Chapter **02**

Dis/Tending the Museum: Archival Intervention and Disruption at The Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History

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The Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History (hereafter DNMCH) sits on Visagie Street, on the edge of the Pretoria Central Business District, nestled between Post-Modernist South African apartment buildings in varying states of repair and decay. The museum's iconic convex roof juts through umbrellas of jacaranda trees shedding winter leaves. On my first visit there, I cannot help but wonder if the people living and working in the city, hurrying back and forth between work and family commitments on the pavements outside the museum's high fences, have any idea of what goes on inside this looming structure. Similarly to other state-owned museums in South Africa, the DNMCH carries a heavy historical legacy, which is being navigated through interactions and partnerships with creative practitioners from fields outside of traditional museological and curatorial practice. This chapter aims to explore how one of these interactions, stewarded by Motsane Gertrude Seabela (curator of the anthropological collection) and Laura de Harde (a postdoctoral fellow at the NIHSS, University of Pretoria), is starting to prod and poke at the history of the museum, and explore the lives of objects within its collection of anthropological materials that carry connotations of value, heritage, conservation and nationhood as they lie encased within the museum's storerooms.

I will confess that the title of this book, to which I was invited to contribute, is what initially lured me in. *Inherited Obsessions* (2022) and the ideas that begin to crystallise around these words speak to my own professional and academic research interests regarding museum practice, curating and object research. What do we, as curators, stewards, custodians and facilitators of collections, *inherit* when we move in and out of museum spaces in Southern Africa? How do historical, social and cultural legacies, *inheritances*, *obsessions* and ideas of heritage, value, nation, and conservation haunt us long after the progenitors of these ideas are confined to the history books? What do we as artists and academics do with the heavy bags that the originators of these ideas and *obsessions* leave at our doors? What materials do we choose to work with, and why? These questions provide the framework for De Harde's intervention within the archives of the DNMCH's anthropological collection. She draws her creative inspiration from 'a quieter scholarship' (De Harde 2019:22) within contested archives and museum spaces in Southern Africa. The DNMCH, like many of its contemporaries, is an example of a layered and contested space that provides many opportunities in this regard. In order to gain a valuable perspective on the historical context of this institution, it is helpful to reference an article penned by Johnny van Schalkwyk, the then curator of the anthropology and archaeology collections, in the *de arte* journal in the year 2000, written at a particularly interesting time in South African history (Van Schalkwyk 2000:83–91).

Van Schalkwyk's writing reveals a museum subjected to the harsh light of critical, reflexive, academic examination in the context of the newly formed 'rainbow nation'; a country just starting to form a cohesive narrative of national identity on the back of a new democratic political dispensation and a fractious past. While instructive purely in this regard, Van Schalkwyk's article also refers to the problematic foundations of his collections. He writes that it was only in 1964 that the museum split its natural history and cultural history collections; before that, since the museum's foundation at the end of the nineteenth century, material objects related to *nature* and *culture* were lumped into one homogenous mass, collected on a whim and by personal taste and choice by natural scientists, entomologists and reverends of the church (Van Schalkwyk 2000:83). That these objects were historically treated as casual commodities, even to be classified and traded outside of any frame of contextual relevance (Van Schalkwyk 2000:84–85), is evident from Van Schalkwyk's brief history, but what is also clear is how material cultural objects such as smoking pipes, food baskets and weapons were classified in the same category as natural science materials such

as rocks, plant specimens and insect fossils. This blunt conflation in collection and accession strategy hints at the overtly racist tendencies forming the foundations of many similar museums. These strategies are intimately connected to the very essence of historical, colonial museological practice where objects, through the carefully controlled specificities of collection, accession and display for *consumption,* are transformed and stripped of their original significances to suit the objectives and motivations of the collectors (Lentz 2007:24–25).

