

Chrisél Attewell | Artist Portfolio





Photograph of studio with work in progress, January 2026.



Work in progress, January 2026.

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Artist Bio

Chrisél Attewell (b. 1994, South Africa) works across painting, lens-based media, and installation. Her practice grows from both love and anger: love for people, for the earth, for what feels alive, and anger at the damage, greed, and violence that cut through it. She lives in that contradiction, wanting to hold onto the world while desiring to escape its overwhelming presence.

Her work begins outside, in the landscapes she moves through. She walks, listens, and gathers. Stones and pigments hold weight and memory. She collects experiences, recording encounters through photography and video. Together they form a living archive of curiosity, a way of staying present to the world.

In the studio, these gathered elements enter a process of alchemy. Materials are treated as collaborators with their own histories. Through mixing, layering, and erasure, her process shifts between surrender and control. The paintings often read as topographic maps, rooted in place yet shaped by imagination and the quiet act of escape that unfolds in making.

Each piece is an act of attentiveness and a defiance against indifference, a way to keep caring, to keep looking, even when it hurts to see.

Attewell holds an MAVA from the University of Johannesburg (2023) and a BFA from the University of Pretoria (2016). Her work has been exhibited at Art Cologne, 1-54 London, Contemporary Istanbul, and the Investec Cape Town Art Fair. In 2024 she participated in the Kommagene Biennale in Türkiye, creating a collaborative land installation titled Hands of Many on Mount Nemrut. Recent solo exhibitions include Rain Shadows (UJ FADA Gallery, 2023), Heat Waves (Berman Contemporary, 2024), and Earth is “a” Story We Inherit (OiR Art Hub, Mongolia, 2025).

Artist Statement

I work towards telling a complete story. As a South African artist shaped by a multifaceted and layered history, I feel a responsibility to look closely, hold contradictions, and stay with the full weight of a place or moment. I move between painting, photography, video, and installation because I feel that no single form can carry the weight of the layered stories and contexts that shape the landscapes I work in. Each material opens a different door, and together they build a world where many ways of seeing can sit together. Looking closely is the method: form, pattern, and colour pull me in, and that attention guides how each piece takes shape.

While I work with an ethic of completeness, I am suspicious of neat conclusions. The aim is not resolution but accountability and care. The work invites openness and curiosity. I leave fluidity, texture, and visible brushwork in place so that decisions stay legible. I let one medium check another. A photograph can anchor a body of work; paint can digest experience and carry feeling; video can hold the time it takes to notice. I choose materials for what they do to attention: clay slows the eye, water pushes chance into a surface, pigment from a site ties the work to that ground. I am always willing to revise these choices. If a move feels too tidy, I undo it until it breathes.

If the work succeeds, it gives a truthful pace to seeing, keeps complexity intact, and lets various materials speak together so a full story can be seen and felt.



Image courtesy of Manyatsa Monyamane



Tankwa Artscape, 2024.

CV

Education

- 2023 MA in Visual Arts, Cum Laude, University of Johannesburg
- 2016 BA(FA) Fine Arts, Cum Laude, University of Pretoria

Solo Exhibitions

- 2025 Earth is “a” Story We Inherit. Ulaanbataar, Mongolia. Curated by Ulziibat Enkhtur.
- 2024 Heat Waves. Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg. Curated by Els van Mourik
- 2023 The Weather Report Promised Rain. Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg. Curated by Els van Mourik
- 2023 RAIN SHADOWS. UJ FADA Gallery, Johannesburg.
- 2020 SOCIOGENESIS: Resilience Under Fire. Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg. Curated by Els van Mourik
- 2019 Substratum. Lizamore & Associates Gallery, Johannesburg
- 2018 Architectus Konstruksie. Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK), Oudtshoorn, Western Cape
- 2018 Under Construction. Assemblage, Braamfontein, Johannesburg

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2026 SAFFCA Spring Salon. Brussels, Belgium
- 2025 Shared Stories, curated by Jana Bednářová, State Convention Centre, Shillong, Meghalaya, India
- 2025 Outside In – Inside Out, curated by Leli Hoch & Christa Swart, Gallery Glen Carlou, Paarl, South Africa
- 2024 Pretty Brilliant, curated by Els van Mourik, Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg
- 2024 The 2020s: new forms of abstraction – part 2, curated by Els van Mourik, Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg
- 2023 Young Birds Learn to Sing in Springtime, Artsy viewing room, presented by Berman Contemporary
- 2023 The 2020s: new forms of abstraction – part 1, curated by Els van Mourik, Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg
- 2023 Reimagining: New Perspectives, curated by Morgan Kunhardt, Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg
- 2022 Making and Interpreting Art in 2022, SARChI Postgraduate Exhibition, curated by Dineke Van der Walt
- 2022 WORK IN PROGRESS: Chrisél Attewell & Gina vd Ploeg. Berman Contemporary. Curated by Els van Mourik
- 2022 WORKS ON PAPER, curated by Els van Mourik, Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg
- 2021 ARTISTES DE LA TERRE: Chrisél Attewell & Barbara Schroeder. Berman Contemporary. Curated by Els van Mourik
- 2021 The Liminal Space, Berman Contemporary, curated by Morgan Kunhardt. Johannesburg
- 2021 Making and Interpreting Art in 2021, SARChI Postgraduate Exhibition, curated by Dineke Van der Walt
- 2020 Learning to Breathe Differently, Berman Contemporary, Curated by Els van Mourik, Johannesburg
- 2019 ArtLadies, Berman Contemporary, Curated by Els van Mourik, Johannesburg
- 2019 Collecting Contemporary, Lizamore Gallery, KKNK, Oudtshoorn
- 2019 SAFFCA Group Exhibition, Gerhard Sekoto Gallery, Alliance Française, Johannesburg
- 2018 Unsettled, ABSA Gallery, curated by Thabo Seshoka, Johannesburg
- 2018 Talking to Deaf Ears, ABSA Gallery, curated by Sarah McGee, Johannesburg
- 2017 Thami Mnyele Fine Art Awards, Coen Scholtz Recreation Centre, Kempton Park
- 2017 Young Capital – White Noise, Joburg Fringe, Curated by Mbali Tshabalala, Johannesburg
- 2017 Sasol New Signatures, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
- 2017 Fresh Produce, Turbine Art Fair, Curated by Rolihlahla Mhlanga, Johannesburg
- 2017 My XXX, Innibos National Arts Festival, Curated by John-Anthony Boerma, Nelspruit
- 2016 Sasol New Signatures, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria

Art Fairs

- 2025 Investec Cape Town Art Fair. Berman Contemporary. Cape Town
- 2024 Investec Cape Town Art Fair. SOLO section, curated by Sean O'Toole. Cape Town
- 2023 Art Cologne. Berman Contemporary. Cologne, Germany
- 2023 Investec Cape Town Art Fair. Berman Contemporary. Cape Town
- 2022 Contemporary Istanbul, Berman Contemporary. Istanbul, Turkey
- 2022 Investec Cape Town Art Fair. Berman Contemporary. Cape Town
- 2021 Investec Cape Town Art Fair. Online. Berman Contemporary
- 2020 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair. Berman Contemporary and Christie's. Online. London
- 2019 Contemporary Istanbul. Berman Contemporary. Istanbul, Turkey
- 2019 Turbine Art Fair. Solo booth: Earth to earth, stone to stone, dust to dust. Johannesburg
- 2018 Investec Cape Town Art Fair. The Project Space. Cape Town
- 2018 RMB Turbine Art Fair. Young Female Residency Award. The Project Space. Johannesburg
- 2017 RMB Talent Unlocked. Turbine Art Fair. Johannesburg

