

Penny Siopis's Film Fables — TJ Demos

Penny Siopis's *Obscure White Messenger* (2010) p202 tells the story of Dimitrio Tsafendas, the man who assassinated South African Prime Minister HF Verwoerd in 1966. The film combines samples of found home-movie footage, a mixed soundtrack, and text that runs over the images like subtitles, relaying the story. From this text, we learn that the architect of apartheid was stabbed to death in Parliament by Tsafendas, who had been employed there as an official messenger. It turns out that Tsafendas was an illegal alien, a stateless wanderer who had passed through the otherwise well-guarded gates of access to the highest levels of government by some mysterious bureaucratic error. Tsafendas was of mixed race: his Greek father lived in Lourenço Marques (today's Maputo) where Dimitrio was born, and his Mozambican mother worked in his father's household as a domestic labourer. The video presents footage of these diverse places while the soundtrack plays traditional Turkish music, the two together translating the sights and sounds of the subject's life into aesthetic heterogeneity.

In her film, Siopis examines this remarkable

encounter between an exemplary exponent of the National Party's politics of racial separation and an obscure figure of stateless hybridity. Developing an experimental cinematic structure of montage, she finds an innovative way to speak about the traumatic apartheid past in a modernity of dislocation and crisis. Her approach reinvents the conditions of documentary practice, moving beyond the stale oppositions of fact and fiction in order to propose a new way to tell stories of subjective and geopolitical resonance. Moreover, *Obscure White Messenger* proposes the cinematic means to transcend the violence of political and epistemological oppositions – between truth and falsehood, purity and hybridity, nationality and statelessness – in a post-apartheid present when xenophobia, anti-immigration policies and nationalism are resurgent and exist in paradoxical relation to the international flows of commodities, migrant labourers and information that define globalization.¹

Obscure White Messenger exemplifies Siopis's thematic concerns and filmic style, which she has established gradually over several interrelated works since 1997.

Artist's reference, *Cape Times*, 8 September 1966

Still from *The Master is Drowning*



My Lovely Day (1997) explores the travels of the artist's maternal grandmother to Greece, England and South Africa in the early twentieth century, comparing and contrasting her experiences with a coming era of mobility under contemporary global reality. *Communion* (2011) tells the story of an Irish nun, Sister Aidan Quinlan, who was tragically caught up in an anti-apartheid protest in the Eastern Cape during the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and was brutally killed by a crowd of angry demonstrators, including some to whom she had dedicated her service. And *The Master is Drowning* (2012) investigates the attempted assassination of Verwoerd in 1960 by David Beresford Pratt, a liberal white businessman and farmer, on the eve of the inauguration of the apartheid Republic of South Africa. The Prime Minister was shot twice in the face, yet miraculously survived. The film presents news footage from the time, mixed with home movies, showing the annual Rand Easter Show in Johannesburg, where the shooting took place.

What these various projects share is Siopis's signature mode of filmic construction, in which assembled clips of found footage are coupled with narratives derived from historical documents relating to the circumstances of

the film's subject. *My Lovely Day* presents the narrative 'voice' of Siopis's grandmother, which speaks of her literal and emotional journeys during that 'sad time' when people displaced by war and crisis travelled out of necessity, a situation she contrasts to today's leisurely tourism: 'You don't know what it feels like to be marooned in a place, uproot, or cut ties,' she explains. For the artist, the film develops 'a much larger allegory of the felt effects of what we might now call globalization'.² Similarly, *Obscure White Messenger* builds its narrative from various historical documents, employing a question-and-answer format based on a psychiatrist's interview with Tsafendas immediately after the assassination, and also supplemented by medical reports, legal documents and quotes from Henk van Woerden's biography of Tsafendas, *A Mouthful of Glass*.³ Meanwhile, *Communion* crafts its story from court records and newspaper reports of the case, reconstructing Sister Aidan's voice in the form of subtitles, which eerily tell the nun's story in the first person and the present tense. And *The Master is Drowning* derives its text from various historical sources, including transcripts of Pratt's trial and newspapers of the time. In these documents, Pratt, who had a history of mental instability and epilepsy,

describes his intention to 'main' Verwoerd and grant him the contemplative time of convalescence in which to reassess his support for misguided apartheid policies.