Of course, much time has passed at the museum since Van Schalkwyk's tenure. Seabela, appointed as curator of the museum's anthropological collection in January 2014, is aware of these dialogues and historical contexts and is actively engaged in pilot projects related to the collections she curates to expand their reference and relevance through inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary collaborations. That the successes of museums have conventionally relied heavily upon, and been measured by, ideas of an *archive*; of valuable objects and materials encoded and stored within unassailable vaults, impervious and resistant to ingress or contamination, makes the work that she is undertaking all the more important. Interferences into these banks of knowledge (repositories that are safely categorised, easily understood and clearly catalogued) are not always met with happy welcomes. This is because these vaults of knowledge have deep roots connected to ancient legacies of mythological, hallowed civilisations; whose ontologies and identity were captured within these deified spaces as a historical database from which a select group of people could draw a kind of special legitimating power (Butler 2016:31–69). Thus, museums have traditionally had deep investments in maintaining the status quo, lending legitimacy to governments and administrations. This makes archival ingresses such as Laura de Harde's NIHSS Fellowship critical within a South African academic de-colonised context. Seabela is, as custodian of the DNMCH's anthropological collections, committed to these acts of ingress. She is also currently working on a transnational curatorial project with Njabulo Chipangura, curator of Living Cultures at the University of Manchester's Manchester Museum, in a collaborative effort to re-contextualise beadwork in their collections through the methodology of source community interaction.

Readers of this publication will be familiar with the volumes of academic literature (see, for example, Hamilton & Leibhammer 2016) on the politically charged and essentially artificial dichotomies and teleologies of classification and display in museums that hold collections that have been historically classified as ethnographic or anthropological. The history of these museums and their collections (the narratives of which are in many ways similar to that outlined by Van Schalkwyk) are important to understand in relation to the archival interventions and interactions with collections and objects *living* in these spaces that De Harde as a fine artist and Seabela as a curator are engaged in, and which forms the topic of this volume. Museums such as the DNMCH are grappling with and teasing out their historical complicity in pedagogical reinforcements of concepts related to *nation*, *nationhood*, *archive* and *heritage*, as briefly sketched above. Historically, museums such as these, which played a role in defining identities and building knowledges through these collection and exhibition strategies, find themselves stuck within historical, social and cultural lacunas. The exhibitions and objects within these spaces float in a vacuum. They exist within a strange, detached non-place outside of contemporaneity. Upon these plinths and in these glass vitrines, the dust of ages past accumulates on objects being displayed. Administrative frameworks actively prevent agitation through the rigid exhibition and display strategies that have been decided upon by a governing body, state department or curator. Each of these stakeholders also carry their own motivations and desires for legacies that live beyond their tenures. Contemporary artists, curators, academics and collection managers such as De Harde and Seabela, working as they do in the liminal spaces (the *quieter* moments) between these often overpowering and politically charged dialogues, could be viewed as negotiators between the past and the present: Together, they perform a sort of skilful tap dance that moves between the historical and political legacies and, to my mind, violences of these museums and their collections and collection strategies. Via their creative outputs, they expose the creative potential of these spaces and the objects within them to new audiences. Their aim, to open these collections and objects to fresh, contemporary discussions and critique, is vitally important in ensuring the relevance of these institutions.

The context of the field of museum work that artists such as De Harde and curators such as Seabela are engaged in to tease out and complicate these sticky and often painful histories is complex and rich, requiring much more space than what is permitted here, but is summarised neatly and sensitively for this chapter by Andrew Weiner's (2016) discussion with curator Clementine Deliss on her

curatorial work at the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, Germany. While it is important to note the social, cultural, political and historical differences between the Weltkulturen Museum and the DNMCH, there are similarities between the collection objectives that formed the foundation of both museums. Deliss' engagements within this space[1] point toward museums increasingly taking on the challenge of opening their ethnographic and anthropological collections to interactions and scrutiny by academic disciplines not necessarily directly related to the field of museum study. It is, as communicated to Weiner (Deliss 2020:134), one of Deliss' requirements in her curatorial work at the Weltkulturen Museum; namely, that producers of knowledge unrelated to museums, anthropology or ethnography enter the space to deconstruct and re/vision through fresh eyes the problematic contexts and methodologies of representation that I have briefly outlined earlier in this chapter.