Biennales

- 2024 Kommagene Biennale. Adiyaman, Türkiye. Curated by István Eröss

Residencies

- 2026 SAFFCA.EU - ENSAV LA CAMBRE Residency. Brussels, Belgium
- 2025 Essence - International Performance Art Residency. OIR Art Hub, Mongolia
- 2025 Artist Point. Meghalaya, India
- 2024 Tankwa Artscape. AirSA, Tankwa Karoo
- 2023 Bodhi Khaya. AirSA, Overstrand
- 2022 Work in Progress: An In-Situ Residency. Berman Contemporary, Johannesburg
- 2019 Southern African Foundation for Contemporary Art (SAFFCA). Residency at Entabeni Farm, Knysna
- 2018 The Young Female Residency Award Programme. The Project Space, founded by Benon Lutaaya
- 2017 Artist Career Development Programme developed by Assemblage

Seminars and Research Papers

- 2024 Attewell, Chrisél. "Mapping traces in the art of Ibrahim Mahama." International Journal of Cartography (2024): 1-9
- 2022 Notions of Disappearance in African Artists' Response to Postcolonial Landscapes, Making and Interpreting Art in 2022, SARChI Postgraduate Conference in association with UJ, the National Research Foundation and the Department of Science and Innovation
- 2022 Artists' Responses to Traces in the Postcolonial Traumatized Landscape. Spring Seminar 2022: Traumatic Landscapes, School of Arts, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, in Association with CITAR (Research Center for Science and Technology of the Arts) and FCT (Foundation for Science and Technology), Porto, Portugal
- 2021 Circular economies in the artistic practices of Otobong Nkanga and Ibrahim Mahama, Making and Interpreting Art in 2021, SARChI Postgraduate Conference in association with UJ, the National Research Foundation and the Department of Science and Innovation
- 2019 A Womxn's Work: Sculpting and Living. A discussion with Avi Soulful and Chrisél Attewell on the processes, practices, challenges and glories of being a (female) sculptor in South Africa. Turbine Art Fair Talks Programme Sponsored by RMB Private Bank

Publications

- 2024 To the Sun: 2. Kommagene Biennial, Artful Living, 5 September 2024, written by Meryem Koç
- 2024 2. Kommagene Biennial: Accelerated results of the effort to heal, Aposto, 8 September 2024, written by Ugur Ugan
- 2024 Seven Joburg artists to look out for at Investec Cape Town Art Fair 2024, inyourpocket, 19 March 2024
- 2023 Art Unbound, House and Leisure, Volume 12 (Reframe), Autumn 2023
- 2023 Ghosts of Stone, # Horst und Edeltraut, Berlin, Germany, 10 November, 2023
- 2023 An experimental album and exhibition looks at the history and ecology of the Cape. Creative Feel, Jan 2023
- 2022 Sustainability In Art With Chrisél Attewell, LivingSpace Magazine, TFG Media, Yolanda Balwanth, Oct 2022
- 2022 A Matter of Contemporary Connections, ART TIMES, February 2022
- 2022 Collector's Edition Cover - Chrisél Attewell, featured on the Opener and dust jacket of House & Leisure
- 2022 Works on Paper exhibition at Berman Contemporary allows for viewers to engage with the artists' process of creating, Edward Tsumele
- 2021 The 10 artists participating in The Liminal Space exhibition at Berman Contemporary test artistic limits, Edward Tsumele, Aug 2021
- 2020 Whispers of Inspiration, Bernie Hellberg Jr, Signature, May 2020
- 2019 Selections, Curated by Contemporary Istanbul, September 2019
- 2019 RMB Turbines Art Fair's Potential to Challenge Traditional Arbiters of Taste, Nkgopoleng Moloji, Bubblegum Club, July 2019
- 2019 The Young Female Residency Award: Entrepreneurship and Arts, Art Africa, July 2019
- 2019 Art Africa, Countering Artybollocks – an exhibition curated by Bland&Boring, written by Tracy Murinik
- 2018 South African Art Scene: Artist using printmaking to explore Johannesburg's architectural history, CGTN Africa
- 2018 Khuluma Magazine, Jozi's Lost Pockets, written by Trevor Crighton
- 2018 Prestige Digital Magazine, Jo'burg's Rebirth Documented as Art, written by Trevor Crighton

Awards

- 2021 Special URC Award. University of Johannesburg, Postgraduate School
- 2018 ABSA L'atelier, Top 100
- 2018 Young Female Residency Award. The Project Space
- 2018 Grant received from The African Arts Trust as part of the Assemblage Exhibition Programme
- 2017 Thami Mnyele Fine Art Awards, top 100. Coen Scholtz Recreation Centre, Kempton Park
- 2017 Sasol New Signatures, finalist, mentioned in catalogue. Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
- 2016 Sasol New Signatures, finalist, mentioned in catalogue. Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria

Collections

- Artist Point, Shillong
- The Leonardo Building, Sandton
- Ellerman House, Cape Town
- African Arts Trust, Johannesburg
- The ABSA Bank Collection, Johannesburg
- The Project Space, Johannesburg
- South African Foundation of Contemporary Arts, Brussels

Earth is “a” Story We Inherit

2025

The title names my position. Putting the small word “a” in inverted commas acknowledges that this is one account of the earth, shaped by where I have been and how I work. Here inheritance refers to the perspectives, habits, and biases we receive, not possessions or titles. These are partial and never neutral. The title signals that this view sits beside many others and invites you to notice what you carry and what you choose to pass on.

Earth is “a” Story We Inherit is a body of work that brings together painting, video, and photography to test how landscape can act as co author. The works were made across South Africa, Mongolia, Türkiye, and India. In each place I walked, listened, and gathered images, stones, stories, and gestures. As I travelled I kept returning to a simple question: where does our sense of home and rootedness come from. Some landscapes felt familiar before I knew their names, others stayed at a distance. Some conversations opened easily and with warmth, others held doubt or polite reserve.

I moved through these places as a guest and often as an outsider. Some people welcomed me with ease and curiosity, others were cautious or unsure. When I said that I am South African, I was often questioned or challenged. I understood the confusion behind these reactions, shaped by the country’s history and by assumptions about race and nationality, but it still hurts. In those moments my sense of home felt shaky, as if it could be renamed by someone else.

Working with people in each landscape brought this tension into focus. I danced with someone on a hillside, walked with children who showed me their favourite paths, and sat with residents who spoke about their own homes. In these moments I kept finding overlaps in our lives. We shared daily concerns around weather, food, care, and family. At the same time there were moments of misreading, when my habits did not fit and I felt clumsy in my responses. These frictions sat next to the points of connection.