In other words, Siopis's stories generally focus on the experiences and conflicts within the diverse white population living in apartheid South Africa, and how migration, displacement and the creation of a diaspora complicated and intervened in the racist system and nationalist mythology. However, these stories, like their protagonists' identities, are never presented in transparent fashion. In all her works, Siopis stresses the materiality of film and the complex mediations of contingency. For instance, she emphasizes the sprocket marks, dust spots, scratches and signs of damage in her films, and highlights the uneven processes of filming by including the effects of amateurish camerawork, incorrectly exposed shots and light flares. These aspects recall the self-reflexive lessons of structuralist film of the 1960s and 70s, which underscored the material conditions of the medium. Siopis transfers her 8mm and 16mm found footage to video, defining a further space of material hybridity in her moving images, which also resonates with her practice as a painter concerned with formlessness and materiality.⁴

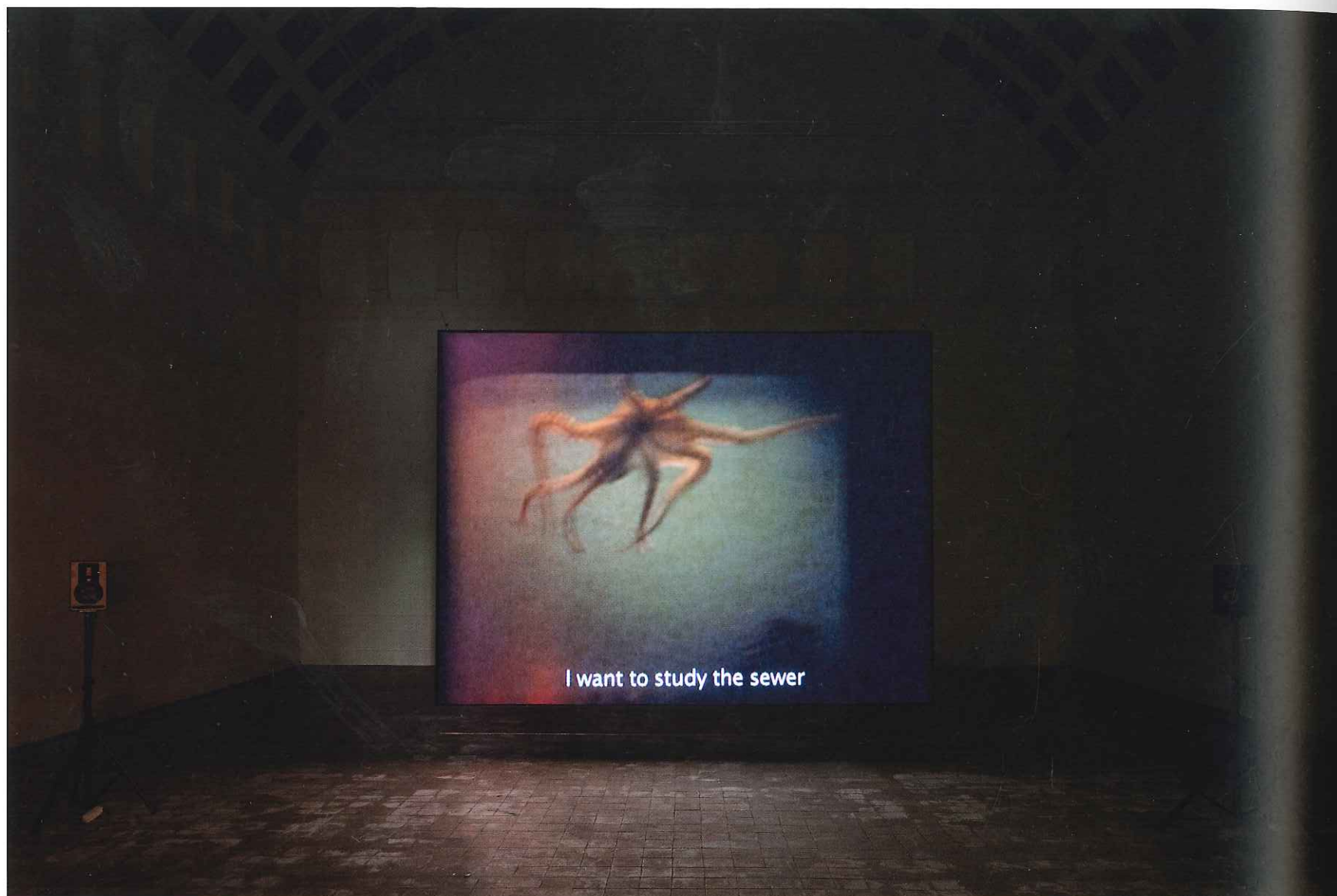
As Siopis notes, 'the physicality of the film has a history that is often as compelling as the events pictured in the film, story or sound'.⁵ That history of filmic physicality leaves us with the ghostly trace of a past severed from meaning and context, marooned in time and place, which indicates a reality beyond what representation can capture, a realm that is *more than* and *other to* the meaning and significance of language. This visual indeterminacy lies at the heart of Siopis's stories and reinforces the uncertain relation between their texts and images, images that often have no direct relation to the film's subject, but bear only an associative connection. *Obscure White Messenger*, for example, features shots of an octopus swirling its tentacles slowly around a tank of water, and these images appear only metaphorically connected to the tapeworm that Tsafendas imagined to be living in his stomach, a delusion that tormented him for much of his adult life. Siopis frequently elicits this kind of serendipitous correspondence

