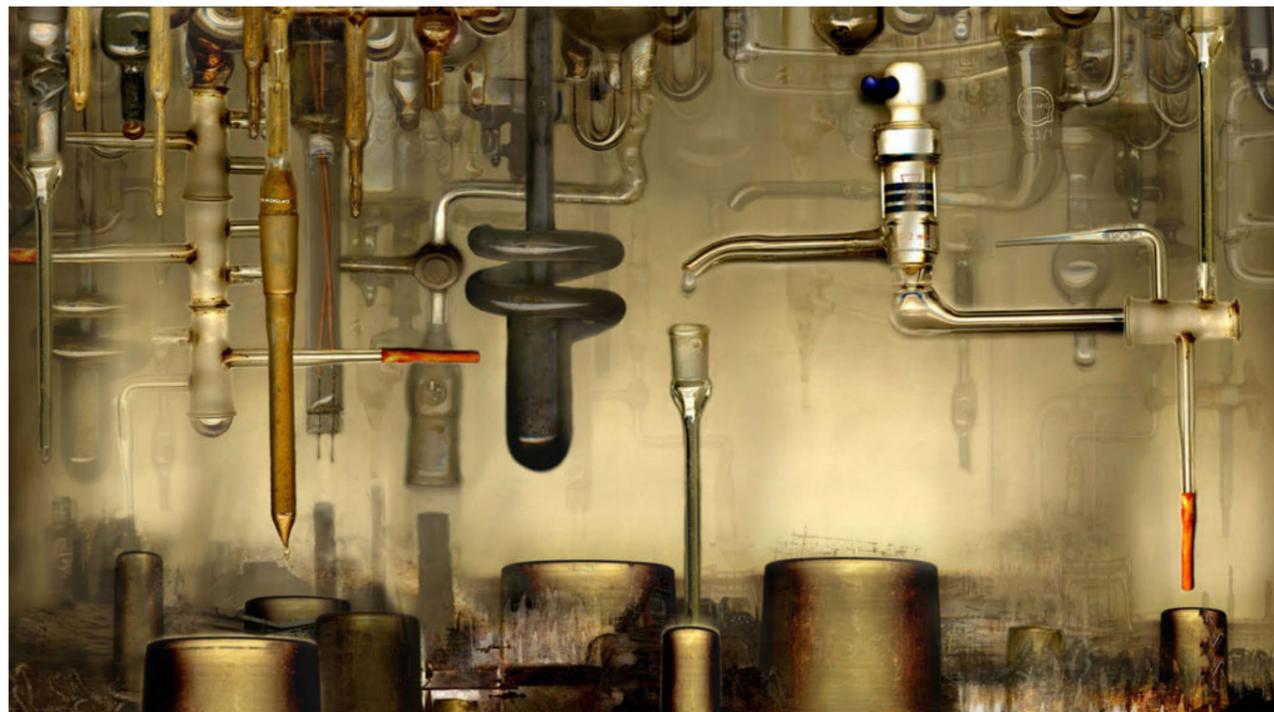
my observation of this site, my mere looking at it, was layered by my memory – ‘baggage’, that blocks the clear perception of a site.

The title of *River of forgetfulness* refers to the mythological river ‘Lethe’. According to myth, if you drink the water from the river you forget all that is past. For me, the codes of knowledge and layering of systems not only enriches and encodes understanding, but also blocks out previous ways of understanding, just as the fabled river makes one forgetful. The use of the punctured filter or funnel in the mixed media painting *Life water* is also a representation of a system that loses value – where much of the water that is poured through the funnel will be lost and not reach the bowl.

The next pivotal work, *Earth skin* (2000), considers the relationship between our living off the land and depicts the earth as an entity with potential to be scarred. This site-specific work started its exhibiting schedule in Lady Grey and changed form each time it was exhibited in the year 2000, reflecting sensitivity to the four sites where it was presented. In this work, the order and structure of a place (where it was exhibited) imprints its system on the artwork itself, in a process of negotiating and assimilating meaning.



TOP: *Life water*, 1996. Collaged drawings on wood with oil painting, beeswax and inlaid sticks; 95 x 54 cm. | **BOTTOM:** *River of forgetfulness*, 1996. Charcoal drawing on paper and board with beeswax, oil paint and overlaid wood; 90.5 x 122 cm. | **RIGHT:** *Earth skin*, 2000. Charcoal drawings on layered Vylene with oil painting, beeswax and hair embroidery; format variable.



TOP: *Holy relics*, 2008. Limited edition digital print: Ultra Chrome Inks on Hahnemuhle paper; ± A1.

BOTTOM: *Continuum system*, 2009. Limited edition digital print: Ultra Chrome Inks on Hahnemuhle paper; 53 x 95 cm.

The works created from 2008 onwards consider *acts of ordering* where they apply the tools of one 'world' – that of the scientist – to create several other imaginary worlds: industrial, urban or simply imaginary systems of control. When my father-in-law gave me most of his old laboratory equipment, along with several of his notes and publications, my limited understanding of the science of chemistry spurred my own, rather odd, system of ordering. These scenes of mediated 'laboratories' form the current output of work that will be exhibited in 2011 as part of an exhibition that forms the visual focus of my doctoral research. It will be exhibited in context with other artists in a curated show that investigates the dialogue between digital and traditional art methodologies.