In the video work Milk to the Mountain, this negotiation is held in the body. A fixed camera looks up a hillside while I mirror the movements of a local Mongolian dancer. The slope, wind, and grass set the tempo as we move. Sometimes I keep pace and our gestures align; sometimes I misinterpret and fall out of step. My body tries to learn the place through her gestures. I am interested in how our connection to specific landscapes decides what is shared and what resists translation. A sound element accompanies the video installation, softly audible throughout the exhibition space. Sounds of insects in the grassy Mongolian landscape mix with fragments of group conversations and laughter. They drift in and out of clarity, sometimes echoed and delayed, mirroring my efforts to follow the dancer’s movements.

The landscapes themselves asked for different kinds of attention. In some places I settled quickly and worked with a sense of calm. In others I felt restless or watched. I began to notice which colours, textures, and climates felt close to my idea of home and which stretched it. A circular pattern kept returning. I saw it in circles of children holding hands, in stones stacked into piles or laid out in rings, and in bodies gathered in loose circles. In the suspended painting, smaller works from different landscapes are stitched together around a central ring based on fire blackened stones I found on a hillside in Türkiye. In the photographs, stones are carried, pressed into hollows, or tied to string, forming circular arrangements that echo across places and materials.

Selected works from the project were brought together in a solo exhibition at OiR Art Hub in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, curated by Ulziibat Enkhtur.





Light and shadow patterns casted through the painting installation.



Back of painting installation.

Curatorial statement by Ulziibat Enkthur

“Live in this world as simple as a child, as vast as a mountain.” These are the words my grandmother used to tell me.

Chrisél Attewell carries a similar inheritance. Her practice draws on the wisdom and care passed on by women in her family, and on the land that shaped them.

When she arrived in Mongolia, she travelled the steppe, rode on horseback, and developed performances in response to wind and terrain. From the outset it was clear that her exhibition would not just link distant geographies. It would connect human feeling to the Earth and to the work of repair.

Ahead of her exhibition opening, Attewell gave a public lecture on how artists confront the scars of resource extraction and colonialism in Africa, and how remembrance can become a form of healing. She outlined the concerns that guide her work and introduced peers whose practices echo these themes. She spoke about mountains and rocks as keepers of memory, and about how we might face history without resentment.

In parts of Africa, names of rivers, mountains, and lands have been changed or forgotten. Wounds remain in places and communities through extractive practice and colonial legacies. Some communities have begun to ask forgiveness from those places. The resonance with Mongolia is plain. Here, questions around natural resources shape daily life. People respond in many ways. Some resist, some accept, some ignore, some justify.

What follows when we betray the living world and fail to notice?

Her exhibition is an act of noticing. The title, Earth is “a” Story We Inherit, makes that explicit. The quotation marks are intentional, drawing attention to the small word “a” and how it frames our thinking. Inheritance here is not property but received understandings. The Earth holds overlapping histories, ecologies, and memories, each partial and biased. By stressing this, the title asks us to consider how stories are built, whose voices are included, and how language shapes what we think we know. The Earth is not a silent listener. It speaks.

Through painting, photography, a video and sound installation, and several interactive elements, the exhibition invites a return to nature. Moving from a dark cave toward light, visitors meet the work as a mirror for interior change. The journey is simple and exacting. To look inward. To listen. To recognise the weight of stone, the clarity of crystal, the patience of a mountain.

Attewell relates to nature as to a grandmother. She treats the Earth as living and conscious, a relationship many cultures honour in different ways. The exhibition is about learning to be human through care for place, and about the pause that lets us see that the Earth is never just “a” story, but many.

We thank the team at OiR ART HUB for co-organising the exhibition, the lecture, and related events.



Let's Play, 2025
Archival Inkjet on Tecco Matt 230gsm
143 x 310 cm

Milk to the Mountain

This morning, after a quiet breakfast,

You told me about your mother's
mother,
And how she gave milk to the
mountain.

That you, in your way,
Now offer it a slanted nod,
A soft touch,
A dance of birds.

With hushed breaths,
You ask for a safe passage,
For the mountain to be a friend,
A sister,
A mother.

Last night,
The mountain visited you in your
dream.
It turned into stone,
And offered itself as a gift.

One for you.
One for me.

This, after all, is what we truly need,
Us air people.

Salt.
Mud.
Stone.
Earth.

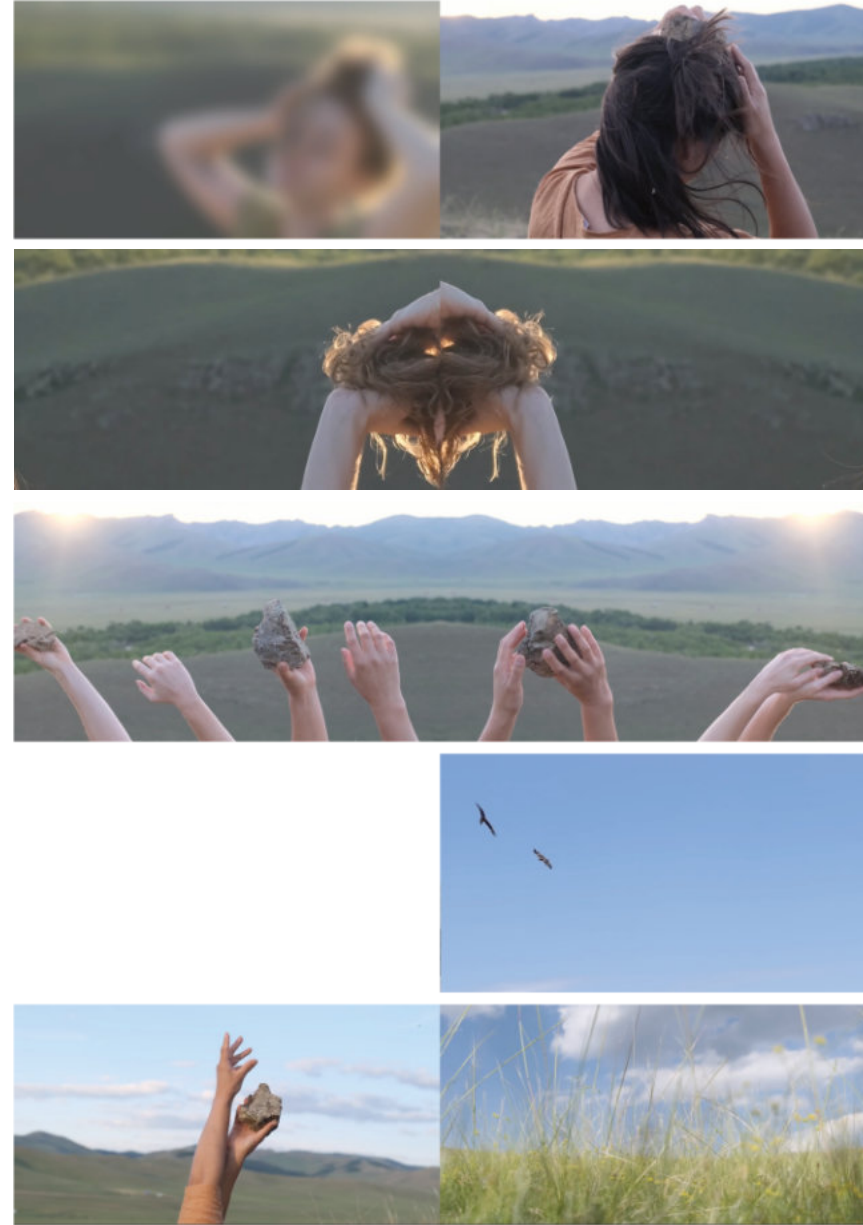
Yet, even in your dreams,
You struggle to accept gifts.
Reasoning it away:
It was for you, not me.