between footage and narrative in her films. In *Communion*, the narrator's voice describes various occurrences, such as a crowd dispersing and a woman brandishing a knife, which the film simultaneously pictures. While these matching images could almost be taken to show the actual events in question, in fact they were sourced from home movies shot in places like India, Greece and Madagascar. In drawing such disparate materials together, Siopis expresses an uncanny relation between image and story, as if some magical significance relating to these momentous events inheres in her found footage and she has mysteriously been able to conjure it up.

These various layers of indeterminacy and uncanny correlation between images, texts and sounds not only define a captivating cinema, but also materialize an experimental historiography. 'What allows me to hook contingency to fact,' Siopis notes, 'is my selective use of this text in combination with film sequences snatched from my ever-expanding archive.'⁶ In other words, Siopis's work draws together the intended and the accidental, the fabulated and the documentary via the visual, the textual and the sonic, to propose a new way of thinking historically, and to situate ready-made film fragments within the web of historical experience. Her films thus approximate a contemporary formation of 'documentary fiction' within contemporary art, or what Jacques Rancière terms 'film fables', meaning a type of cinematic construction that links the camera's objective capturing of the visual field and the artist's subjective vision, making for a cinematic form of the 'heterogeneous sensible' capable of remaking the conditions of history. According to Rancière's model, fiction doesn't oppose fact, and it doesn't define an escapist tendency, relativist logic or make-believe fantasy. Rather, fiction – derived from the Latin *fingere* , meaning 'to forge' – connects to language's constructivist and performative functions. Fiction, in other words, identifies the material and sensible components used to construct reality and history – which is exactly what Siopis's films do.⁷

More specifically, Siopis's archival explorations, built around centres of indeterminacy and uncanny resonance,

Installation view of
Obscure White Messenger,
Brandts Museum, Odense,
Denmark, 2014



respond to the difficult circumstances of telling history after the psychosocial trauma that was apartheid. As Annie Coombes observes:

Still from *Obscure White Messenger*

My Lovely Day is also an exploration of the effects of traumatic displacement. It may not be in the same register as the trauma recounted at the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] hearings, but it is part of the complex of difficult loyalties, nostalgic longings, misplaced desires, and internalized prejudices that make up any society that has a long history of immigrant settlement.⁸

Siopis's films, that is to say, underscore the subjective affects and emotional qualities of political and social ordeals, and yield results different from the judicial and forensic functions of the TRC. In this sense, Coombes is right to point out how Siopis's work nonetheless 'enables us to share in the film's own regime of truth if we accept that [by working] across these different generational registers simultaneously and through the deployment of fragments it is possible to reproduce a closer approximation of the contradictions and conflicts, the fleeting desires and frustrations, of lived experience'.⁹

