



# The Lotus Eaters

Interactive catalogue

Barbara Wildenboer

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*The Odyssey II (Waves in Liquids) (detail)*

Altered book

550 x 650mm

2014



# Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank the following people who all played an important role in realising this exhibition and catalogue:

My father, Jan Snyman, for his love, generous support and genuine interest in my work. I am extremely grateful to him.

All the staff from Oliewenhuis Art Museum, William Humphreys Museum and Kimberley, North West University Gallery for hosting The Lotus Eaters.

Heidi Erdmann from ErdmannContemporary for her advice and encouragement.

Emily Brady, whose writing on the aesthetics of the natural environment has greatly inspired me. I feel very honoured that she agreed to write a catalogue essay for The Lotus Eaters.

Juliana Irene Smith for writing an essay and also for all her valuable input and advice regarding curatorial aspects of the show.

A special thanks to Michelle Prévost, whose collaboration on artwork and assistance in the production of the exhibition and catalogue were crucial. Without her participation, this exhibition could not have been happened.

Liza Grobler for all the random and sometimes not so random conversations, laughter and chance encounters and for always being a reliable sounding board.

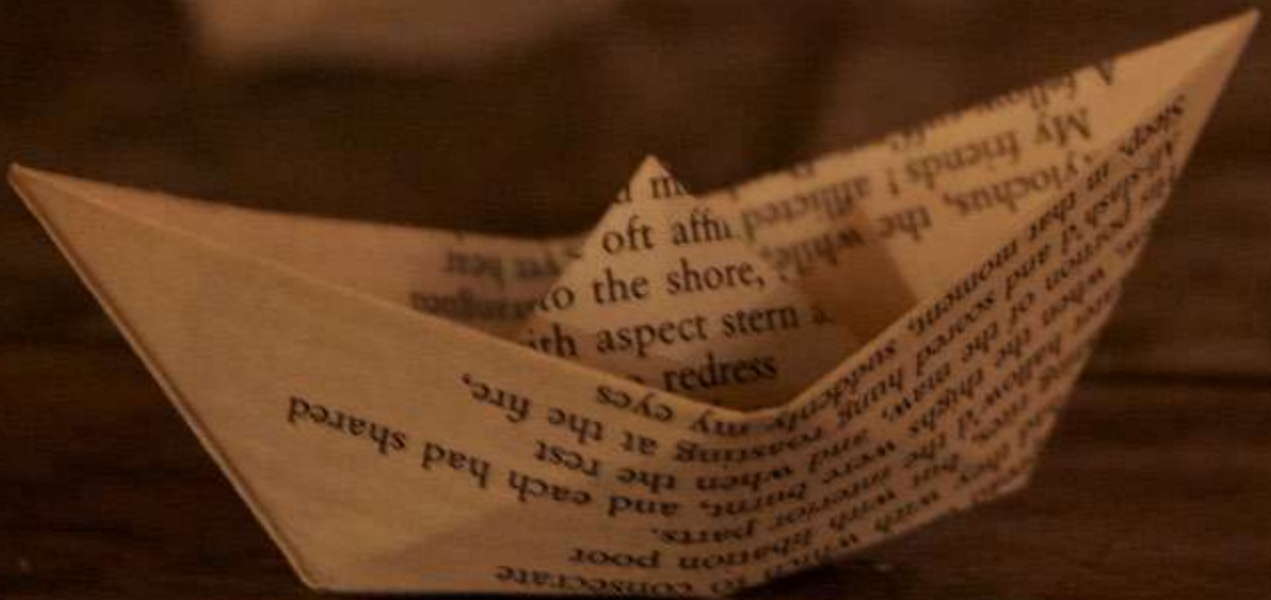
I also want to thank the staff of CityVarsity, notably Paul Lensen and Michelle Young for granting me the time to start production on the work in Malaysia.

Hotel Penaga, Georgetown, Penang Island, Malaysia for hosting me during my artist's residency in 2013.

And all of my friends and students who helped to fold 3 000 origami boats.