Dear friend,
This one gift
You should embrace.

Place it on your chest,
Your breast,
Your tired lungs.

Let it sink into your porous body,
To a place of slower heartbeats,
Where you too
Can give milk to the mountain.





Stills from *Milk to the Mountain*, two-channel video, 7mins 45sec, 2025



Photograph of installation:
"Earth is "a" Story We Inherit" (2025), OIR Art Hub, Ulaanbataar

Shared, Slow Breaths

2024

The paintings in this series grew from the September 2023 floods in Stanford, Western Cape, which took lives, displaced communities, and altered the ground. Two weeks later I joined a group of artists for a residency at Bodhi Khaya in the same area. The land was still soaked. Water pooled in the old clay quarry.

I kept returning to the clay deposits. In its wet state the clay had weight that matched what I felt while thinking about loss and recovery. I began to read it as a record of the place, carrying history and present anxiety.

I asked the group to join me in a performance in the quarry water. I called it *Touching Clouds*, because our bodies brushed the reflections on the surface. The water we stood in was floodwater from the same clouds now mirrored above us. We stood in a circle in the cold water, eyes closed, fingertips touching.

The cold moved quickly inward, settling in the chest and catching our breath. We shivered and fought the urge to step away, trying to hold the circle together. Gradually, our breathing slowed and steadied. In that shift, the cold became a way of feeling the place more sharply, an instruction to stay present with one another and with the water.

A single ball of wet clay moved from hand to hand, marking our skin, then slipping into the water until it dissolved. Before the performance began, I asked the group to reflect on the clay and the histories it might hold. Are we skeptical of it, or protective? Do we treasure it, or does it bring discomfort? How do we relate to one another while sharing this weight? Do we offer reassurance, support, haste, distrust, or hesitation?

That steady, shared attention sits inside the paintings. The palette draws from iron reds, silt pinks, water-dark blues. Surfaces layer, stain, and wipe back like sediment. Touch stays visible as smudges and soft edges. Circular forms echo the round clay ball moving between our bodies, and the closed eyes and linked hands that held it.

The cloud reflections and the swirls of dissolving clay shaped the work. The paintings follow those drifting patterns and shifting tones. They hold not only anger and fear around climate uncertainty, but also the emotions between the artists, the shared histories, and the intimacies and difficulties of being together in that place.







Shared, slow breaths, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
143 x 310 cm



Slow breaths in the cold II, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
154.5 x 155 cm



Quick, sharp breaths, 2024
Oil and Clay on Canvas
137 x 104 cm



Curatorial statement of “Heat Waves” by Els van Mourik

Last year changed its seasons subtly, stripped its sultry winds for the reds of dying leaves, let gelid drips of winter ice melt onto a warming earth and urged the dormant bulbs to brave the pain of spring. We, loving, above the whim of time, did not notice.

Alone. I remember now.

- Maya Angelou

Since 2017, Chrisél Attewell has developed a practice across painting, sculpture and multimedia installations in which soil, stones, glass and other natural elements are her primary materials. Over time, her paintings turned from delicate colour shades to earth tones, and then into large-scale installations. Chrisél’s use of primary materials are informed by the landscapes in South Africa, and conveys the notion that nature is not something inert that we access and control at our will from an outside and exceptional position, but that we are earthly beings.

The exhibition HEAT WAVES (2024) features paintings, glass works and photography. In addition, Chrisél created an installation in the gallery space made from mixed soils found after the flooding that occurred during her artist residencies at Bodhi Khaya and the Tankwa Karoo. The mud paint installation suggests the topography of an exposed riverbed or flooded land. It was a captivating experience to see her working with the clay, like she was unlocking the spiritual and creative power of the land. Over time, the moisture and temperature will cause a cracked texture, revealing the underlying structures, which reflect the artist’s thoughts on land use and ownership, as well as the

prolonged and violent history of conflict and displacement in South Africa. Soil can have so many colours – yellow, ochre, orange, grey, light brown, dark brown, black – depending on its chemical compositions. Soil is the matter from which everything emerges and comes back to, the medium of regeneration in the cycle of life and transformation, mediating relationships between water and land. As a viewer, you will find this dimension of the sacred earth, of fragility and of sadness, in Chrisél’s oil paintings. Entering the exhibition space, you have the opportunity to experience the deep relation between us humans and the earth, and how we often lose awareness of this fact. Chrisél’s ecological beliefs, in the interconnectivity, reciprocity and respect between all living things, leads her to create art that calls our attention to connections between people and the environment.

Her engagement with the world, as an artist and a woman, contains certain vital feminine aspects, such as listening, nurturing, harmony, connectivity, emotion and knowledge acquired from intuition and bodily experiences. The polar opposites of anxiety and courage go hand in hand in her work, and it’s a powerful acknowledgement of her female psyche, which makes her receptive to and intuitive with nature. We can never avoid uncertainty, but with patience and polite curiosity, we can propose shifting encounters with the vital resources of our earth.



Photograph of installation:
“Heat Waves”, 2024. Berman Contemporary.

Strangely Silent

2024

Strangely Silent is a single-channel video filmed in the Tankwa Karoo during the 2024 Tankwa Artscape residency. The desert felt hauntingly quiet, a quiet that unsettled me, especially knowing this was once a nomadic landscape.

I was drawn to a field of nearly black stones and learned that their colour comes from a high iron content. I imagined them, over centuries, slowly soaking up iron from blood spilled in conflicts across this landscape. In the 18th and 19th centuries this region saw localised but brutal frontier conflicts over land and scarce water. Bantu-speaking groups, Khoi pastoralists, trekboer farmers, and white settlers violently displaced the indigenous San/Xam people, in what many historians describe as a genocide. The wider Karoo later saw guerrilla warfare during the Second Anglo-Boer War between the British Empire and the Boer republics.

The video holds this history in a simple set of actions. Two stones hang from iron wire on a basic scaffold. I filmed them as they sway, graze, collide and rest. You hear the clean metallic clang when stone hits stone, and the thin, singing rasp of the wire. The frame holds weight, contact, and the charged stillness of the place.

Alongside the suspended stones, I worked with performer and actress Jane Mpholo. Together we mirrored the stones' movements. At times we are close, a slow dance, circling and leaning. At other times we are abrupt and clashing. We stepped into the landscape like strangers meeting for the first time, testing distance, approach and retreat. Our movements were guided by what the stones were doing, but they were improvised in the moment.