Pointing to a 'regime of truth' is key, as it makes clear that the subjective and psychosocial elements of lived history are nonetheless one form of truth. In fact, the TRC defined four types: factual or forensic truth (the kind used to determine innocence or guilt in a legal trial); personal or narrative truth (where subjective storytelling contributes to the psychological working-through of a traumatic past); social or dialogue-based truth (where discussion allows for social negotiation of the past and for public forms of social justice); and healing or restorative truth (where expression can lead to the restoration of the survivors' dignity).¹⁰ While Siopis's films negotiate these various levels, and perhaps come closest to the truth of storytelling, they also run contrary to the way the TRC directed truth-telling toward social reconciliation and national unification. In fact, Siopis's version of subjective storytelling reveals the 'truth of film' as fundamentally a matter of uncertain meanings, fragmentary conditions and indeterminate relations between

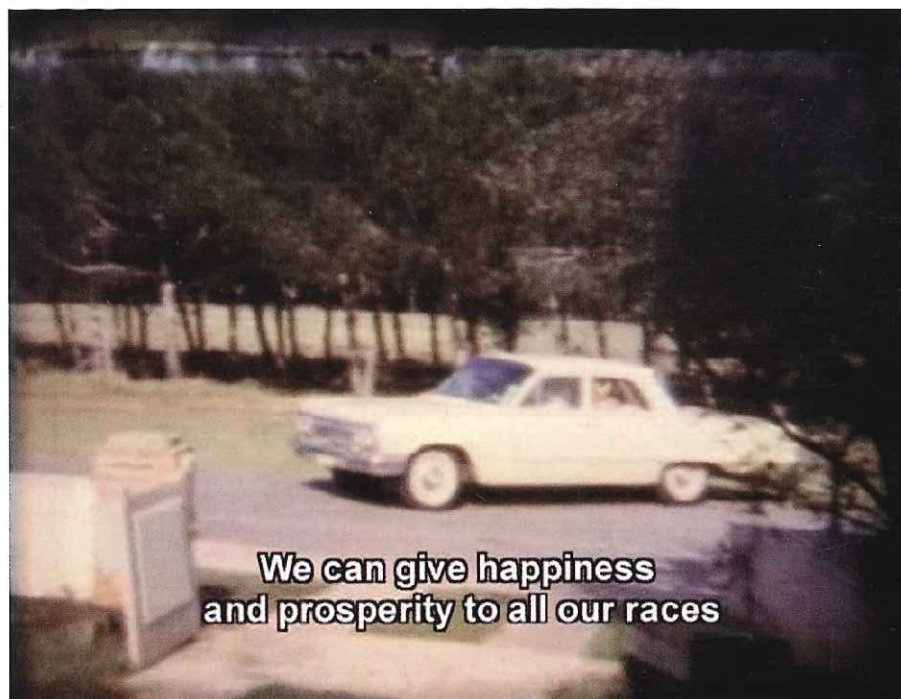
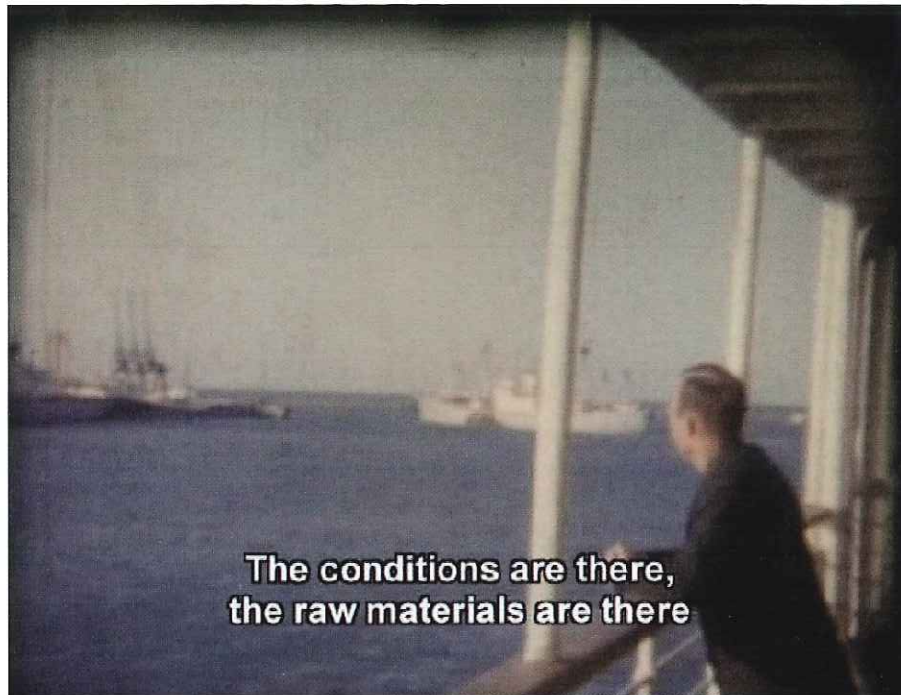