*3 Wishes (detail)*

(collaboration with Michelle Prévost)  
Digital animation and 3000 paper boats  
Dimensions variable



# Introduction

---

*They started at once, and went about among the Lotus-eaters,  
who did them no harm, but gave them to eat of the lotus,  
which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home...<sup>1</sup>*

In *The Lotus Eaters*, I draw from a range of historical art, literary and scientific references, such as the monumental paintings of water lilies of Monet, P.H. Emerson's Pictorialist photography of water lily gatherers afloat in boats, Homer's *Odyssey*, the quasi-scientific experiments of Japanese scientist Masaru Emoto that consider water on a poetic level and Leonardo da Vinci's *Deluge* drawings, a scientific inquiry into the workings of water turbulence that illustrate a preoccupation with mathematics, chaos and fractals.

I explore the repercussions of a disconnected relationship to the natural world by considering environmental aesthetics as not only encompassing natural territories, but also extending to the influence of human actions on the natural realm. The work centres around the ritualised theme of water, our complex connections with it and how it interlinks a myriad of life forms on both a macro and micro level, in the physical and metaphysical world.

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<sup>1</sup> Hom. Od. 9.93-97, Homer's *Odyssey*.



[above]

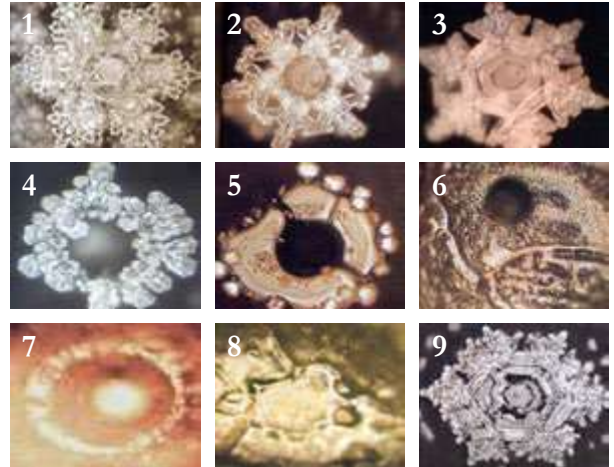
*Gathering Water-Lilies,*  
Peter Henry Emerson, 1885–86,  
Platinum print from glass negative.

[above right]

*Messenges from Water,*  
Masaru Emoto, 1999,  
Water crystal photographs.

[below]

*Waterlilies: Green Reflections,*  
Claude Monet, 1914–18,  
Oil on canvas.



1. Sanbu-ichi Yusui spring water.
2. Shimanto river, referred to as the last clean stream in Japan.
3. Antarctic ice
4. Fountain in Lourdes, France
5. Biwako lake, in the centre of Japan, where pollution is getting worse.
6. Yodo river, Japan, passing through most of the major cities in Kasai.
7. Untreated distilled water.
8. Fujiwara dam, before offering a prayer.
9. Fujiwara dam, after offering a prayer.





*Deluge (detail)*

Paper construction with found maps  
675mm, 565mm and 420mm in diameter  
2013/14

# An Elemental Journey: Barbara Wildenboer's *The Lotus Eaters*

---

Emily Brady

*Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast,  
And in a little while our lips are dumb.  
Let us alone. What is it that will last?'*<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Wildenboer's 'The Lotus Eaters' presents an elemental journey through humanity's effects on the earth through space and time, expressing ideas about environmental tragedy, human apathy, and the play of control and our inability to control our interactions with the environments we inhabit and consume.

This journey is executed through forms and meanings that are, in many respects, appealing, delicate, and fragile, rather than heavy or apocalyptic. The installation, 1%, consisting of ninety-nine borosilicate laboratory glass water droplet shapes standing upright on the gallery floor are

quite beautiful, glistening and shiny, bringing home both the aesthetic and ecological value of the remaining amount of water suitable for human consumption. The molecular beauty of Masaru Emoto's microscopic water crystals seen up close through glass over black digital prints in *Prayer, Parascience and Polluted Water*, is reminiscent of Kant's idea that many natural beauties appear to be created for our pleasure.<sup>2</sup> This idea was not a hedonistic notion, rather, it was Kant's attempt to explain the relationship between the perceiver and subject of perception, where something which emerges through nature's teleology appears *extraordinary*, something that seems unusually fitted to our capacities for engaging with the world around us.