The work looks at how bodies meet each other and meet land in a place marked by long histories of movement and control. It threads the stones, the wire and the body into one continuous study of contact. The Tankwa's quiet is not empty. It is dense, and it listens. The dark stones hold that density. They carry metal, memory and sound.

The performance with Jane was documented by Sara CF de Gouveia and Inka Kendzia. Iman Adams composed a sound for the work that we created with stone, wire, voice and the whispers of my poem *Thirsty Stones* (page 36).





Still from *Strangely Silent*, single-channel video, 4min 50sec, 2024

Thirsty Stones

The land is dry, arid,
expansive and unending.
The heat: unrelenting.

Eternal skies loom ominous,
rendering me insignificant, irrelevant,
anonymous.

I am exposed.

Yet, to tiny creatures crawling and
cowering,
I am power unchecked, unregulated,
unopposed.

If only there were no thirsty stones
threatening to suck and swallow
until I am hollow.

When all I am is bone,
this land will remember,
all I marked, made, and maimed.
It will digest and preserve
through salt and wind,
heat and fury.

I will no longer be alone,
exposed.

I will be the thirsty stones,
shading crawling creatures,
digesting,
unopposed.



Stills from *Strangely Silent*, single-channel video, 4min 50sec, 2024

Refractions

2023 - 2024

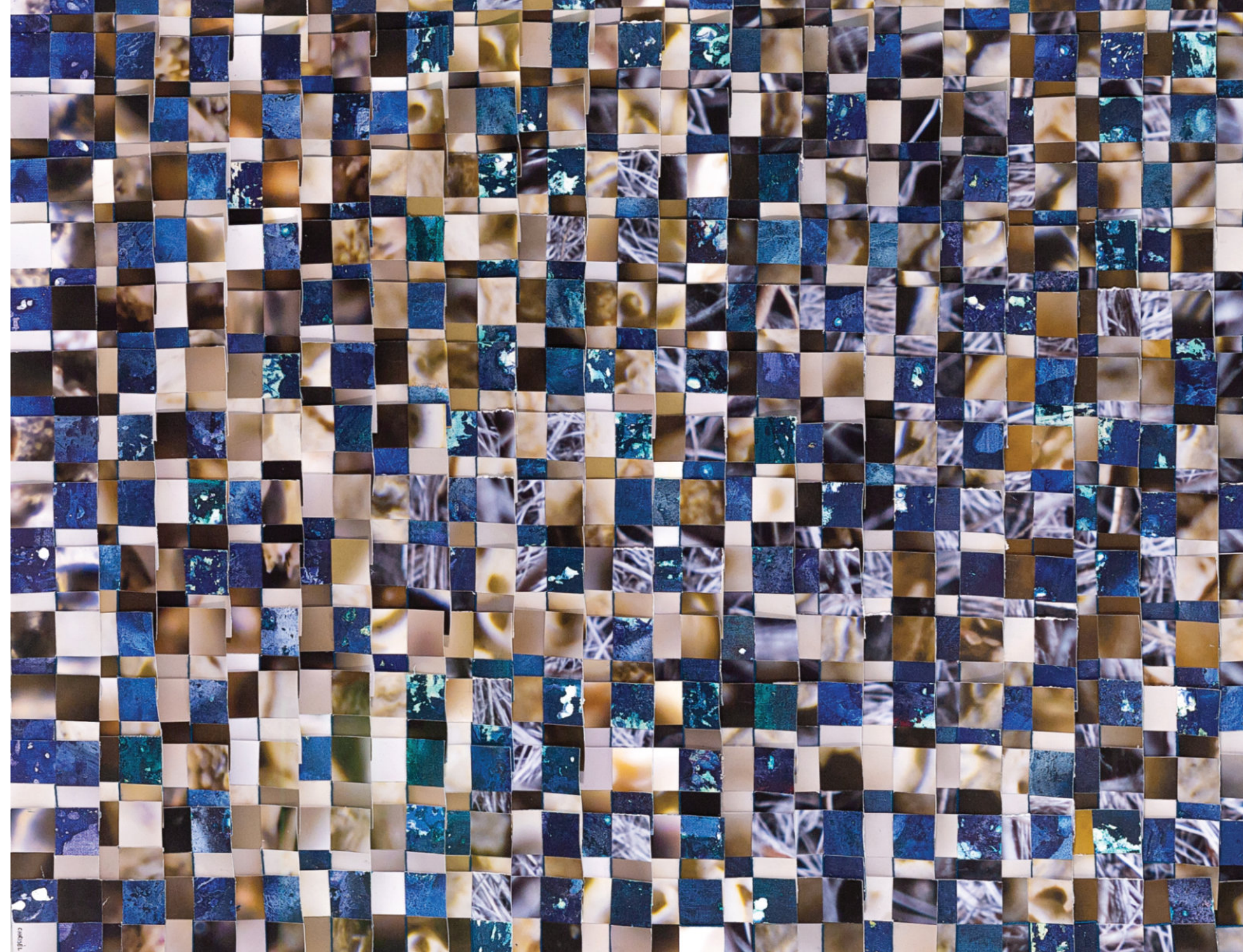
Refraction is what happens when a wave enters a new medium and changes course. In these works, I let images and materials move across mediums and never return unchanged. Photographs on paper and paintings made with oil mixed into clay are cut into strips, reassembled in new sequences, and woven together with bamboo thread. Knots hold the fragments in place. The image becomes pixelated and abstract, yet it carries a clear sense of motion, like light shifting in water or wind passing through leaves.

The weaving is both construction and repair. It obscures and reveals, interrupts and reconnects. The bamboo thread does not hide the joins. Instead, the sutures become part of the picture, a record of decision and care. Clay brings the ground into the painting, photography brings the outside into the studio, and their meeting produces surfaces that feel mapped, handled, and evolving.

For me, these works speak to a cycle of looking and holding. They begin with observation and collection, then move through rethinking and processing, and finally toward an internalising of the outside world. The cut, the knot, and the reorder are the verbs of that cycle. They suggest attention as a method, and assembly as a way to carry what is seen.

At the level of image, some pieces read as pixelated ripples of water. Others settle into a skin-like field, closer to scale or hide. This drift between wave and skin points to how perception toggles between surface and depth. It also ties the work to nonhuman bodies and habitats without illustrating them. The forms are not depictions. They are effects produced by the process, where light, texture, and joinery reorganise the original view.

Technology sits in the background as both tool and question. Debates about our ecological future often split into extremes, from salvation narratives to calls for retreat. I am interested in the working space between them. I do not expect a return to an untouched world, and I am not resigned to collapse. I look for partial repair, for the small adjustments a hand can make. These works test that possibility. They acknowledge damage without reproducing spectacle, and they offer a modest proposal: that attention, contact, and reassembly can shift the path of things, even if only by a few degrees.