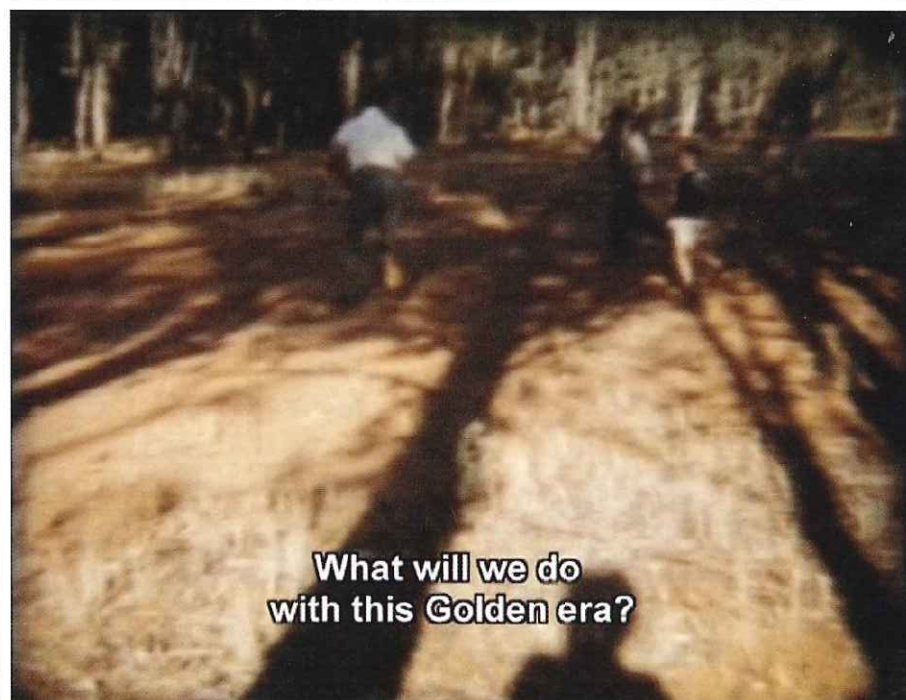
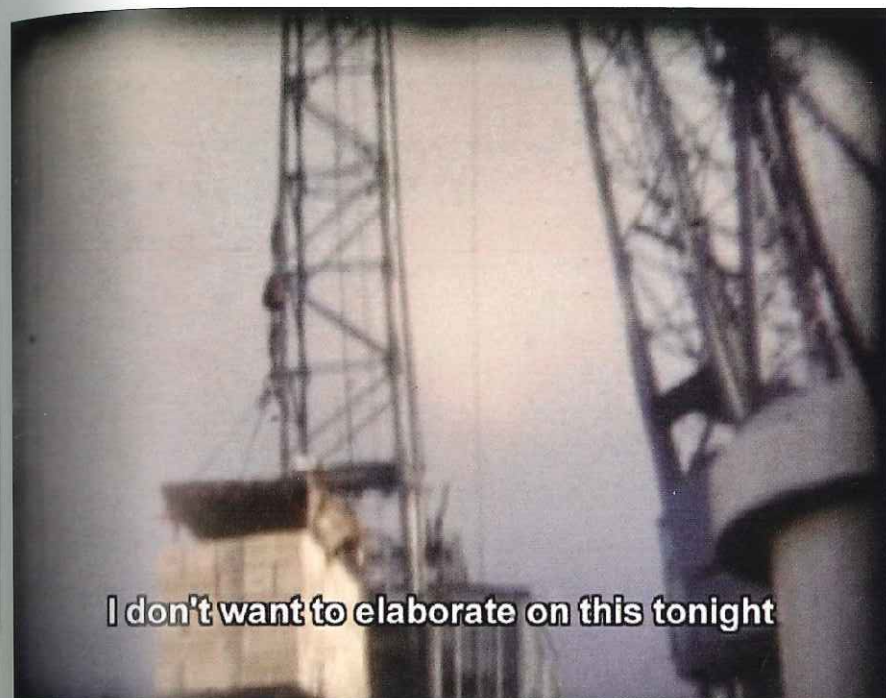
its constitutive elements, which also correlates with and thus allegorizes her subjects' conditions of displacement, hybridity and exile.¹¹ For instance, *Obscure White Messenger* tells us that Tsafendas, born in Mozambique, raised in Alexandria, Egypt, schooled in Middelburg, South Africa, had wandered about for much of his adult life ('I have lived everywhere,' he explained); and *My Lovely Day* offers an account of Dorothy Frangetes, in Siopis's own words, as 'a bleak stoic, an eternally unsettled, exiled soul', which relates directly to the artist's Greek heritage and family history.