One need not look far to find an example of a Southern African museum doing similar work to engage their archives in transformative ways. The Wits Art Museum (WAM), while primarily a university museum and thus different in many ways (historically, institutionally and methodologically) to the DNMCH, also holds collections of material culture—ethnographic and anthropological—obtained by different individuals and organisations, each with their motivations and considerations, at certain times during the history of each of its collections. There are marked similarities between the Weltkulturen Museum, WAM and the DNMCH and, importantly, the work being undertaken by curators and collections managers at each institution to surface the complicated legacies surrounding the objects in their storerooms through new exhibitions and creative manifestations. WAM's *Collections Re-engagement Project* in 2012 is an example of a contemporary interaction with the museum's collections aimed at highlighting the educational and artistic potentialities of the objects in their holdings through multifaceted interactions with different stakeholders. This particular project included creating teaching modules for university and secondary school students centred on the collections and items of material culture housed within the museum and, most relevant for the topic explored in this chapter, inviting contemporary artists into the museum to create outputs that drew on the museum's diverse collections (De Becker & Nettleton 2015:11–13).

One such artist is Walter Oltmann, who, during his career, spent time in the WAM archives working with their collections to develop his own

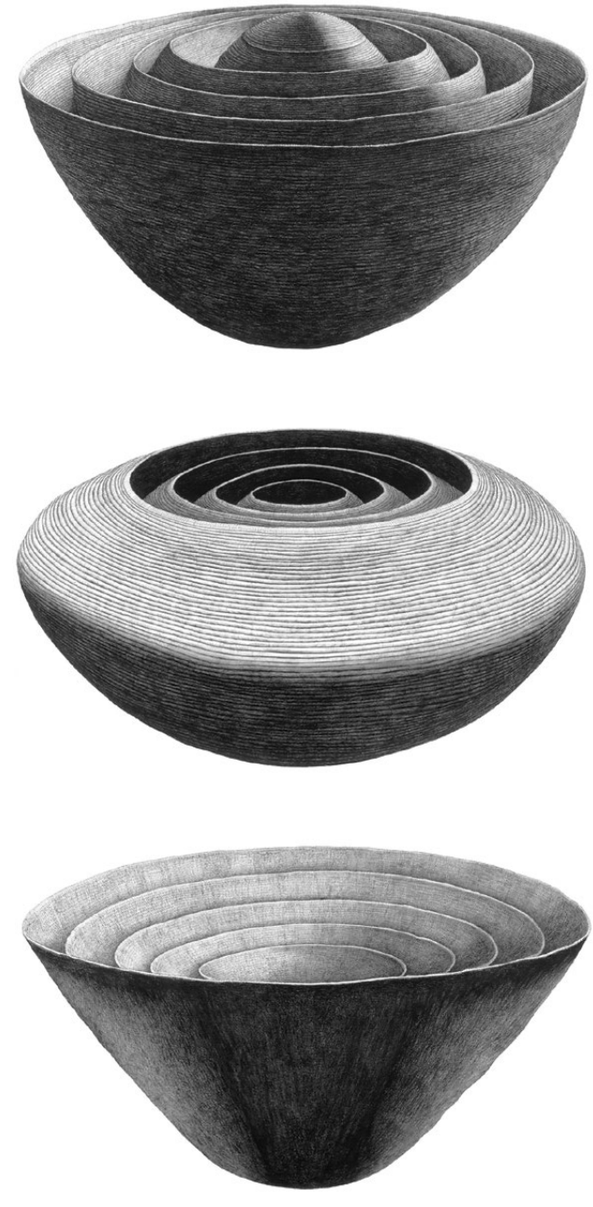
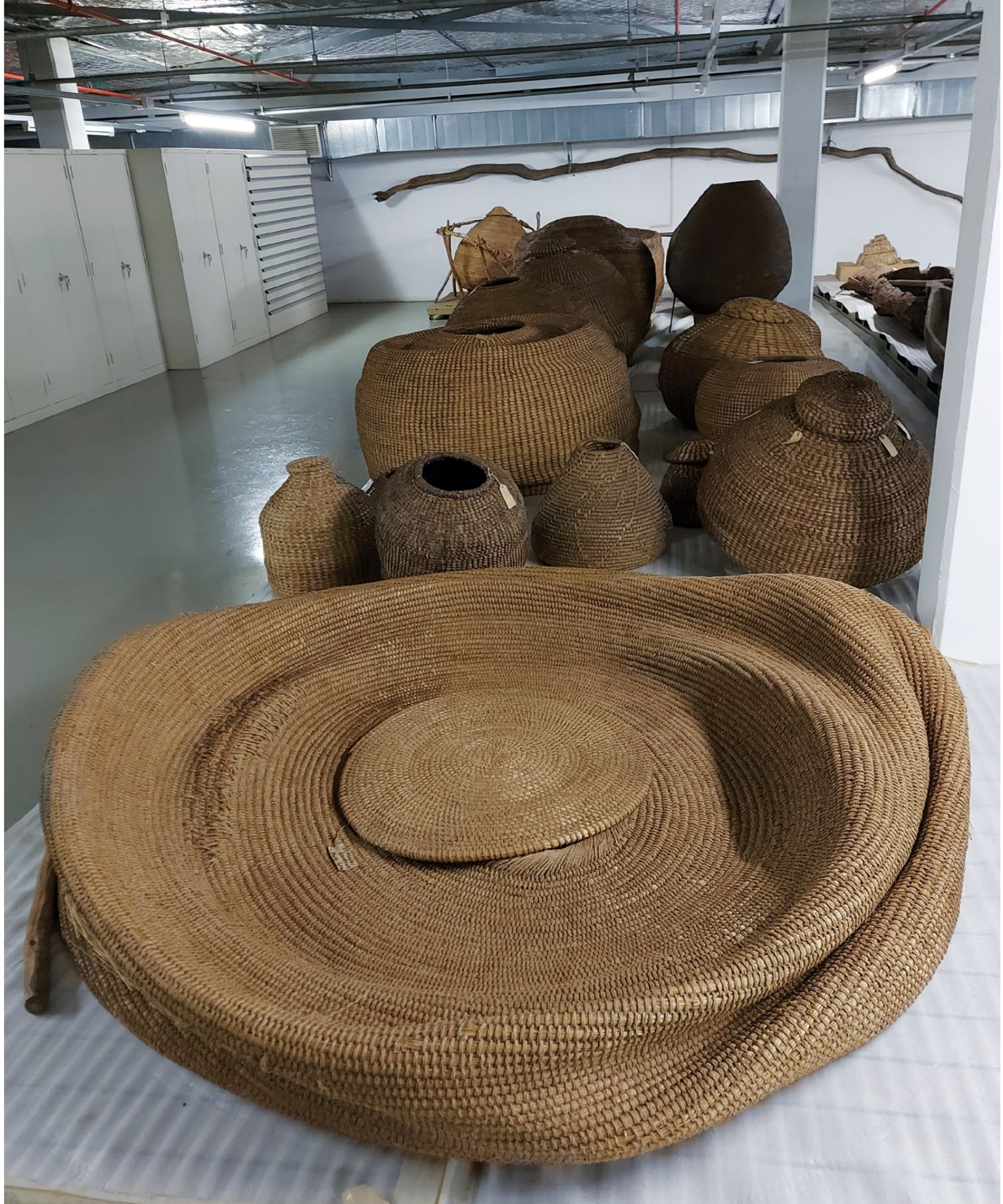