My emphasis on beauty in these works is intended to emphasize the sensitivity with

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<sup>1</sup> From, Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, 'The Lotos-eaters', <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174631>.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1790] 2000).



*A Deluge*, Leonardo da Vinci,  
c.1517—c.1518, Pen and black ink with wash on paper.

which Wildenboer executes some very serious environmental themes, but I do not wish to hide other aesthetic expressions that can be found here. In *Deluge*, Wildenboer creates whirlpool shapes from hand cut paper, loosely based on Leonardo Da Vinci's drawings which examined water turbulence and patterns within moving water. These

swirling paper disks laid upon maps suggest the sheer force and expanse of water extending without boundaries, bringing to mind notions of sublimity, yet held within the form of an artwork.

Water in all its forms – rivers, lakes, seas, oceans – has so often seemed unlimited,

that is, the human ability to capture it, use it for transportation and consumption, pollute it, clean it, and carry on using it underwrites the belief that water is an everlasting resource. This is matched by sensory perception of water in its various sublime expressions – the vast expanse of oceans, tidal phenomena and huge waves, or the tremendous force of a river breaking its banks. Here, the sublime power of water would have us believe that this (classical) element is infinitely present. At once, water transmits a metaphor for our *sense* of control and our distinct inability to control. Returning to Kant, we find this interesting juxtaposition: ‘The beautiful prepares us to love something, even nature, without interest; the sublime, to esteem it, even contrary to our (sensible) interest’.<sup>3</sup> Something which is appealing and attractive is easy to like or attach value to, whereas something sublime, or great, challenges us, demanding admiration and respect.

The aesthetic and moral become intertwined in these environment-human interactions. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men’s passage to the land of the lotus

eaters involves moral action, not merely sensory engagement. Eating the lotus flowers brought about – through intentional actions ignorant of their outcomes – a general lack of interest, a lack of *care*. By contrast, we find the faithful Penelope awaiting for Odysseus’ return, weaving and undoing her death shroud. In *Penelope’s Web*, Wildenboer captures clouds and sky as a backdrop to a spider web delicately woven using thread and pins. Is this hope, looking skywards, rather than the despair so commonly employed to capture our current predicament? This speaks, again, to this exhibition’s intention to reveal serious environmental concerns yet to do so by moving away from bleak expressions of our ecological futures.

In ‘The Lotus Eaters’, Wildenboer imagines an aesthetic-moral journey, a passage characterized by shades of beauty and sublimity. Created generations ago, a Greek myth speaks directly to present generations who themselves must take responsibility for and respond to catastrophic climatic change in the name of future generations – where apathy is not a choice.

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<sup>3</sup> Kant, 2000, General Remark, 5:267, p. 151.



[previous]

*1% (detail)*

99 suspended glass drops and sound installation  
(sound design by Wim Kock)

Lengths: 300mm, 250mm, 200mm, outside diameter 100mm  
2014



*Fate*

Photographic composite on  
Hahnemuhle paper with pins and thread  
600mm diameter  
2013



*Fate (detail)*

Photographic composite on  
Hahnemuhle paper with pins and thread  
600mm diameter  
2013

[next page]

*Penelope's Web (detail)*

Colour photograph, pins and  
thread on Hahnemuhle paper  
530mm, 400mm and 290mm in diameter  
2014

# The art of spinning or the spinning of art: Alchemy and other survival strategies

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Michelle Prévost

*To practice seidhr, you need to be able to follow a thread—the thread that is a path through the worlds, winding ever-upward and then back down again along the Tree, spiraling like the double helix of DNA. You have to be able to navigate the narrow, twisting, perilous pathways that run from Midgard to Asgard to Hel and through all the worlds, the thread that binds the worlds together like a string of beads. But more than this, you also have to be able to spin a thread, to hold the path firmly—yet not too firmly, still allowing it to run through your fingers, as it is always in motion. You have to be able to maintain control of it, allowing it neither to break, nor to diverge into snarled dead ends and knotted masses of meaninglessness. A spinner takes raw materials and converts them to a useable supply (yarn or thread) through her skill. A seidhrkona is both a spinner and a*

