Chapter **09**

Objects on Life-Support: Items on Pallets and Bundles in Cupboards

Laura de Harde

During one of my first visits to the Anthropology storage area, located in the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History (DNMCH), Motsane Gertrude Seabela, curator of Anthropology Collections, introduced me to the grain storage baskets or *dišego* in the Sepedi language. Over the years, the museum has amassed an assortment of grain baskets of varying shape, size and tonal range. They sit quietly alongside one another, huddled together on covered metal pallets towards the left-hand side of the dimly lit, air-cooled storeroom. Historically, African baskets were produced in a range of sizes to act as vessels for containing and storing provisions such as vegetables, grains and, in some cases, liquids, including beer (Nettleton 2010:60). Some baskets would be kept in designated huts (Monnig 1967) and others, the large woven baskets or *dišego*, such as the ones on display in the exhibition *Inherited Obsessions* (2022), were made to store grains including maise, wheat and sorghum.

The *dišego* displayed in *Inherited Obsessions* (2022) were made using a technique called coiling, which is one of the most common forms of indigenous basket-making in southern Africa (Nettleton 2010:62). Coiling is a process whereby 'thin bundles of sedge grass stalks are bound together in coils'; the bundles are then 'sewn together to form vessels of various shapes, and for a variety of purposes' (Nettleton 2010:62). Following their completion, the *dišego*, are 'planted by men' (Masekoameng 2007:29) and buried in the community cattle kraal (Masekoameng 2007:29; Seabela 2021). Seabela explains how

> a large hole is excavated in the centre of the kraal and lined with grains (called *ditokole*) at the bottom of the hole, one or two feet thick. The basket is then placed in the hole so that the bottom rests on the wheat. Two poles on which a crossbar rests are planted opposite sides of the hole. A strap is fastened to the transverse pole, while the other end, which is fastened to a strong beam of

Figure 9.1.
Dišego (grain storage baskets) propped up in the Anthropology storage area of the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History. Photograph by Laura de Harde, 2022.

> about 3 metres, is placed in the basket so that the transverse one passes in front of the mouth. A further two poles of about 3 by 4 metres are planted in the beam about 2 metres apart. At these two poles, two ends of cowhide are [buried] so that the other end runs through into the basket (Seabela 2021).