Refractions III, 2024
Archival inkjet on paper and oil on canvas, woven with bamboo thread
Framed 140 x 101 x 5 cm



Refractions IV, 2024
Archival inkjet on paper and oil on canvas, woven with bamboo thread
Framed:140 x 101 x 5 cm

Refractions: Smoke and Water, 2023
Archival inject on paper and oil on canvas, woven with bamboo thread.
Framed: 93 x 72.5 x 5.5cm

Refractions: Shell and Bone, 2023
Archival inject on paper and oil on canvas, woven with bamboo thread
Framed: 93 x 72.5 x 5.5 cm



Salt of the Earth

2023

Salt of the Earth is a series of paintings where I map the ocean tides along the Western Cape coastline. The original compositions are based on topographical sketches I made of the rock formations around the Cape Town coast. From a bird's-eye view, the works follow that shifting line where water meets rock, and how much of the shoreline is visible as the sea moves in and out.

The series grew out of returning to the same stretches of coast with a sketchbook in hand, watching the tide creep up and fall back, tracing where the water reached last time, and noticing which rocks disappear and which stay visible. I worked from quick drawings and small painted studies, trying to catch how the coastline feels over time rather than to measure it precisely. Those visits are quiet and bodily. I feel the cold of the water around my ankles, the calm surface that can suddenly deepen into a sense of vastness, and the way the horizon can feel both soothing and slightly eerie. Salt sits on my tongue, the air grows sticky on my skin, and the wind presses against my body. The paintings hold that mix of comfort and unease.

Some sketches were made only days apart, others across different seasons, and together they start to suggest the moon's pull on the tides and a longer conversation about rising seas. I am interested in the tension between what looks like an ordinary high tide and what, held in memory and in paint, starts to hint at a slow and permanent shift. For me, these works carry the pleasure of being by the sea, the steady breath of the waves and the coolness of the water, as well as the unsettled sense that the line between land and water is quietly moving.

Although the paintings begin with a representational reference, they become more abstract as I work. I am guided by intuition and emotion as much as by the original drawings. I follow the pull of colour, edge, and flow, letting paint pool, stain, and be wiped back like water leaving a trace on rock. The finished works exist somewhere between map and invented terrain. You can read them as shorelines, as weathered surfaces, or as internal landscapes where depth of colour and accumulated marks quietly map time and experience.



Salt

Rise up,
salt of the earth.
Swell. Grow.

Take in the rhythm.
Water hammers stone.
Stone answers, then thins.

Hands to the sand.
Through shell and shard.
Exhale the grey.

Savour the slow creep
of water
that licks and tests.

Is it enough,
or will water
in time
swallow all stone?

Rise again.
Feel it.
Taste it.

Salt on the tongue.

Pulls us down,
down, down,
and sinks our stomachs
to the pit of the earth.



Salt of the Earth IV, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
183 x 144 cm

Salt of the Earth I, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
184 x 141cm

Salt of the Earth II, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
183 x 140cm





Salt of the Earth V, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
140 x 230 cm



Photograph of installation:
Art Cologne (2023), Berman Contemporary.

Rain Shadows

2022 - 2023

rain shadow n.

An area having relatively little precipitation due to the effect of a barrier, such as a mountain range, that causes the prevailing winds to lose their moisture before reaching it.

Over two years, I visited, explored, listened to, and responded to the Cape landscape, its traumatic histories, and the threats of drought and desertification that it faces. These are global concerns mostly brought on by humanity's negative impact on the planet's ecologies. It is however not all of humanity that is to blame. Traumatic colonial and exploitative histories are entangled in the planet's current ecological crises. At the moment, and over the past few centuries, there has been a disconnect in humanity's connection with the earth's natural landscapes. This, however, was not always the case.

When studying the Khoikhoi language, it becomes clear that the indigenous communities had developed a close connection to water in the natural landscape of what is now Cape Town. Through studying the spiritual connection that the Khoena had with the waters of this landscape, I investigated my own relationship with the earth as I created these works. They tell stories of a landscape, both real and fictional. These are stories of materials, histories, and possible real or fictional futures.

In this body of work, I engage with the concept of rain shadows both in a literal and metaphorical way. In the literal interpretation, a rain shadow is a landform that has become desertified due to mountain ranges that block rain clouds from passing over them. On one side of the mountain, healthy plant life can be found within wet weather systems, while the other side is forced to become a desert. Metaphorically, the rain shadow in this exhibition refers to the darker side of human history that divided people into those who prosper and those who suffer.





Photograph of installation:
"The Weather Report Promised Rain", 2023. Berman Contemporary.



Nests of stone IX and XII, 2023
Archival Inkjet on Tecco Matt 230gsm
90cm x 180cm



Photograph of installation: "Rain Shadows", 2023. UJ FADA Gallery.
Featuring *Hande in Onskuld* and an installation of marine sponges suspended with jute string.



Stills from *Hande in Onskuld*, single-channel video, 40mins, 2023



Still from *The Water in Our Breath*, single-channel video, 30sec (looped), 2023



Photograph of installation: "Rain Shadows", 2023. UJ FADA Gallery. Featuring *Ghosts of Stone* and a video installation of flowing water.



Photograph of installation:
"The Weather Report Promised Rain", 2023. Berman Contemporary.

"The Chicken Coop" by Ashraf Jamal

Cape Town, December 2022

When asked if she is an 'eco warrior', Chrisél Attewell is circumspect. While her work is wholly immersed in ecology, rain patterns, alluvial flows, the 'leaching of oceans', urban degradation, in brief, the Anthropocene takeover and destruction of the earth, her stance is never righteous. Balance remains critical, psychically, emotionally, creatively. This is evident when I visit her in her chicken coop in Somerset West, a studio that once housed chickens that died due to the suffocating density of heat.

Seated therein, the heat is overwhelming, until one begins to accept it. It is this acceptance, this malleability, evident in her love of working with clay, which distinguishes Attewell's temperament – she is flexible, open-hearted, explorative. Her works, whether paintings, relief works, video, or photography, are profoundly connected to the earth. Instead of zealously raging against the narcissism of humankind, which, like Vitruvian Man, places itself at the centre of the universe, Attewell examines the concurrency of human, animal, and vegetal life.

In her studio there are banked rows of oceanic detritus and stone, collected by municipal beachcombers. These forms and textures illuminate the geography of her paintings and installations, which are informed by and defined through clay and stone and sponge encrusted surfaces – sometimes only the impressions remain, on other occasions it is the entire relief, the impacted substances sealed with an acrylic gel.

Attewell's work is organically encaustic, there is no artificial substance and no artifice in their making. This is because Attewell is wholly inspired by the earth – her greatest instructor and medium.

And if heat matters, if she needs the coop as a furnace, it is because heat – a form of fire – purifies the beach residue, moulds the clay, allows for a cleansing combustion. Winter dampness is not conducive to making her art. Attewell's art is forged in a high noon, an optimal temperature, which for Nietzsche, is also the most radically cleansing.

Attewell is averse to land art, or landscaping, because 'it interferes too much'. She is not interested in a damaging carbon footprint, or any egotistic signature upon the earth. We discuss the alluvial flood plain which once travelled the length and breadth of land surrounding Table Mountain, stretching outward to what is now the greater winelands. The shift from the indigenous to the exogenous – literally, bio-politically – illuminates the deformity of human so-called civilisational intervention.