*storyteller (who also “spins a yarn,”); like picking wool from a hedge, she gathers data from the other worlds—snatches of vision, and the fleeting words of the gods and spirits—and allows them to run through her fingertips as they twist in the currents of wyrd, coalescing them from formlessness into something that can be communicated and used: a beckoning and a message, a thread of meaning and connection from There to Here.<sup>1</sup>*



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<sup>1</sup> From *On spinning and magic*, Laure Beth Lynch.

Women were spinsters before the word became pejorative. In Greek mythology, each human life is a thread that the three Moirae, or Fates, spin, measure, and cut. Strands twine together into a thread of yarn that can go on forever, like words becoming stories. Fairytale heroines spin cobwebs, straw, nettles into whatever is necessary to survive. Scheherazade forestalls her death by telling a story that is like a thread that cannot be cut; she keeps spinning and spinning, incorporating new fragments, characters, incidents, into her unbroken, unbreakable narrative thread. Penelope at the other end of the treasury of stories prevents her wedding to any one of her suitors by unweaving at night what she weaves by day on her father-in-law's funeral garment. By spinning, weaving, and unraveling, these women master time itself, and though master is a masculine word, this mastery is feminine.

The wonder is that every spinner takes the amorphous mass before her and makes thread appear, from which comes the stuff that contains the world, from a fishing net to a nightgown. She makes form out of

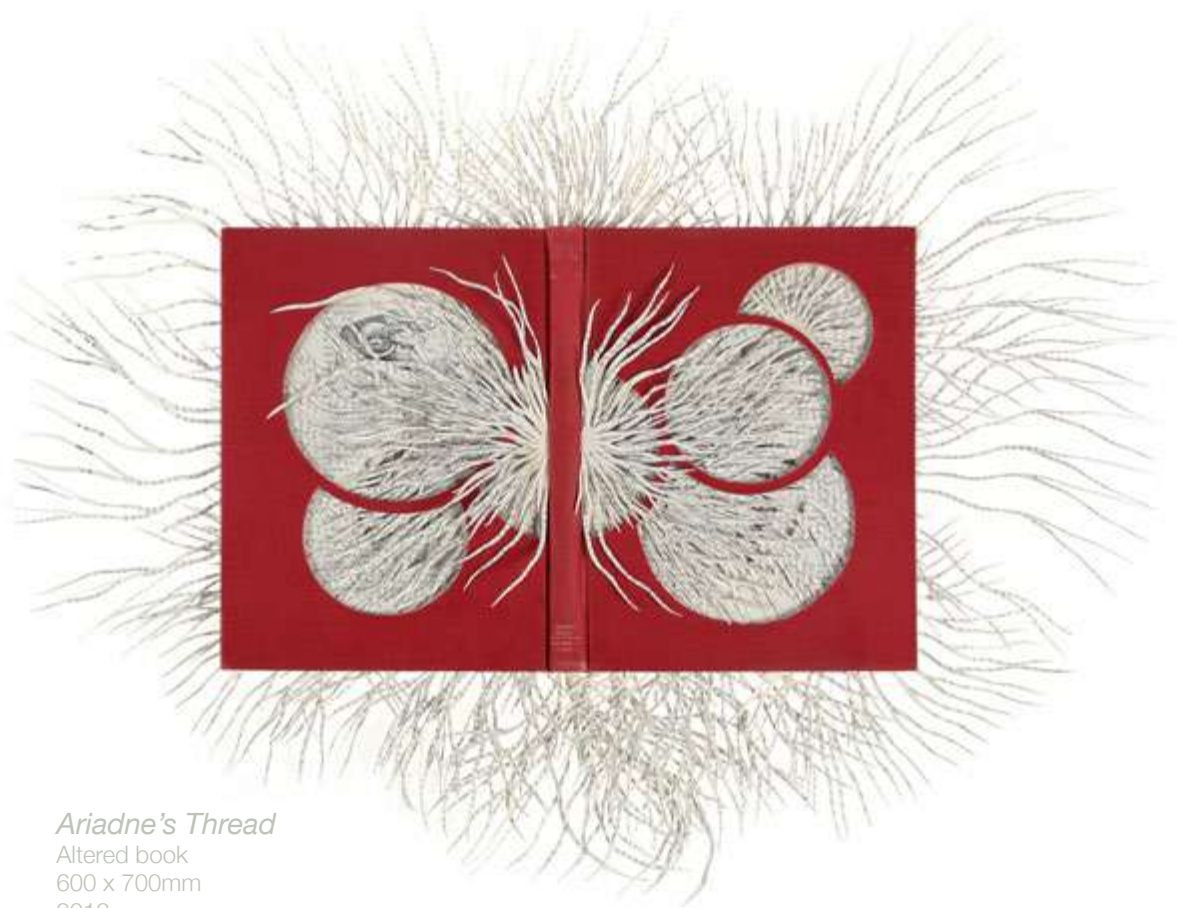
formlessness, continuity out of fragments, narrative and meaning out of scattered incidents, for the storyteller is also a spinner or weaver and a story is a thread that meanders through our lives to connect us each to each and to the purpose and meaning that appear like roads that we must travel.<sup>2</sup>