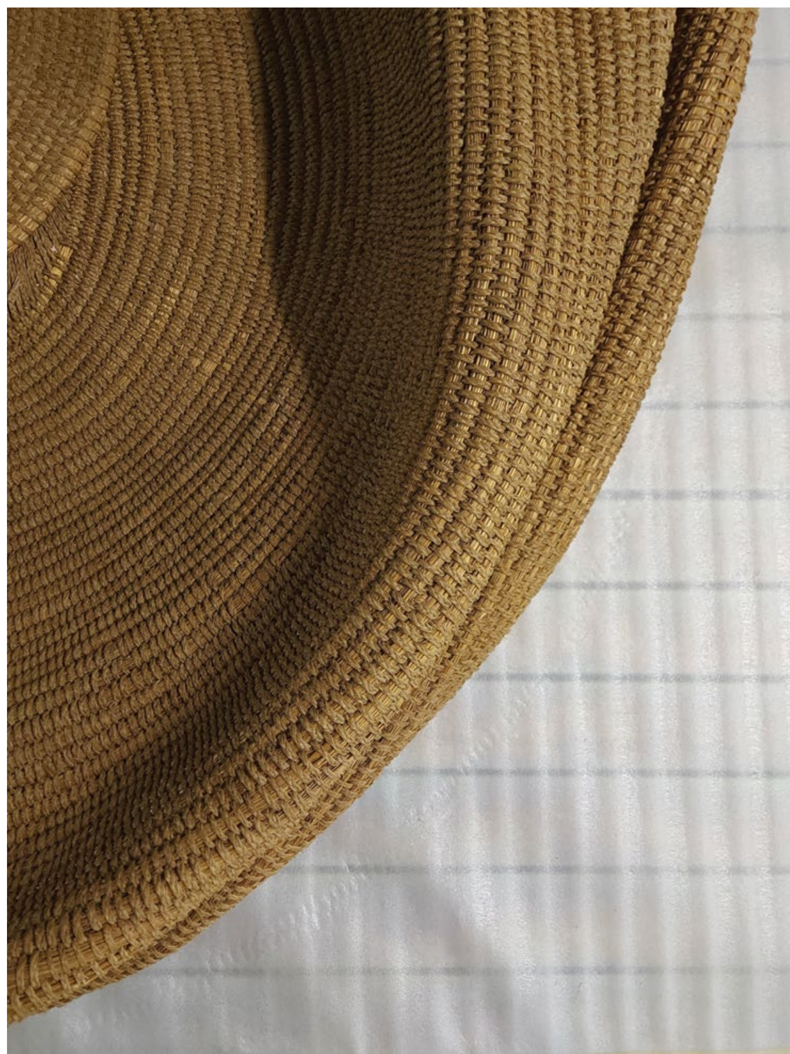


Figure 9.2.
Close-up photograph taken of a *sešego* (grain storage basket) in the Anthropology storage area of the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History. Photograph by Laura de Harde, 2022.

Once below ground, the *sešego* can efficiently maintain its contents at low temperatures. The material used to weave the baskets 'absorbs any possible sweating that might exist due to embryonic breathing of the sorghum grains' (Masekoameng 2007:5). Stored in this way, crops can remain fresh for two to three years (Khumbane 2004). Sorghum can be stored for more than ten years.

The baskets were therefore made with the knowledge that they would be stored below ground and, in this way, be supported by the earth. In other words, they were not made to support themselves or to hold their spherical shapes for extended periods. Today, as they sit positioned on metal pallets in the exhibition space (a re-enactment of their lives in the storeroom), their 'bodies' are exposed to the public, their forms bending and buckling, some assisted by wooden supports or positioned on wire stands propped up against supports and others with their bodies imploded. The physicality of these objects, their forms and their bodies provide evidence of the conservation difficulties Seabela contends with at the museum (Figures 9.1 and 9.2).

Seabela (see Chapter 3) finds herself frustrated and overwhelmed when confronted with the gaping holes of unrecorded information pertaining to the communities, makers, and locations, where objects in the museum are severed from their provenance. Even in instances when 'individualised information does exist, it is now largely detached and disassociated from the objects' (Leibhammer 2017:83). Yet the inscrutability of objects and archives is ever present in collections and is also true for objects preserved in the DNMCH storeroom, with individual objects each displaying a label with an accession number but, in many instances, not much else and with no supporting documentation immediately available. Where the *dišego* are concerned, the museum's *Anthropology Collection Accession Register* retains some information regarding the provenance of some of the baskets. In one instance, the maker's name has been recorded as 'Phineas Phelego of the Hananwa people at the southern foot of the Blouberg, Leipzig in the Limpopo Province' (Seabela 2021). It reportedly took Phelego two

months to make the basket, and according to the accession record, Phelego sold the basket to the museum in 1966.

Citing the long history of basketry in Africa, the use of 'locally available materials', and the continuation and utilisation of 'inherited techniques', Nettleton sees the craft of basket-making as a 'vector for an African identity' (2010:56). Yet even with this prominence, in the five decades since their acquisition, the *dišego* in the DMNCH storeroom have never been exhibited nor have they left the storeroom (Seabela pers. comm. 2022). As co-curators of the exhibition accompanying this volume, Seabela and I elected to revive these objects by transferring them from the positions they occupy in the storeroom into the gallery space in the museum.

Patiently waiting

In earlier chapters in this volume, Matthew McClure (Chapter 2) and Motsane Gertrude Seabela (Chapter 3) consider the history of the DNMCH and reflect on the events that led to the making of the Anthropology Collection over which Seabela now presides. Since the early 1880s, the anxiety that indigenous races were on the brink of extinction motivated a scramble 'to collect and conserve evidence of their existence as part of the natural history of the world' (Rassool 2015; Van Schalkwyk 1996, cited in Seabela, Chapter 3 in this volume). As McClure points out, the objects allocated to the categories of '*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' (Chapter 2). In Chapter 3, Seabela ponders her role in caring for these objects, listing the agents of preventative conservation and pauses to reconsider the definition of dissociation as the act of 'an item becom[ing] separated from information about why it is valuable' (Lacombe Museum and Archives 2022, cited in Seabela Chapter 3). Seabela offers a broader definition to 'include the separation of objects from their source communities, which results in misrepresentation and obscured provenance or the lack thereof'. For Seabela:

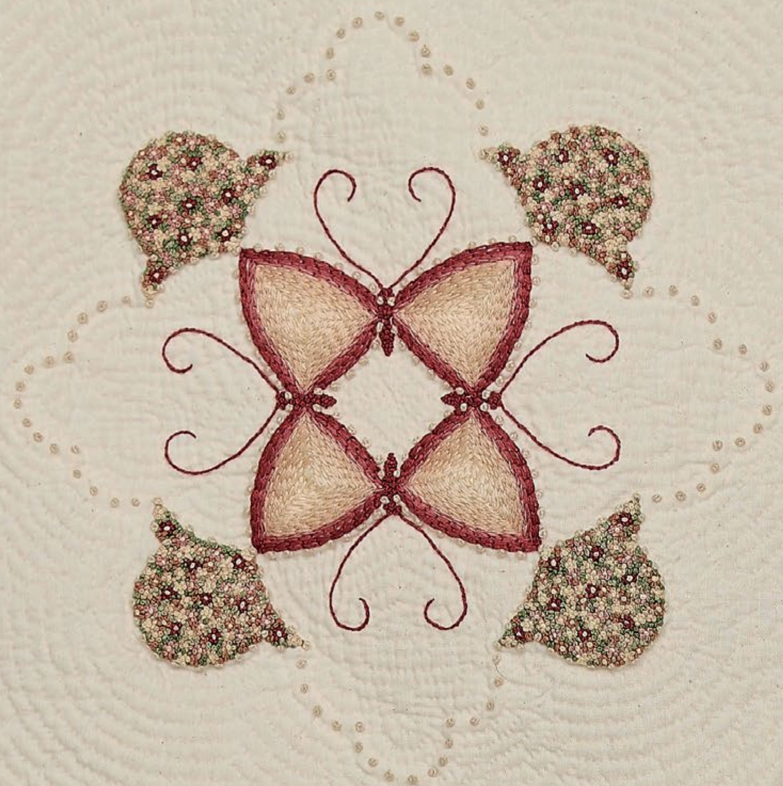
> the silenced voices of indigenous communities in museum collections due to colonialism have resulted in the separation of the intangible from the tangible heritage of objects. Encouraging the continuous preservation of such objects merely for the sake of preserving them (because it has always been done so) makes no sense (see Chapter 3).

In 2016, I described the materials I encountered in the Survey Room on the second floor of the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences (ZMHS) as 'sleeping' (after Foucault 1994:123 in De Harde 2019:21). There has moreover been a comparison drawn between the 'unseen archives, study rooms, and libraries which are inaccessible to the public' and the crypt (Brusius & Singh 2018). As Theodore Adorno once commented:

> the German word *museal* (museumlike) has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association (Adorno 1982:178 in Witcomb 2002:102).

Yet my experience walking through the air-cooled and humidity-controlled Anthropology storage area at the DNMCH was quite different from my encounter with the Survey Room in Harare (De Harde 2019; 2021). If the materials I engaged with in the ZMHS related to the scholarship of Elizabeth Goodall were quietly left to rest, the objects in the DNMCH storeroom are purposefully positioned in cupboards, on shelves and raised off the polished and sealed cement floors on pallets. In the large windowless room in central Pretoria, the objects exist mostly in the dark, carefully monitored at intervals by Seabela, who has described them as 'paralysed' (Seabela pers. comm. 2022). In addition, Seabela takes umbrage with the term 'object', seeing them as 'more than just things but symbols and strands of people's lineages' (Chapter 3). Inspired by these discussions, I began thinking again about the term 'object' in relation to the anthropomorphising terms attributed to storage, as discussed above. As I reflected on my visit to the dimly lit, quiet room, it seemed to evoke a visit to the Intensive Care Unit in a hospital. Following this thought, I found it provocative to consider the items in the storeroom as 'patients'.