Figure 2.1.
Stacked Baskets, Walter Oltmann, 1990. © Iziko Museums of South Africa Art Collections. Photograph by Nigel Pamplin.

[1] Here I refer to Deliss' involvement of academics and creative practitioners from many different fields in symposia, colloquiums, panel discussions and creative interventions centred on the collections under her stewardship.



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artistic practice but also to shift the focus and re-vision some of the antiquated lenses through which the tangible material cultural objects in the WAM collections were historically viewed (De Becker & Nettleton 2015:97–111). Oltmann focused on wirework and beaded objects in the Standard Bank African Art Collection (part of the larger WAM holdings). His practice centred on navigating the problematic boundaries between and definitions of art and craft within a Southern African context (see Nettleton 2010). During this process, Oltmann drew extensively on the modality of handwork (the intellectual and physical process of using hands to create), the rich, textural materiality of the objects within the Standard Bank African Art Collection, and the applicability of these characteristics to his own artistic practice, stating that 'Valuing craftwork and handcrafted objects, and celebrating the "mindfulness" inherent in the making process, underlines all of my creative work' (De Becker & Nettleton 2015:103). The theoretical framework and practical approach underlying De Harde's project at the DNMCH is similar to Oltmann's work at the WAM. Both artists draw on the rich possibilities inherent in the materiality of objects within museum collections and their placement within the museum storerooms (De Becker & Nettleton 2015:105) to produce new pieces of creative output that frame these objects and the institution that houses them in a different light (Figure 2.1).