The initial work of this series: *Holy relics*, engages with the concept that science has taken the high ground during the last century – particularly in relation to religion and the 'soft' sciences. In this work the glass laboratory components are firstly seen as precious collectable items and then secondly, they imply redundancy: owing to the escalation in technological development some even relatively recent objects belong to another technological age. The collection of randomly selected glass represents mundane, yet at the same time, very rare objects that were specially manufactured for Dr Leonard Miller, a scientific researcher who practiced in Germany and later in South Africa. The visual conversation between the calculated arrangement and the glowing atmospheric quality refers to the mind's organising habit and furthermore implies the elevation of our rational mind, which possesses romantic over-

tones of religious paintings of the past. The work considers the idea of a quiet intervention, positioning given objects in a new contemplative space, unsettling the original familiarity. In the work *Continuum system* (2009), I work with the idea that physical matter or energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be transformed or redirected in a closed system. 'Continuum', a term borrowed from a mathematical context, refers to transitions as opposed to discontinuities. In a time where progress is still associated with expansion and industrial development, the consideration of the earth as a closed system has jolted us into urgent responsibility. The grime we create comes back to us in unwelcome structures that dictate alternative rules.

In an organised society of a constantly changing world we attempt to measure, control and determine the reality through regulation. The use of laboratory glass equipment recalls the continuous alliance between technology and our urban lives. This representation speaks of the values of purity and intellect that society puts forward, yet underneath it the organic imperfection of physical existence labours on. The system feeds and, at the same time, withholds sustenance from the decomposing urban cityscape.

The idea of being constantly measured by society is on the one hand related to a world of supreme peaceful order and on the other hand, to the control that suppresses individuality and that breeds revolt. The visualised system is also a rather nostalgic reflection on the impossibility of living spontaneously.

This work is closely related to an earlier work *Urban night* (2008) where the translation of the lab glass altered into droplets started the concept of an enclosed world. *Urban night* considers intervention of science as looming and ambiguous. Laboratory burettes and pipettes are about to rain down like luminous droplets, enshrined through light and dense configuration. I particularly enjoyed the play between the illusion of glowing glass and the same glass presenting the grime of the urban landscape.

I conclude with another urban landscape, a mediated hybrid space of panoramic vastness and industrial sites. The title *Homo Viator* refers to the human being as a traveller searching for spiritual fulfilment, a displaced witness to the community of humankind, literally meaning 'pilgrim man'. In this work the stance is critical, in that the figure is in the attire of the scientist observing the technological world he has created, adrift with smog. This figure is also "homo technologicus", technological man, referring to the ability of manipulating his/her environment with either dire or impressive consequences. Formally this work is a parody on

Caspar David Friedrich's 19th century landscape painting, *Wanderer above the mist*, a work that reflected the Romantic sentiment of harmony in sublime vastness of nature. Friedrich evoked tension between awe, being part of the splendour of nature, and terror, an insignificant issue of humankind. In my work, glass laboratory components are used once again to construct the land. The visual conversation between the assembled industrial scape and the glowing atmospheric quality sets up a theatrical dystopia, which recalls the overtones of Romantic paintings, yet asserts that this is an artificially raised reality. The work *Homo Viator* is a transcoding comment across time, the spaces of the natural and the artificial. On the one hand the work engages with our inability, as wanderers, to connect: in the presence of undesired spectacles, the work places the traveller centre-stage, yet renders him incapable of reaching the vastness of his doing. On the other hand an environment situates our being, as much as we construct its physicality.



Urban night, 2008. Limited edition digital print: Ultra Chrome Inks on Hahnemuhle paper; 50 x 45 cm.



About Gwenneth Miller

Born in 1962 in Musina, South Africa, Gwen studied at Potchefstroom University, completing the B.F.A. degree in 1984 and a postgraduate educational diploma in 1985. She held several exhibitions under her maiden name, McLellan and since marriage in 1993, exhibits as Miller. She completed the M.F.A. at University Pretoria in 1997 and is currently registered for a DLitt et Phil at UNISA. She lives and works

in Pretoria, lecturing at UNISA where she is the current head of Visual Arts. She exhibits nationally and internationally, and has participated in 108 group exhibitions, 4 solo exhibitions and several collaborative projects. She works in a range of traditional two-dimensional media and in digital media. Her works are represented in private and public collections, such as Absa, Telkom, University of the North-West, UNISA and Sasol. <

Homo Viator, 2010. Limited edition digital print: Ultra-chrome on Hahnemühle paper, 43,4 x 26 cm.



Walter Battiss
Desert
Screen print
450X640mm
10/30

November 2010 Marcus Neustetter *In motion*

December 2010 Walter Battiss *Screen print exhibition*

January/February 2011 Mark Kannemeyer (Lorcan White) *Solo exhibition*

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