Previously, the *dišego* (and by association, their makers) had been aligned with nature. They were housed in natural history or ethnographic museums and deemed to be 'ethnographic' or craft items with mere utilitarian significance. As we follow the trajectory of the appropriation of African material culture into Western Art History, we see that, as



Nessa Leibhammer observed, only some select pieces were recognised as 'masterpieces' and displayed as 'worthy' of aesthetic contemplation (2017:70). 'Objects formerly treated simply as craft', as Anitra Nettleton points out, 'were, in a number of places, decontextualised in their display as aesthetic objects, and reinterpreted as the "art" of black Africans' (2010:57). 'With a swift sleight of hand', placed on display in museum and gallery spaces, 'they became "art", occupying the realm of "high culture"' (Leibhammer 2017:59–60). My and Seabela's decision to include these objects as part of *Inherited Obsessions* (2022) is made with the intention of mobilising the baskets and reconfiguring and redefining them by this relatively brief intervention. In this exhibition, the grain storage baskets are not confined to their function, nor bound by their perceived aesthetic value, but rather are shown as objects with their physicality, as bodies that convey the burden of preservation and conservation as it is inherited by our future successors.

Bundles of burden

In thinking through the notion of representation and the issue of 'black subjectivity' concerning fine art production and the history of art, Nontobeko Ntombela has explored the possibility of employing what she calls 'individualised and imagined moments'. She describes this concept as being

> based on the idea of contemporary art as a discipline primarily located in the engagement of imagination, memory and storytelling, ideas positioned within wider practices of contemporary art. Such artistic practices compel us to take a closer look at the context that brings to the surface the issue of 'black subjectivity' (2017:88–89).

This exhibition manifests our conversations and my creative work, where I try to empathise with Seabela's role as curator, custodian, carer and nurse. In reflecting on Seabela's burden of inheriting what I refer to as the 'obsessions' of others in trying to preserve what are often cumbersome, fragile and decaying objects, I draw on my personal experience, less formal and on a much smaller scale.

In the top of a built-in cupboard in the family home where I grew up is a loosely rolled up bundle made up of two queen-sized quilts (Figures 9.3 and 9.4). Together these quilts are the product of 13-and-a-half years

Figure 9.4. (above)
Close-up photograph taken to show the individual knots that make up Tilly de Harde's hand-embroidered quilt. Photograph by Laura de Harde, 2022.

Figure 9.3. (opposite)
Close-up photograph taken of Tilly de Harde's hand-embroidered quilt. Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.

of handwork produced by my mother, internationally acclaimed Master Quilter and Fibre Artist, Tilly de Harde. What started as a single block grew through a six-and-a-half-year period into a quilt that brushes the ground on three sides when spread over an extra-length queen-sized bed. Each embroidered thread has been individually knotted and placed by hand, and each stitch that binds the three layers of fabric together, in effect, 'quilting' it, has been sewn by hand. These quilts fall into the category of objects that Olivia Loots (Chapter 7) explains can 'no longer be neatly categorised as, simply, "sentimental". Because matter is experienced and "knotted through different encounters"'. In this way, Loots argues that 'an object's perceived value impacts its affective hold, and vice versa' (Boscagli 2014:12 in Loots Chapter 7).

Figure 9.5.
Tilly de Harde nearing the end of her project, photographed stitching the first of the two quilts, *Golden Memories*. Photograph by Barry de Harde, c. 2000.

In the years since completion, the quilts have been shown to the public several times; in each instance, they have received awards and acclaim. Aside from these public viewings, they are taken out twice a year to be aired and folded again to prevent creasing. Driven by my mother's fear that they would be dirtied, hooked, or damaged in some way, the quilts have never been used. They live in the dark in a cupboard purposefully chosen because there is no geyser nearby and, therefore, no risk of water damage. One day, one (if not both quilts) will be bestowed on me, and I will be responsible for looking after one or both of them. While in her possession, Tilly de Harde has cared for them, preserving them pristinely. I often think of these objects, sewn by my mother's hands, and the enormous amount of work, perseverance and dedication that has been stitched into them (Figure 9.5)

In placing the grain storage baskets and my mother's embroidered quilts imaginatively alongside one another in this chapter, I am considering the responsibility of what will one day be the burden of preservation that I will need to shoulder. These objects, burdens of inheritance—my mother's embroidered quilts and Seabela's grain baskets—are engaging in an endless dialogue about the categories of art and craft, which has been continuing over decades.

Some affinities can be drawn between the woven baskets and the stitched fabric, from an appreciation of the hours dedicated to handwork stitched and worked and embedded into the surfaces to the desire to preserve something of the makers' identities. The traditions from which both objects develop face similar challenges, both, for example, are seen as falling into the domain of 'women's work'. Yet as Rozika Parker points out in *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), Medieval embroidery was

practised by both men and women, a detail obscured by the Victorians who presented it as 'an inherently female activity, a quintessentially feminine craft' (1984:17).