Similarly to Oltmann, De Harde took on the challenge of working within/with the DNMCH's anthropological collection (Figure 2.2) through the methodology of fine art. Seabela's facilitation of this process, as curator of the anthropological collection, reflects that of Clementine Deliss in terms of its recognition of the transformational potential inherent in stakeholders within museum spaces not necessarily coming from traditional fields of museum discourse, and should be read in conjunction with her collaboration with Chipangura at the Manchester Museum. It was on one of her field trips to the museum, facilitated by Seabela, that De Harde uncovered a small wooden cabinet on the fringes of the main anthropological collection in which a series of grainy black and white photographs were stored. According to De Harde and Seabela (2022), these photographs were taken by the museum's collectors on their travels. They depict people from the source communities from which some of the material cultural objects within the anthropological collection originate. Similarly to Oltmann, De Harde found fruitful potentialities in the *objectness* of these photographs; specifically, in the physical and conceptual separation between the photograph and the people in it (see Sontag 2007) that these documents symbolised. Interestingly, De Harde also found fertile areas of interest to explore in the placement of the photographs and the storage cabinet within (or in this case, outside of) the main anthropological collection.

This placement, as a study, is intriguing in itself: The wooden cabinet is placed outside of the neatly stored and climate-controlled environment where the objects photographed in the pictures reside, in a space separated from the rest of the collection by wire fencing. In this way, there is as much a physical and conceptual separation between these photographs and the main anthropological collection as between the hauntingly evocative individuals captured in half smiles and tones of sepia and the objects pictured with them: A pot or basket, a wooden staff. The unmistakable evidence of a lived life. There is a fission, a palimpsest of violent separation between these layers of significance and the values placed upon them. It is within and around the strata of this palimpsest that De Harde has worked. The disrupted surfaces of the artist's pieces (rent by threads, torn, dissolving) serve to emphasise this loud separation between person, object, photograph and archive, as well as the problematic methodologies of collection and preservation, of *inherited obsessions* that this museum and other institutions like it are tackling. De Harde's ghostly images, half unrecognisable, acknowledge the liminal space that these photographic documents occupy within the museum's anthropological collection, which is further reinforced through the physical placement of the photographs outside the main collection (Figure 2.3). Her work also gestures strongly towards the museum's positioning within the wider discourse of ethnographic and anthropological museum collections and their foundations in Southern Africa.

These photographs vibrate with intense and magnetic energy as source material and objects in their own right. Elizabeth Edwards (Peers & Brown 2003:297) has written on the self-same vibrant energy and the specific agency of photographs as distinct objects of power within museum collections. Edwards describes them as material traces and physical manifestations of the fraught relationship 'between the collector and the collected, the photographer and the photographed, the museum and the source community' (Peers & Brown 2003:84). It is this relational balance and *object power* that De Harde and Seabela are highlighting in this exhibition. Photographs, and their placement in museum collections, are not stable fields of reference and meaning, as is

Figure 2.2.
Dišego (grain storage baskets) in the Anthropology storage area of the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History. Photograph by Laura de Harde, 2022.