Clearly, then, these indeterminate elements challenge the notion of an incontestable, definitive history, and overturn those versions of 'truth' associated with official accounts – for instance, those that reigned until the end of apartheid, where truth was monopolized, guarded and determined by the ruling government and its censored media apparatus. (The resulting official mythology of apartheid is invoked in Siopis's video *Verwoerd Speaks: 1966* (1999), which shows him speechifying about the 'golden era' of South Africa that

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Verwoerd Speaks: 1966
1999
Video, sound
Duration 8 min







promised to bring 'happiness and prosperity for all races'.) In this regard, her work is part of an emergent experimental memory culture following the demise of apartheid in the early 1990s.¹² But more than merely deconstructing official history, the productive force of her films prompts new or under-represented historical insights that complicate our understanding of the past. For instance, Siopis brings out Tsafendas's political anti-apartheid motivations behind the assassination ('I was so disgusted with the racial policies'), motivations that were generally repressed by the media at the time in favour of reports stressing his ostensible insanity and tapeworm fantasy as explanations for his violent act.¹³ Her films abandon the deceit and epistemological violence of official truthful accounts that allow no contestation and admit no contingency. She proposes instead the truth of the subjective relation to matters of world-historical significance – as in the way madness, the experience of statelessness, and conditions of displacement and racist exclusion intervened in the proceedings of the apartheid regime in the mid-1960s – a matter that has found little place

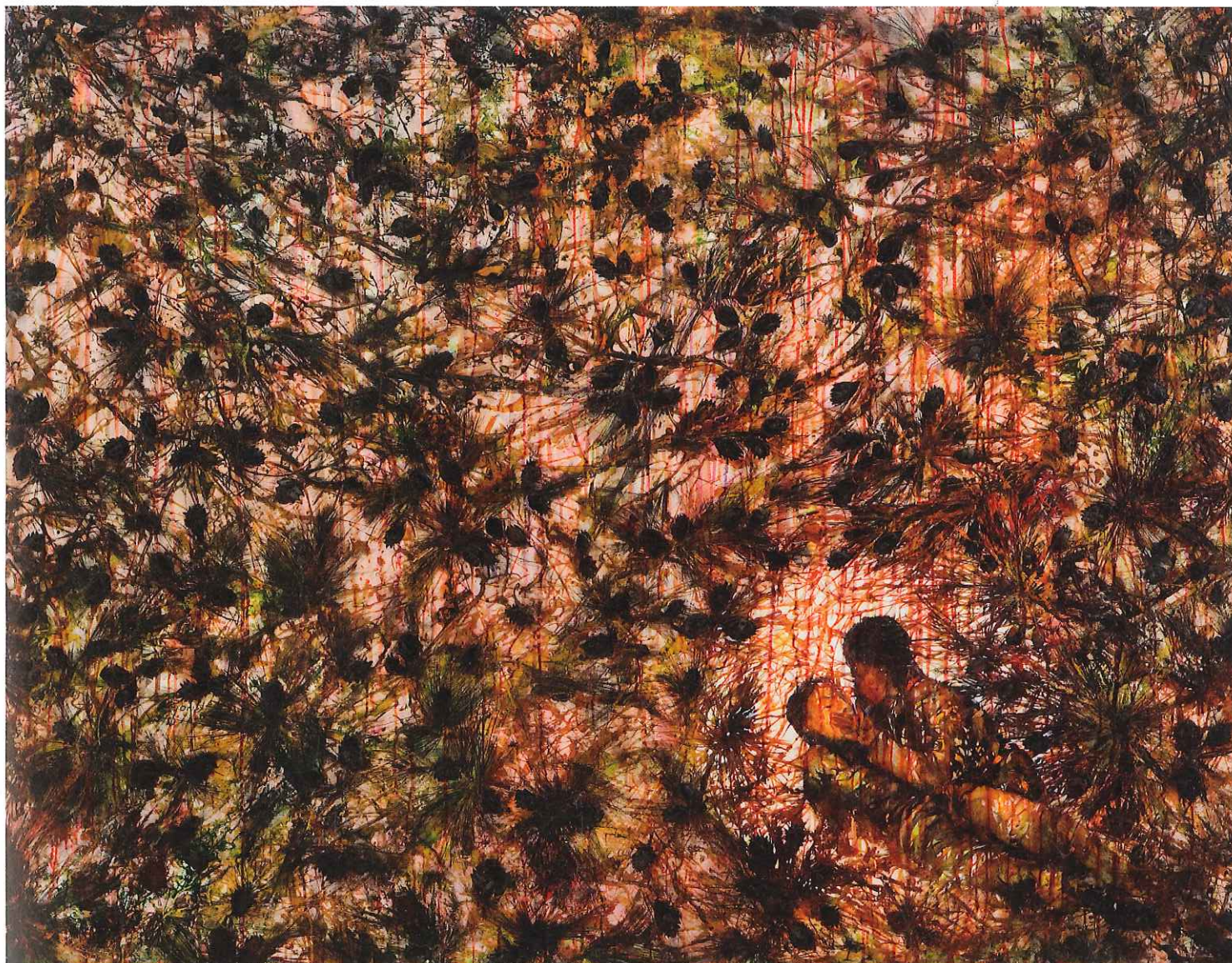
in the post-apartheid historical process with its focus on victim hearings.