Slivers in cabinets

While trawling through a small wooden cabinet in the Anthropology storage area, in close proximity to the baskets but 'separated from the rest of the collection by wire fencing' (see McClure, Chapter 2), amidst a pile of photographs with the inscription 'Issued by the South African Information Service, Pretoria' typed on their versos, I found two black and white photographs relating to the grain storage baskets.

The first, 'Photo No. 2358', showed the grain baskets in the background with several women positioned in the middle ground forming a line separating a collection of smaller bowls on the ground from the large baskets in the background. The description typed on the back, 'bringing the grain for storage', provided context for the activity captured in the frame. 'Photo No. 2359' seemed staged by comparison with the previous image. The images of 12 women standing in a line in front of the *dišego* are captured within the frame of the photograph. They stand still for their portraits, looking out to the right, beyond the frame created by the photograph, each figure dwarfed by the sheer scale of the grain storage baskets in the background. On the back, the inscription reads, 'South-West Africa. Ovambo women in front of their grain stores'.

I have always been interested in photography. Not necessarily the image itself, but the photograph as an object with a life of its own, separated from the sitter whose likeness it reflects and the photographer who captured the moment. When I was growing up, my mother had a hand-coloured photograph of herself at about two years of age, taken in the 1960s (Figure 9.6). This image is the only one my mother has of herself as a small child. She treasured this item, and I remember her efforts to preserve it. One of her interventions was moving this photograph along with a few other cherished family portraits out of the way of home renovators and into a cupboard for safekeeping. At some time in the months that followed, a geyser burst, leaking water onto the ceiling of the house. The water ran down the walls into the cupboard where the photographs were being stored, seeping into the frames and blurring the pigment on the surfaces, disrupting the portraits. My mother was devastated. Insurance compensation replaced the beams in the roof and the wood in the cupboard, but the

Figure 9.6.
Hand-coloured portrait of my mother at about age two, damaged by water while in storage. Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.

portraits were destroyed. No copies had been made, and there was no way of replacing them. This event haunts and informs my creative research—the urgency to protect a loved object from damage and the devastation when efforts fail. I believe I have inherited something of this obsession from my mother to care for and preserve cherished items. I, too, have faced devastation when these interventions fail, and items are damaged. It feels as if what is often associated with motherhood, the motherly instinct of care, can also be stifling and suffocating.

In 2020, I began working with my mother's mark making, her stitching, incorporating it into my creative practice. Her work has evolved from the labour-intensive task of hand stitching employed in her embroidered quilts. She has now developed her mode of mark-making, a technique called 'free motion quilting' whereby she moves the fabric under the needle of her Bernina 770 QE sewing machine to create intricate and spontaneous patterns. In my studio practice, I began integrating my mother's gestural mark-making by having her transfer her technique (usually done on fabric) onto paper (Figure 9.7). Her patterns are visually attractive as they flow across the surface, puncturing holes in quick succession. I would collect the stitched sheets of paper from her, return them to my studio and imprint onto the stitched paper my renditions of digital copies of photographic portraits I had taken in storerooms and in archives. In the studio, I experimented with reproducing the images using ink and water. The water destabilises the ink, moving it across the surface of the paper and making any attempt at precision copying unattainable and futile. In Chapter 5, Jessica Webster describes these portraits as trapped 'within the delicate whorls' of stitching 'being disfigured, and sometimes structured by them'. The ink is unstable in the reaction it has with water and light. It flows and bleeds across the textured paper surface, changing colour as it is diluted. In the future, in the life the images lead beyond the confines of the studio, the ink will continue to change colour, and as a result, the images will continue to shift and change in ways beyond my control.

