



**The 36th Annual SAVAH Conference will be hosted by the Department of Fine Art & Jewellery Design, Faculty of Arts & Design, Durban University of Technology, City Campus 20 - 22 September 2022.**

## **CALL FOR PAPERS**

### ***Romancing the Stone: Lithic Ecologies & Hard Places in South African Visual Culture [Breaking Rock]***

‘I call them ruins, though nothing is left of the buildings. The stones long since became part of the landscape. Yet I remember where each house used to be.’

- **Zakes Mda** (on his family's ancestral home in Lower Telle, Eastern Cape, in the novel *Sometimes there is a void*, 2012)

‘*Ukuphosa itshe esivivaneni*’

- A **proverb** in isiZulu that refers to the individual’s contribution to a greater, collective good – literally to ‘throw one’s *stone* on the pile’.

‘Everything changes, even stone.’

- **Claude Monet** (with reference to the shifting face of light on the façade of Rouen Cathedral)

The relationship between human beings and stone as a medium, metaphor and artefact has a significant and contested history within the visual arts. We use the word in metaphors to signify *impermeable* ideas and *hardened* frameworks. We describe ideas and ideologies as *set in stone* when we feel that they cannot be changed or shifted. However, as Monet observed in relation to the shifting light on the Rouen Cathedral, ‘Everything changes, even stone’. A *monumental* observation that speaks also to the displacement or *casting into shadow* of the grand narratives of the art canon, that have privileged occidental views. The lithic metaphor is a broad habitus, particularly aligned with KwaZulu-Natal, where much rock art and history from within and around the *rock* (archeology, history, and heritage) is drawn. Professor David Lewis Williams’ theories on the shamanic dimensions of San rock art in the Drakensberg are a primary example of this heritage, while touching on the ubiquitous *romancing of stone* that pre-colonial culture is so often subject to – a *fetishising* of the unknowable past.

The Durban University of Technology is engaged in a *lithic* position, *between a rock and a hard place* – emerging out of the technical college’s system into a contemporary institute of higher learning. There are many *rocky outcrops* to negotiate: the challenging balance of technology and theory, productively engaged in the model of practice-based research; the pessimistic outlook of research funders, who often view Universities of Technology with a suspicion tainted by the light of past *edifices* and academic prejudices; and the discursive project of decolonisation, in a city where the very buildings and town-planning bear witness to a

complex *stratification* of colonisation, segregation, migration, history, and memory. The metaphor of *romancing the stone* is an apt one for the development of Universities of Technology; it is also a warning to be vigilant of the prism of *romancing*, using cultural, gendered, and fetishised lenses, which can obscure a clear view of new, surprising, and transitional identities.

How can the metaphor of *romancing the stone* assist us in navigating the rocky, harder places in South Africa's visual culture?

**We propose this figurative theme of *romancing the stone* as a productive framework to cast a wide net amongst the *hard places* in South African visual culture. We invite papers and visual presentations from scholars, researchers, and post-graduate students. Practice-based research is particularly welcome. We also invite contributions from SAVAH members on current research that engages topics not included in this call for papers.**

**Please submit an abstract of between 300 and 400 words via the [savah.org.za](http://savah.org.za) website by 19 April 2022. Successful applicants will be notified by 30 April 2022.**

**Topics may include, but are not limited to:**

**Art & Artefact; Heritage, History, Fetishisation, Decolonisation, Landscape & Museum Studies:**

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's recent book, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (2015) outlines his conception of *ecologies of stone*, pointing to 'ecology' as a study of the relationship between living things and their habitats. This is a welcome discursive development, a biomimicry inspired theoretical *lava flow* to subsume, compress, and critically alter the imperial origins of many heritage and visual arts related academic practices. We invite an opening of the *rock face* with regards to the taxonomising practices of the occident in relation to artefacts *made of stone* or painted onto stone (both literal and figurative).

Landscapes and sites of imperial and colonial heritage (zoos, museums, monuments, parks, mining and concrete landscapes) all feature. U.S.-based historian Richard V. Francaviglia (1997) writes about mining landscapes as 'hard places'. These post-industrial sites are marked by pollution, damage and decay; but also represent opportunity for creative intervention, reconsidering the human relationship with nature in the Anthropocene.