In a way, having no place is the truth of Siopis's films, which not only investigate exile and geopolitical displacement, but do so, as we've seen, via a formal structure of dislocation and fragmentation. Her use of found footage, collected in flea markets and charity shops in South Africa and during travels abroad, endows her film fragments with the sense of being stranded in time, which in turn resonates with the fragmentary nature of memory. Siopis connects to important precedents in joining the aesthetics of exile and the thematics of geopolitical dislocation. One might think of the diasporic Afro-Caribbean film practices in London during the 1980s (such as those of the Black Audio Film Collective and Isaac Julien); or the exile aesthetics theorized by Edward Said in relation to the literature of a deracinating modernity; or models of contemporary art that investigate the geopolitical displacement, refugee conditions and bordered worlds of globalization via migrant images (as in the work of Emily Jacir, Yto Barrada and Hito Steyerl).¹⁴ Connecting to these diverse models, Siopis advances her own aesthetics of exile through her own filmic specificity and phenomenology of storytelling, which is also singularly connected to the South African post-apartheid context.

What is singular about her work is the particular filmic relation she establishes between the autobiographical and the geopolitical, which highlights historical moments of crisis when the subjectivity of difference and diaspora meets political upheaval and violence during apartheid. That relation between geopolitical event and subjective perspective is mediated in her films through the experience of reading texts, where the viewers are invited to internalize the language (often relayed in the first person), listen to the music and watch the historical footage. These texts and sounds draw us into an affective space that constructs a relationship between our own inner narratives as viewers and those presented by the film. We read her films, with the effects of light and age disturbing their surfaces, as dreamlike sequences of apparently disconnected parts. Their surfaces connect us to the materiality of the past.