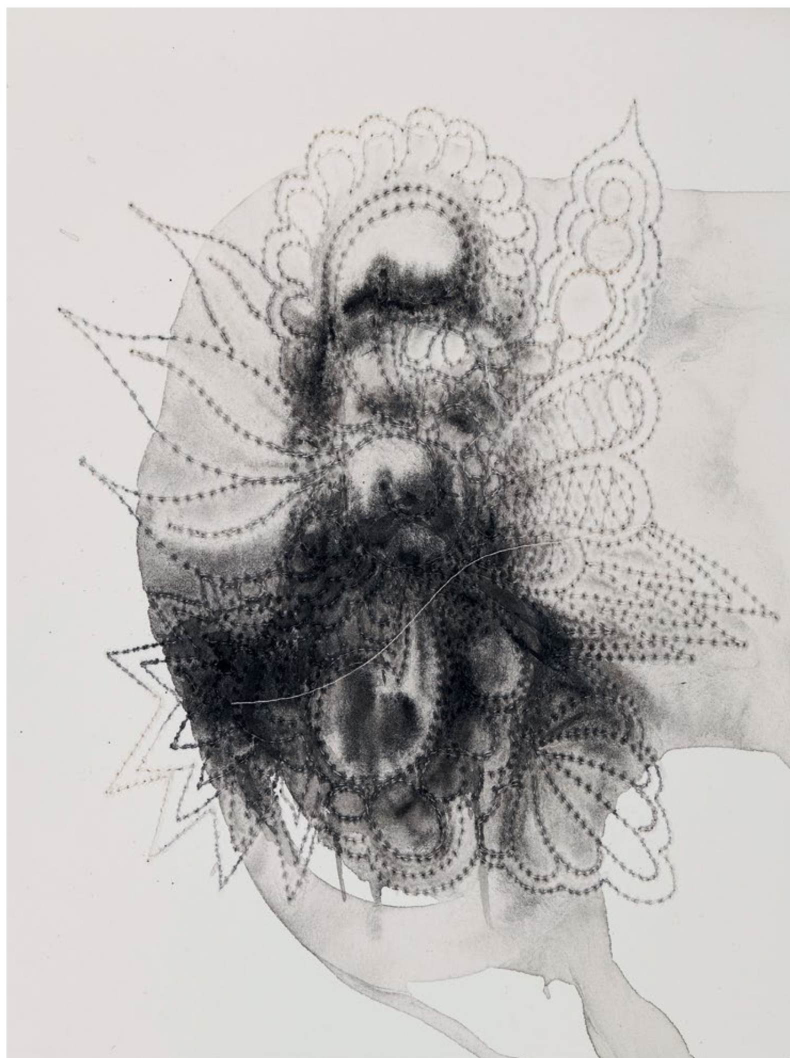


Figure 9.7.
An artwork where I incorporated my mother's mark-making (2020). This work is inspired by a photograph in the Documents and Materials Collection at the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History. Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.

My time spent working in commercial galleries and museums and the cross-continental research I have conducted in various storerooms and archives have revealed the instability and fickleness undermining the project of preservation. Objects entrusted and interred in museum storerooms for posterity are subject to the changing objectives of those museums. Objects stored for decades can be deaccessioned, or museums can lose funding and close their doors. Or, as Jill Weintroub discusses in Chapter 6, archives and the objects they protect can be

extinguished by fire. In my engagement with these concepts, I am aware of my subjective and irrational desire to preserve and keep the many objects in museums, storerooms, and archives safe. I have been exposed to the futility of failed preservation.

Nevertheless, through my experimental creative research, I try to capture, reproduce, copy, and conserve the likeness of the sitters in the portraits I have encountered. But the water disrupts the ink, forcing it across the surface of the paper in ways I cannot control, evading my ability to accurately record recognisable details of the individuals (Figure 9.7). My mother's stitching sometimes holds the image in place, giving it form, but the ink inevitably slips through the holes that pierce the paper, showcasing the inefficaciousness of my attempts to preserve the original photographs in this way. These early efforts to grapple with and understand the urge to preserve images (objects) with the knowledge that our efforts are only ever fleeting and frustrated, and while our legacy of 'pristinely preserving' a cherished item may be remembered briefly, the burden to continue preserving rests on the shoulders of future generations.

Seabela has commented on what she sees as a momentary intervention in what will inevitably be the decay of objects (Seabela pers. comm. 2022), such as the *dišego*, for example, that are kept on life-support in storerooms. I, too, have explored this notion of inexorable decay in my studio practice. Building on my mother's stitching on paper, I have explored what would happen if I used my mother's stitching as the thread that holds the image together, dissolving all the background materials (Figure 9.8). These artworks begin to convey the texture and physicality of the object (photograph) as it decays. Here I combine my desire to preserve something of the original object and the likeness of the sitter with an exploration of the process of deterioration. I use a range of experimental techniques and distinctive materials to capture the materiality of decay. This resonates with the otherwise hermetically preserved objects/bodies of the *dišego* exhibited in conversation with the outcomes of my creative research.