The rerouting of water is the definitional problem, for its reorientation negatively impacted on local flora and fauna – now protected on the mountain slopes, home to the greatest biodiversity on earth. As for the flood plain? With the rerouting of flows, the erection of barriers, the installation of exogenous plant life, the rivers dissipated. Water, after all, has its own peculiar language, it is no boundless bounty. Its integral relationship to soil, and resultant clay, which is Attewell's core medium, affirms the profound interconnectedness of earth and water, and the human culture which it composed. Today, with over 90% of human intervention, with no regard for the longevity of the species, or the planet, has meant a heightened and acute sense of precarity. But, as I've pointed at the outset, Attewell refuses to allow despair or outrage to negatively affect her creative dialogue with the earth.

It is true that we inhabit 'traumatised landscapes', that ours is an extractive and exploitative relationship with all resources. A 'hydro-colonialism' is one of many variants of exploitation. As for the place of art in this highly volatile geological moment? Can it only bear witness to a catastrophe? Or, more productively, can it reclaim a consoling sonority in our relationship to a leached and dying ocean and destroyed earth?

It is difficult to resolutely gauge the mood of Attewell's art, given the radical uncertainty of this so-called 'End- Time', in which we profoundly experience our fragility. However, if pathos may cling to the temperament of Attewell's art, its role is neither to correct a horror story, or to appease our guilt. Hers, rather, is the desire to sustain a love for the elements, for the earthly wonder which, thankfully, we can still hold to.

It is true that we are surviving at a crux, clutching onto a stony outcrop, blind to what lies ahead, knowing only that we have profoundly failed ourselves – and yet, and yet, for Attewell it remains futile to be gloomy on what remains God's day. I mean this in no denominational sense. An article pinned to Attewell's studio wall, authored by William Albert Allard, reads as follows: 'All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal right upon it. You might as well expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who was born a free man should be contented penned up and denied liberty to go where it pleases'.

But alas, we find ourselves in bondage, our rivers rerouted and impoverished. In this regard, it is impossible to ignore the ecological obscenity underway along the Liesbeek River, the last remaining waters of a great wetland, repurposed to accommodate a global industry, Amazon, which has transformed us into gratuitous and passive consumers.

As we conclude our conversation, Attewell tells me that she intends to title her major mixed media exhibition, 'Rain Shadows'. I am perplexed, not understanding the meaning of the phrase. A rain shadow, I learn, is a zone on the hither side of a mountain, which has not received the rain that has fallen on the mountain's thither side.

'A rain shadow is like this chicken coop', she smilingly says. It's a dry space, a furnace, a space in which her creative language is best expressed. For hers is a language of burning rocks and heated clay, worlds topographically expansive yet also microcosmic, as in love with great vistas as it is with organic detail. It is a world of flows, and their interruption, growths, and their cessation. Fundamentally, however, hers is a generative art wrought from water, earth, and, fundamentally, fire, and art wholly consumed and shaped by heat.



Stones Cry Out

2023

The titles of the paintings in this series reference Maya Angelou's poem *On the Pulse of Morning*. In her poem, Angelou writes, "The Rock cries out to us today, you may stand upon me / But do not hide your face," possibly inspired by Luke 19:40, which states, "Even if these [the crowds] are silent, the very stones will cry out." Both texts emphasise that truth must emerge, even if humanity denies it.

Angelou's poem continues: "Across the wall of the world, / A river sings a beautiful song. It says, / Come, rest here by my side. / Each of you, a bordered country, / Delicate and strangely made proud, / Yet thrusting perpetually under siege. / Your armed struggles for profit / Have left collars of waste upon / My shore, currents of debris upon my breast. / Yet today I call you to my riverside, / If you will study war no more. Come, / Clad in peace, and I will sing the songs / The Creator gave to me when I and the / Tree and the rock were one."

Taking a humanitarian approach, Angelou's singing river invites people from all walks of life, despite their troubled pasts, to rest by the river—if they come in peace. The river's song urges humanity to cease its wars on others and stop the exploitation of the earth's resources. The "truth" within the stones I reference, both in my series of paintings and the

Ghosts of Stones sculptures, holds ecological significance, particularly in the Cape area of South Africa, where river stones once indicated flowing water. Human intervention has altered the landscape, resulting in drought and endangered indigenous plant life.

Angelou continues: "I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree / I am yours – your passages have been paid. / Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need / For this bright morning dawning for you. / History, despite its wrenching pain / Cannot be unlived, but if faced / With courage, need not be lived again. / Lift up your eyes upon / This day breaking for you."

As I reflect on my place in this environment, marked by suffering and loss, I consider the concept of partial healing. In my work, I imagine rivers and landscapes filled with absent stones, whose cries reveal layered histories we must confront in order to hear the river's song and find peace.



The Singing River, 2023
Oil and clay on canvas
Framed: 212 x 157 x 6.5cm

The Rock Cries Out, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
Framed: 212 x 110 x 6.5cm

The First and Last of Every Tree, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
Framed: 212 x 110 x 6.5cm

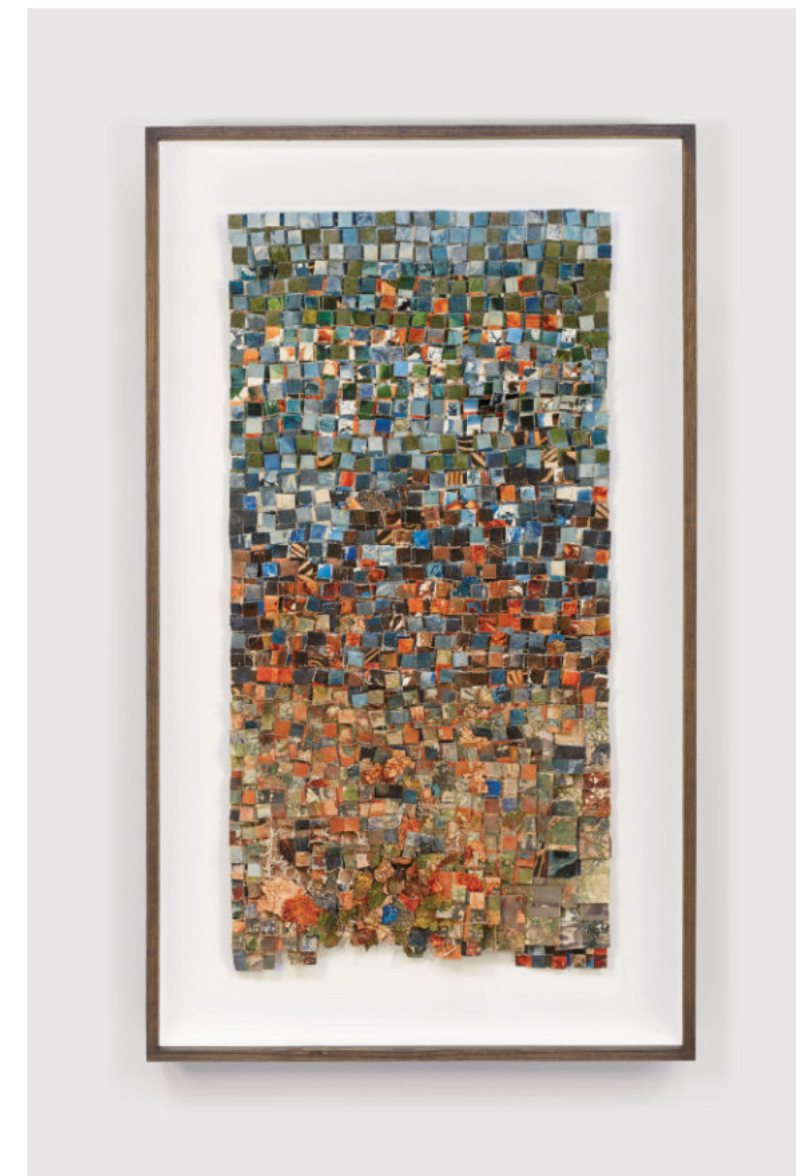




The Singing River and the Wise Rock I and II, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
Framed: 177 x 105 x 6.5cm (each)