being made clear through De Harde's body of work produced as part of this Fellowship: They are entirely contingent on the ways that audiences (in this case, a curator, an artist and us as members of the public) construe them, and thus, for these reasons, their context within a museum collection is important. Through her work, De Harde acknowledges the vibrant energy and creative possibilities embodied by these photographs and how their ambiguousness as objects speaks to much more than what is represented on their dusty surfaces or referred to in well-trodden conversations around restitution and repatriation. Are De Harde and Seabela perhaps claiming, through this archival intervention in the form of an exhibition, that the collection of photographs is a window through which the DNMCH, as an institution, can be viewed? Is De Harde subtly adjusting the kaleidoscope and shifting the lenses of coloured glass through which we, the public, can view the museum? Does De Harde's body of work allow a multiplicity of lights to refract through the coloured prisms of the photographs to create a spectrum of readings that are legible to us, the viewers, and through which we can further understand the anthropological collection, the museum and its troubled foundations? Perhaps, through working with photographs in the museum's collection, she is also making a clever allusion to the trajectory of the DNMCH as a geographical site: The museum is located in what was the old South African Mint building ('A Missing Heritage Site' 2020), a place of commercial *wealth* production. As outlined in this chapter, museums are historically understood to produce a nation's political, cultural, and historical wealth through knowledge production. Photography was, at one time, as Susan Sontag quips, 'a toy of the clever, the wealthy, and the obsessed' (Sontag 2014:5). This would be a compelling subtext if indeed the case.

Material objects, such as this collection of photographs in their small wooden cabinet and the vast array of material cultural objects in the anthropological collection of the museum, possess a vast and often unpredictable power and agency which can be used in transformative ways. Jane Bennett (2010) spins an evocative tale—assisted by the work of Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch—of objects that enjoy a life of vital materiality that is at the same time dependent on and wholly separate from the human agency that acts on and with them. For Bennett, objects (individually, in concert with each other and activated through human interactions) can and do work to produce effect and affect. Bennett's ideas of vital materiality are most obviously at work in museum collections: A small cupboard containing photographic collections of source communities, and just beyond it, a collection of large Hananwa granary baskets woven by men and buried below ground to store food for the harsh winter months (Nettleton 2010:60–63), embody materialities and textualities that become saturated and heavy: Their layers of significance are imbued all at once with the vital materiality of the museum, of their makers and original intended use, of their placement within the archive, of the *inherited obsessions* of collectors and curators that resulted in their current location and context. Following this train of thought, we can also then say, as do Bill Brown and Arjun Appadurai (Brown 2001:1–22), that objects of material culture take on the contexts, connotations and acculturations of the environments from which they originate (and the ways that they move through and around these environments), as much as they also carry the importance given to them by the people that used them. These layers of significance and meaning—in a very real sense, the *textures* and *patinas* of the objects—*enliven* and *give life* to these objects. What then happens when these self-same items are incorporated into museum collections, with their own attachments, significances and bulky weights? The placement of a smoking pipe on a museum shelf, for example, adds as much of a layer of physical patina, of meaning, to that object as the tobacco residues around the rim. Bennett goes even further to argue that 'vital materialists' (Bennett 2010:17), or practitioners that recognise the continuity and synchronicities between the lives of these materials and their agency and engagements with the objects themselves, might be able to use this recognition in critical ways to broaden the interpretation of these materials. Can we then label De Harde and Seabela, as an artist and curator, vital materialists, in the sense that Bennett uses the term? Is this not ostensibly their role when engaging with objects of material culture? Should it be?

The answer to this question would be yes. De Harde harnesses the vital materiality, the rich creative potentialities of the photographs she is working with and the archive they live in to tease out a narrative of conservation, preservation, memory and the role of the archive as an institution, and she sets all of this against the backdrop of the historical legacy of the DNMCH. As audiences and consumers of visual culture, she draws our attention to the materiality of the photographs she is working with by dis/tending the surfaces of the paper she is using to depict the faces of the subjects forever frozen in a photographic

limbo. As this creative and conceptual process plays out through the form of her exhibition and her creative outputs, De Harde's works become almost insubstantial: Paper and fabric melt and drip, evoking a visceral feeling of destabilisation (Figure 2.4). The archive, the historical purpose and context of the museum, is flipped on its head through this engagement. It becomes as flimsy as the paper itself. As a stakeholder of agency in the museum, De Harde extends further into the anthropological collection beyond the wire fencing that encircles the wooden storage cabinet and photographs. She draws a correlation between her works and a collection of Hananwa granary baskets by positioning them in relation to her own art pieces. There is a relationship here, an association, a gesture, that De Harde is asking us to consider. The layering of these objects begins to speak loudly about heritage, conservation and the role of museums in Southern Africa. What are we choosing to preserve, and why?