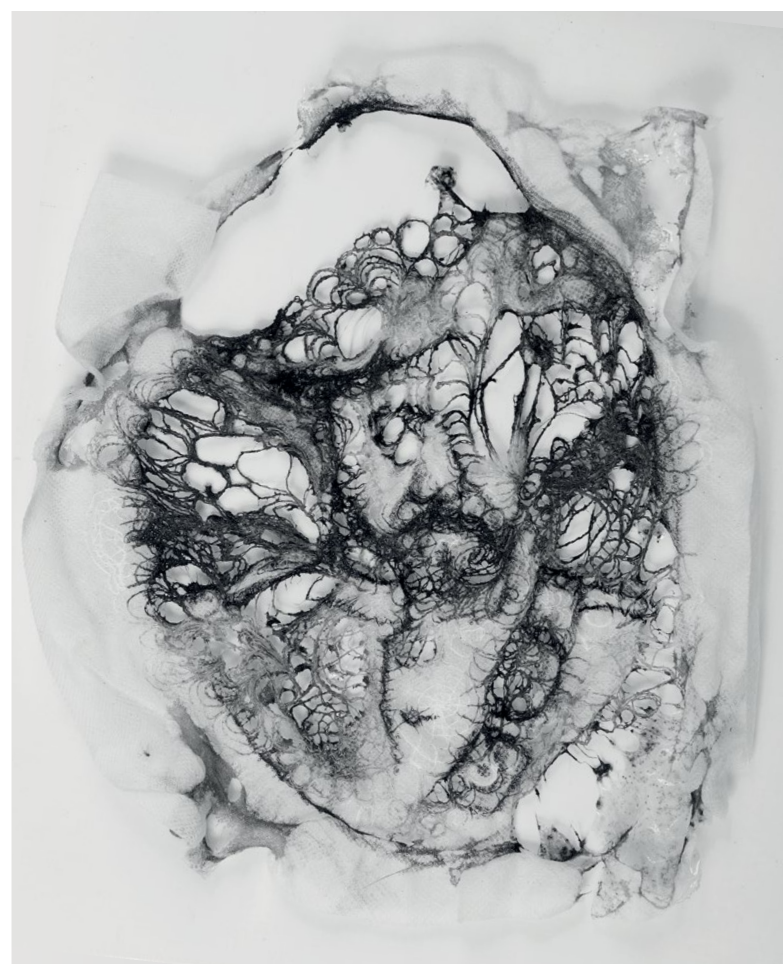


Figure 9.8.
An artwork demonstrating my efforts to translate the physicality of decay using experimental techniques and my mother's mark-making (2020). This work was inspired by a photograph in the Documents and Materials Collection at the Ditsong National Museum of Cultural History. Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.

Layers of meaning

The small wooden cabinet in which I found the photographs discussed above holds a collection of materials that seem to have been left undisturbed for decades (Seabela pers. comm. 2021). As I looked through the photographs, I realised that my chance encounter with

these additional materials offered me a glimpse into the infinite variety of stories that can be told through the process of archival sleuthing and 'close reading' (Bal 2002:9–10), and the opportunity to invoke a biographical approach to objects (Wintjes 2017:137–53). The presence of these women in the archive, their likenesses immortalised alongside objects carrying a description denoting their ownership of the baskets, led me to more questions than answers. As Justine Wintjes reminds us, 'certain items remain frustratingly opaque and mysterious' (2017:145).

Extending the concept of the layered meanings entwined in the archive to my creative work, I reflect on the layering of meanings in relation to the *dišego*. These baskets are the objects that inaugurate my creative interactions with Seabela and the DNMHC. The women in 'Photo No. 2359' became the focal point of my creative engagement. The artworks in the exhibition represent the outcomes of various experimental encounters with various materials and images. The artworks selected for display are the culmination of two years of creative research where I try to convey visually what I understand and experience as the conceptual layering of meaning in the archive. To this end, I worked with a range of experimental printmaking techniques (Figure 9.9), incorporating my mother's stitching as the canvas on which I tried to record the portraits of the 12 women in 'Photo No. 2359' whose names and identities have not been recorded. My ability to capture, interpret and record the portraits is disrupted by my mother's stitching, which also keeps the images that I paint together. In this way, the various layers in my work represent my understanding of my subjectivity as it guides my research practice and engagement with objects.