Places of post-trauma and memorial sites may also be regarded as *hard places*, often marked by the presence of stones or monolithic structures that engage with remembering in complex manners - *lithic time machines* of a sort that shift in use and meaning through the passage of time. Memorials and monuments are often made of *stone* or *concrete*, or may be stones in themselves, and being so, are by design received as *immovable*. As recent social events have demonstrated these historic monoliths are difficult to reconcile with the present.

**Cultural Imperialism & Fetishisation, Identity & Decolonisation:**

The current national government has marketed the KwaZulu-Natal region as a tourist destination, using labels formed in the 18th and 19th centuries. The popular stereotype of 'fierce Zulu warriors' still exists, as if frozen in time – *cast in stone*. This romantic definition of the 'Zulu tribe' is the 'objectification of a constructed romanticised identity' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009: 4). The metaphor of *romancing the stone* is one that requires consideration

and deconstruction in relation to this and other examples and case studies from consumer culture, and the cultural heritage and tourism sectors.

#### **Gendered, Racialised, & Binary Identities, Posthumanisms and Zoopoiesis:**

In her seminal essay, *The Laugh of Medusa* (1976), Hélène Cixous has picked up on the inherent mutability of stone, across time, changed as much through attrition and modelling as it is through perception. This essay explores the dread representation of the mythological figure of Medusa and her fabled ability to *turn men to stone through her gaze*, as a matter of rigid and malevolent phallogocentric perception, a notion aptly expressed in prose: 'Here we encounter the inevitable man-with-rock, standing erect in his old Freudian realm ...' (Cixous, 1976: 884). Cixous' later work, 'Stigmata or Job the Dog' (1997), again employs a *lithic* metaphor in exploring a more critical humanist lens in addressing the xenophobic tensions that she grew up with in Algeria; recounting the *stoning* of her family dog, 'Fips', and his subsequent descent into madness. This work grappled with a broader notion of Otherness than her earlier work.

#### **Practice-Based Research:**

Until very recently, the rules and structures that governed the framing and treatment of technology and practice as positioned in opposition to theory and art history were more or less *set in stone*. The recent acknowledgement of Practical outputs as valid contributions to the research landscape, worthy of government subsidy, indicates a shift in the traditional binary separation of *making* and *theorising* that has characterised the visual arts landscape in South Africa. **We are thrilled to partner with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Visual Arts to chair a session from their campus in Pietermaritzburg in line with this theme.**

#### **Film, Media & Content Studies:**

The 1984 action-adventure romantic comedy, *Romancing the Stone* starring Michael Douglas, Kathleen Turner and Danny DeVito tells the ineffably western tale of Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner), an American pulp-romance novelist, who gets drawn into a plot resembling one of her books; embarking on a journey to Colombia to rescue her sister with a map to an enormous emerald called 'El Corazón' [The Heart], the refined Joan quickly becomes lost in the jungle, waylaid by corrupt officials, and petty criminals, and quite literally 'swept off her feet' by an irreverent mercenary fortune hunter named Jack Colton (Michael Douglas). Despite this pulp presentation, 'Romancing the Stone' (1984) maintains a *tongue-in-cheek* frankness, one could even say an ironic undertone, exemplified by DeVito's rebuke regarding his *clean* theft of the stone, not '*romancing* it out from under her'; more a reference to American imperialism in South America than a rebuke of Jack's romance fraud. In this sense *romancing the stone* points to a duality in meaning and purpose, a picking away, and unearthing of stone [*a theft*], also recalling the *perceptive wiles* of Monet's flickering light on stone. Susan Sontag's seminal essay *In Plato's Cave* (1977) where she likens photographic cultural perceptions of *truth* to the reflections of fire and light on a *cave wall*, an allegory borrowed from Plato's *Republic* (375 BCE), cannot be avoided in this habitus. In the Platonic allegory, exploring the *half-life* of sensory perception, Socrates describes a group of prisoners chained to the wall of a cave, whose only perception of exterior reality is the *shadows and reflections on the cave wall* before them.

**We are planning for the conference to take place in person in Durban & Pietermaritzburg from 20 - 22 September 2022. The conference will be accompanied by curated exhibitions & installations in Durban & Pietermaritzburg. Details to follow shortly.** Any questions relating to the conference can be sent to [conference@savah.org.za](mailto:conference@savah.org.za).