Heritage and the role that museums take on to create a system of control (collection and accession strategies) to protect whatever it is they take to mean by this term needs constant and dialogic interference and interaction by creative stakeholders to create new definitions of these troubled and troubling terms (museum, heritage, nationhood). The vital materialities (tangible or intangible) and histories associated with these institutions can be teased out using creative outputs (Kasfir & Yai 2004:197), whether these are in academic discourses or, in this case, exhibitions and art. De Harde and Seabela's work referred to in this chapter must be seen in the context of this claim. It broadens the relevance of the DNMCH's collections while also signalling to contemporary debate centred on contentious and trendy buzzwords such as restitution and repatriation. Perhaps most promisingly, De Harde and Seabela's archival intervention is but the start of a longer discourse. It is not a final declaratory statement on the museum or its archives but is rather a baton that can be passed on to others in the near future.

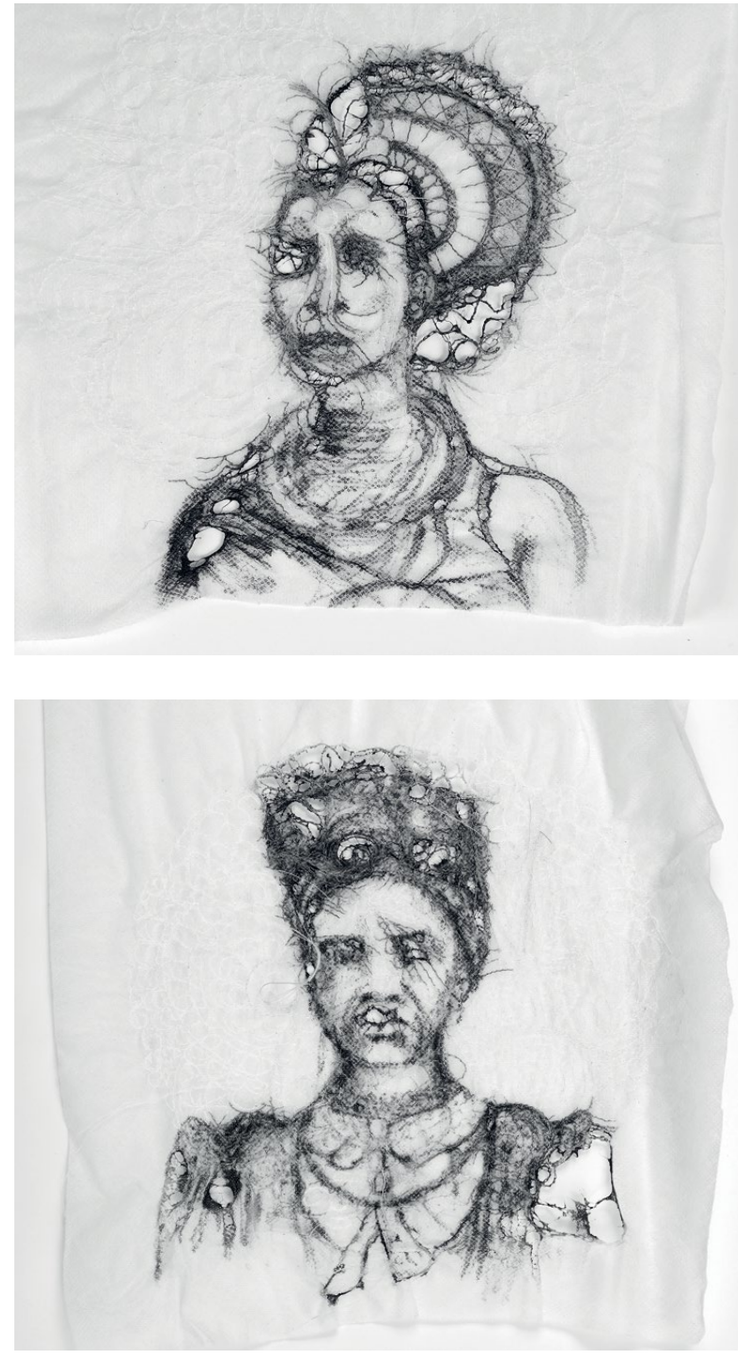

Figure 2.3.
Portrait studies by Laura de Harde, inspired by photographs the artist found in a small wooden cabinet in the Anthropology storage area of the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History. Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.