Fragments of the Singing River and the Wise Rock, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas
Framed: 129 x 76.5 x 5.5cm



Soil Armour II, 2023
Oil and Clay on Canvas, woven with jute
Framed: 162.2 x 94.5 x 10.5 cm

Ghosts of Stone

2022 - 2023

To create Ghosts of Stone I blow glass vessels using river stones collected from my surroundings in the Western Cape. These large cobblestones appear everywhere: in water channels, gardens, retaining walls and earthworks. Heated with the glass, they press into its surface and shape, leaving a record of contact. Rock erodes into sand, and under intense heat sand becomes glass, so the work holds a simple material loop between stone and glass. Both are made from the same basic elements that also circulate through human bodies and other living things.

The forms of the vessels sit somewhere between water and body. They may suggest bubbles held underwater or vases waiting to be filled. When hot, the glass moves like a thick liquid, stretching, sagging and pooling, so each piece records a brief moment of flow as it cools. Its transparency connects it visually to water, as light passes through the vessel, catching small bubbles and revealing the stone pressed into its surface. At the same time the forms recall organs or a breast. I blow the glass from my chest, and the moisture in my breath becomes part of the object as it forms.

To understand why these stones are so present in the landscape, I visited the University of Stellenbosch's Botanical Garden and spoke with the curator, Dr Donovan Kirkwood. He explained that the cobblestones are remnants of a once extensive alluvial floodplain with distinct vegetation. Their smoothed, rounded forms are evidence that they were once moved and shaped by flowing water, a relic of the rivers that used to pass through this area. Only small fragments of this ecosystem remain, and many of the plant species are now threatened. Colonial farming practices erased much of the habitat, as fields were ploughed up to the riverbanks. This caused increased runoff and overuse of water, and later damming further disrupted the natural flow of rivers.

The works in Ghosts of Stone grow out of this meeting of body, stone and damaged watershed. Each vessel holds together river rock, glass, breath and a landscape under pressure, tracing the movement of water through time and through different forms of life and matter.



Seeing Stone I, 2023
Glass and stone
14 x 20 x 22 cm



Sunken Stone 2023
Stone and Glass
14 x 17 x 17 cm



Seeing Stone VI, 2023
Glass and stone
19 x 23.5 x 23 cm



Sociogenesis

2020

The body of work that forms part of the series *Sociogenesis* found its roots during the SAFFCA artist residency I attended in the Knysna forest. When I arrived in Knysna in August 2019, a sense of death hung over everything. Following the passing of mom, grandfather and friend, I longed for an escape. I frequented the Knysna forests as child and held fond memories of it. I wanted to share the charming and wondrous place I remembered with Barbara Schroeder, the artist who joined me for a residency. Instead, I felt lost, struggling to find images of a once-beloved location. The Knysna I remembered had vanished. Upon arrival, we found that a devastating wildfire had ravaged the forests, leaving the landscape exposed, like a body gasping for breath.

Fire transformed the skin of this body. It became thin and stretched, warped and transfigured. In parts, it grew tough and thick, filled with scabs, cracks, and peelings. In other parts, it became fragile and transparent. I asked a farm worker what the fire was like. He said: "The water was black." I imagined the lakes and lagoons of Knysna, scattered black over the landscape like third-degree burn wounds.

I wanted to investigate the charred remains of the forest to find signs of healing and life. The bark of the dead trees resembled the burnt skin of a creature. As I peeled away at the bark, picking at the scabs, I expected to find raw, infected flesh. Instead, I discovered intricate patterns underneath. Later, I learned that carpenter ant colonies had carved these designs. Carpenter ants make their nests in dead or diseased trees, tunnelling out galleries as they go. This process accelerates the decomposition of dead trees and enhances the resilience of the ecosystem.

Antifragility, a concept by Professor Nassim Nicholas Taleb, is the opposite of fragility and surpasses resilience. While resilience allows something to endure challenges, antifragility means becoming stronger through volatility and stress. My observations of ants inspired me to learn how to be more resilient or even antifragile.





The Colony is a Kind of Creature IX, 2020
Stained Wood and Glass
Framed: 66 x 43 x 11cm



Scorched Earth V, 2020
Oil and Clay on Canvas
Framed: 72 x 57 x 5.5cm



Scorched Earth I, 2020
Oil and Clay on Canvas
Framed: 168 x 194 x 5cm



Photograph of installation:
The Colony is a Kind of Creature, exhibited in "Artistes de la Terre" at Berman Contemporary, 2020.



Skins of the Forest II, 2020
Oil and Clay on Canvas
Framed: 180 x 176 x 5cm





Erode I and II, 2020
Archival Inkjet on Felix 200gsm
58.5 x 42 cm (each)



Photograph of installation:
“Sociogenesis: Resilience Under Fire”, 2020. Berman Contemporary.



Photograph of installation:
"Sociogenesis: Resilience Under Fire", 2020. Berman Contemporary.



Photograph of installation:
Cape Town Art Fair, 2022

Biennale Project: Hands of Many 2024

Created for the 2024 Kommagene Biennale on Mount Nemrut, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in southeastern Türkiye, *Hands of Many* is a collaborative installation made with the community of Adiyaman. It takes the form of a circular steel structure in a small clearing on the path to the ruined stone figures of ancient gods. From this structure, stones hang on lengths of jute, forming a loose ring that moves with the wind and with people passing through. The six metre circle was made with local industry in Kahta, where I worked with metalworkers to hand bend steel pipe, cutting it at ten centimetre intervals and shaping it by hand in the absence of bending machines. The suspended stones are light and resilient, able to shift and sway with the movement of the earth. The work responds to the earthquakes that struck the region in 2023, and to how many different hands are needed in the aftermath of such an event.

Visitors are invited to choose a stone from the mountain and tie it to the structure. Like adding a ribbon to a wishing tree, each suspended stone becomes a small marker of care, hope or memory. Over time, people also began to hang personal items such as keys and scarves, folding their own stories into the installation. As more stones and objects are added, the work slowly thickens into a shared record of gestures. Within this circle, guests are free to spend time in whatever way feels right to them: to talk, rest, mourn, pray, or play among the swaying stones.











Image courtesy of Manyatsa Monyamane

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