Still from *The Master is Drowning*

Pine
2008
Ink and glue on canvas
160 x 206cm



- 15 Email correspondence with the artist, quoted in Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, 'The Human Face', in *Marlene Dumas: Intimate Relations*, 28.
- 16 In recent work by South African artist Mary Sibande, purple roots, tentacles, snakes and suspended non-human entities emerge from the inside of a woman's body. In the process of spilling, they draw a complex landscape of incoherence, multiplicity, anguish. Sibande recalls the complex connection she senses between her huge spilling female sculptural figures and a story told to her by her grandfather: when he was young he was seriously injured and 'had to walk for kilometres with his intestines hanging out ... holding his insides' (Sibande, quoted in the catalogue *Mary Sibande: Featured Artist* (Grahamstown Festival, 2013), 9). In several recent works, Sibande's figure of self can be seen cupping her hands across her stomach in an attempt to hold in what is pouring out.
- 17 See Kerry Bystrom, 'Johannesburg Interiors', *Cultural Studies*, special issue on 'Private Lives and Public Cultures in South Africa', ed Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall, 27:3 (2013).
- 18 Njabulo Ndebele, 'A Home for Intimacy', *Mail & Guardian*, 26 April 2006.
- 19 Siopis, 'On a Knife Edge', 101.
- 20 Siopis, 'On a Knife Edge', 102.
- 21 Siopis, 'On a Knife Edge', 102.
- 22 *Who's Afraid of the Crowd?*, 14 April – 21 May 2011, <http://stevenson.info/exhibitions/siopis/index2011.htm>, accessed 30 May 2014.
- 23 Penny Siopis, "'Fire, Water, Forests, Swarms": Penny Siopis Discusses *Who's Afraid of the Crowd?* with Kim Miller', in *Penny Siopis: Who's Afraid of the Crowd?*, Catalogue 57 (Cape Town: Stevenson, 2011).
- 24 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans Carol Stewart (London and New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984 (1960)).
- 25 Siopis, 'Fire, Water, Forests, Swarms'.
- 26 Siopis, 'On a Knife Edge', 99.
- 27 Siopis, 'On a Knife Edge', 103.
- 28 Iain Chambers, 'Maritime Criticism and Lessons from the Sea', *Insights*, 3:9 (2010), 3.
- 29 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 485.
- 30 Siopis, 'On a Knife Edge', 100.
- 31 Siopis, 'On a Knife Edge', 105.
- 32 Michael Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, trans Jack Hawes (Manchester: Clinamen, 2000), 64.
- 33 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

Commentary 6

Penny Siopis's Film Fables

— TJ Demos

- 1 For a discussion of these tensions, see Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2012).
- 2 Penny Siopis, 'The Hooks of History: Three Films', in Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Cara Snyman (eds), *Shoe Shop* (Pretoria: Fanele, 2012), 48.
- 3 See Siopis, 'The Hooks of History', 54, and Henk van Woerden,

- A Mouthful of Glass: The Man who Killed the Father of Apartheid*, trans Dan Jacobson (London: Granta, 2000).
- 4 See "'Fire, Water, Forests, Swarms": Penny Siopis Discusses *Who's Afraid of the Crowd?* with Kim Miller', in *Penny Siopis: Who's Afraid of the Crowd?*, Catalogue 57 (Cape Town: Stevenson, 2011), 47–51.
- 5 Siopis, 'The Hooks of History', 46.
- 6 Siopis, 'The Hooks of History', 45.
- 7 For further discussion of the expansive and diverse approaches to experimental history in contemporary art (for instance, that of the Atlas Group, the Otolith Group, Hito Steyerl, Vincent Meessen and Sven Augustijnen), see my books: *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), and *Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2013).
- 8 Annie E Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 274.
- 9 Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 278.
- 10 See Audrey R Chapman and Hugo van der Merwe, 'Introduction: Assessing the South African Transitional Justice Model', in Audrey R Chapman and Hugo van der Merwe (eds), *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Did the TRC Deliver?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 14.
- 11 On the TRC, see Paul Gready, *The Era of Transitional Justice: The Aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Routledge, 2012); Heidi Grunebaum, *Memorializing the Past: Everyday Life in South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011); and Chapman and Van der Merwe (eds), *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Did the TRC Deliver?*
- 12 On the production of post-apartheid history, see Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, esp 11; Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sean Field, 'Imagining Communities: Memory, Loss, and Resilience in Post-apartheid Cape Town', in Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds), *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 107–24; and Hans-Erik Stolten (ed), *History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 2007).
- 13 See Van Woerden, *A Mouthful of Glass*, who discusses this history of media misrepresentation and reports that, for some people, Tsafendas was a hero, 155.
- 14 For more on the aesthetics of exile and displacement, see TJ Demos, 'Charting a Course: Exile, Diaspora, Nomads, Refugees – A Genealogy of Art and Migration', in Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 1–20.

Commentary 7

Love and Politics: Sister Aidan Quinlan and the

Future We Have Desired

— Njabulo S Ndebele

- 1 Anne Mager and Gary Minkley, 'Reaping the Whirlwind: The East London Riots of 1952', University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop: Structure and Experience in the Making of Apartheid, 6–10 February 1990.