Through a series of portrait studies using experimental printmaking techniques with watercolour, thread, and embossing, I work consciously in the space of the unknown, frustrating the viewer with images that remain obscure, depicting people whose identity remains always just out of reach (Figure 9.10). I have purposefully chosen not to reproduce the photographs here, deliberately concealing the identities of the sitters from the viewers. In this way, my work is a response to the limitations of the archive. It is a creative attempt to acknowledge the 'the devastating rebuttal of the notion long cherished … that in contextualising text they are revealing meaning, resolving mystery, and closing the archive' (Harris 2002a:71, cited in Weintroub Chapter 6).

Driven 'by the pleasure and enjoyment of the detective-like nature of the work' (Wintjes 2017:144) and working imaginatively in the space where the 'openness' of the archive is acknowledged, like Teboho Lebakeng (Chapter 4), I am cognisant of my role as translator and mediator. My engagement with the portraits while keeping the identity of each sitter out of reach of the viewer ignites a frustration, a desire in both artist and viewer to want to find out more. Through this method, I simultaneously present the possibilities offered by the 'object biographies' (Wintjes 2017:137–53) approach but simultaneously acknowledge the limitations of the archive. As Wintjes explains:

> It is about what [we] do with what [we] have, and it is about acknowledging and working actively with the indeterminacy, provisionality and uncertainty of knowledge (2017:146).

The exhibition *Inherited Obsessions* (2022), together with the edited volume, had its inception in the winter of 2020, when I answered a call for a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship position at the University of Pretoria put forward by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). Established in 2013 in response to what an independent statutory body identified as the neglect of the Humanities and Social Sciences, the NIHSS saw a shortcoming in 'post-apartheid forms of thinking, of heritage and scholarship', resulting in what it deemed to be reductive 'shocking and enduring cultural stereotypes' (NIHSS n.d.). The concerns of the NIHSS align closely with an overarching interest that motivated my doctoral research, *Elizabeth Goodall: A Quiet Contribution to Rock Art Research in Southern Africa* (2019), where I stirred an archive containing a range of fragmentary materials to unmask subtle aspects of knowledge production that are often eclipsed by dominant narratives. While my doctoral research was text-based and without a formal creative component, my supervisors commented on an aspect of my work, noting that I presented

> … a fine-grained art-historical reading of the evolving methods, fieldwork and creative practices that frame processes of rock art reproduction and serve to structure in hidden ways how the art is interpreted (Wintjes & Weintroub 2019).

My post-doctoral work under the auspices of Lize Kriel's NIHSS-funded project 'African Au-o-ral Art in Image-text Objects: Cultural Translation of Precolonial Memories and Remains' – within which

Figure 9.9.
An example of an artwork where I experimented with printmaking techniques incorporating Tilly de Harde's stitching (2022). Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.

Figure 9.10.
Issued by Woman 1, a portrait study by Laura de Harde, included in the exhibition *Inherited Obsessions*, 2022. Photograph by Neil Kirby, 2022.

this publication and exhibition are a key outcome – responds to the concerns outlined by the NIHSS while drawing on the methodological approach I employed in my PhD, as well as in my creative practice as an artist and printmaker. This project evolved from the notion of 'image-text-objects' as discussed by Kriel in this volume (Chapter 1) to include conversations with colleagues, many of whom have contributed to this volume. The visual component of this project is the physical manifestation of my creative response to these conversations and the ongoing dialogue Seabela and I started in 2021. Seabela commented that she 'loves working with artists'; when I prompted her, she elaborated positively by saying, 'You have no boundaries' (Seabela pers. comm. 2022). Creativity takes many directions providing possibilities for co-enriching collaboration. Like items on shelves and pallets and bundles at the top of cupboards, museum curators can find themselves paralysed by conventions and modes of display and engagements with collections inherited from their predecessors. The role of artists to disrupt these spaces, questioning conventions and presenting different perspectives, brings fluidity to what can often be a stale and stagnant environment. The intervention in *Inherited Obsessions* (2022), enacted in a collaboration between artist and curator, is merely a momentary encounter with the chosen objects in the museum collection, reviving a small selection of object-patients and engaging them in conversation, yet opening up possibilities for other conversations and different interpretations that are infinite and exciting.

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