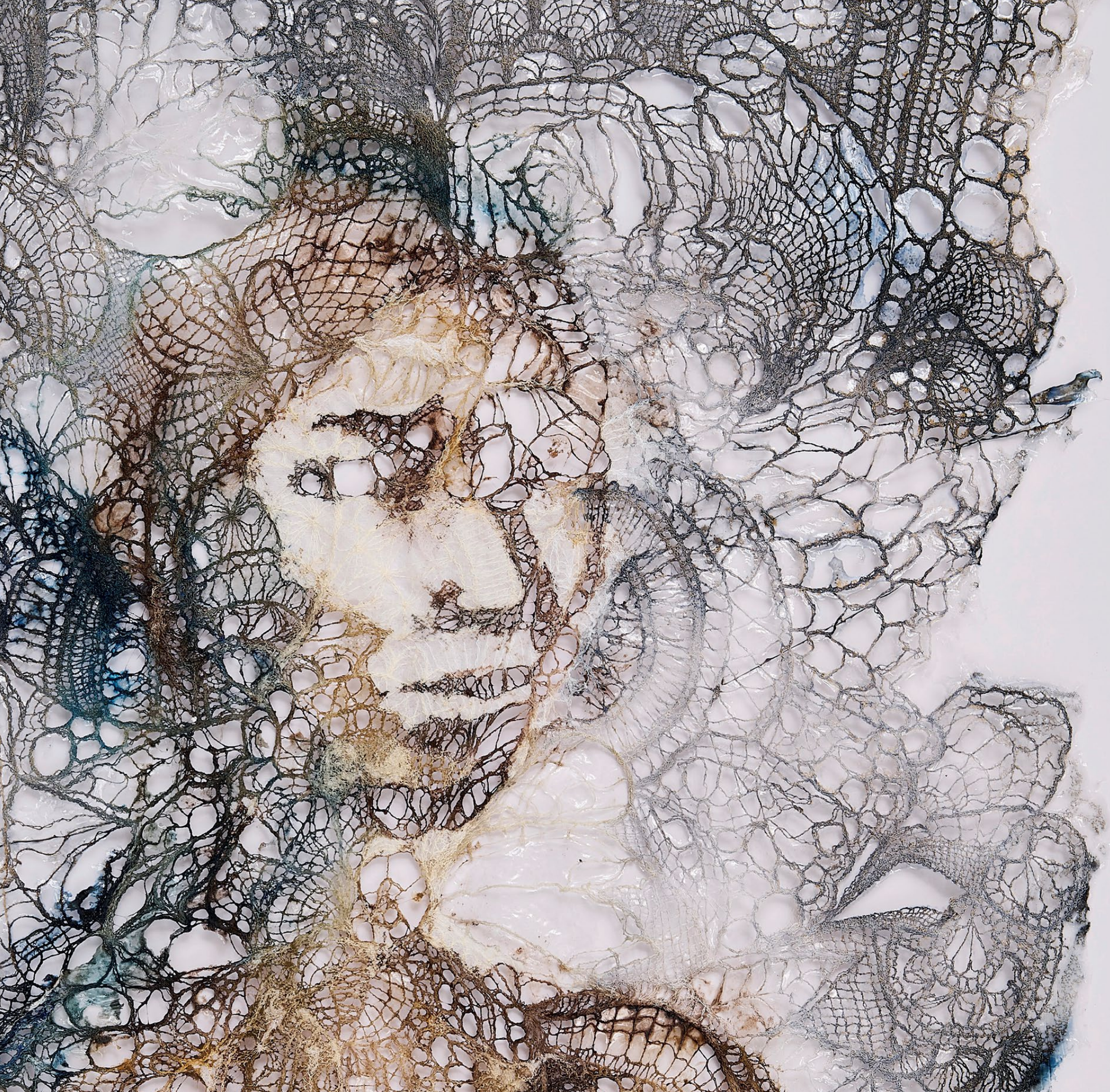

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Figure 2.4.
Ovambo Vrou (2022), a portrait study included in the exhibition *Inherited Obsessions*. Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.