*Penelope and the Suitors (detail)*  
John William Waterhouse, 1912,  
Oil on canvas.

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<sup>2</sup> From *The Faraway Nearby*, Rebecca Solnit.



*Ariadne's Thread*

Altered book  
600 x 700mm  
2013

**W**ildenboer spins a provocative tale out of unassuming materials.

Thin, wavy strands of cut paper, silvery cord wound around pinheads and glowing microscopic shots of water crystals are spun into life, Rumpelstiltskin-style. The continuous thread running through her work, connecting its successive parts, also becomes a line of conversation. Its topic, a series of portholes into the wondrous

and the true. The themes of the alchemical and mythological that inform the content of her work so dynamically, also define its process.

The obsessive cutting, folding, piercing, and binding that brought these works into being forms a wake that trails behind them, as tangible and intriguing as the pieces themselves. It is formed of nimble, ordered, repetitive actions performed over



time, occupying the spaces between tasks, companionship daily activities and stretching out into the night hours. It is ritualistic and mundane, a chore and a meditation, deliberate and methodical yet transpiring below the level of conscious awareness.

Familiar, repetitive tasks that do not require full engagement allow the brain to slip into an alpha brainwave state, “a relaxed, open-minded experience where creativity is at its most potent. When we are stressed and over focused, we can’t see any new ways

of thinking. Alpha state blurs our sense of boundaries and rationality, so that new ideas and connections can appear.”<sup>3</sup>

This nature of process can also be found in the work of Japanese textile artist Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam with her vast, elaborate crocheted and knotted playgrounds and churches; Ann Hamilton’s complex, immersive environments of cut paper and cloth and the strange and intricate fiber wrapped cocoons of Judith Scott.

These artists are consumed by their singular tasks like the labouring women of myth, who toil on devotedly, some as if their lives depended on it. Their work unfolds in a territory where subjugation is the root of creative potency, where artmaking is a strategy against being overcome. It is an intuitive as well as rational solution to an insoluble problem.

And, like the lotus flower that grows out of the fertile mud that feeds it, from this place of adversity, a thread emerges that transmutes the substance from which it is composed. It is two parts struggle, one part alchemy. This is Wildenboer’s stomping ground.

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<sup>3</sup> From *Accidental Meditation: You’re Already Doing It*, JC Peters.



[previous page]

*Chance favours the connected mind (detail)*

(collaboration with Liza Grobler)

String and paper installation

Dimensions variable

2013

*The Odyssey III (Great Voyages and Discoverers) (detail)*

Altered book

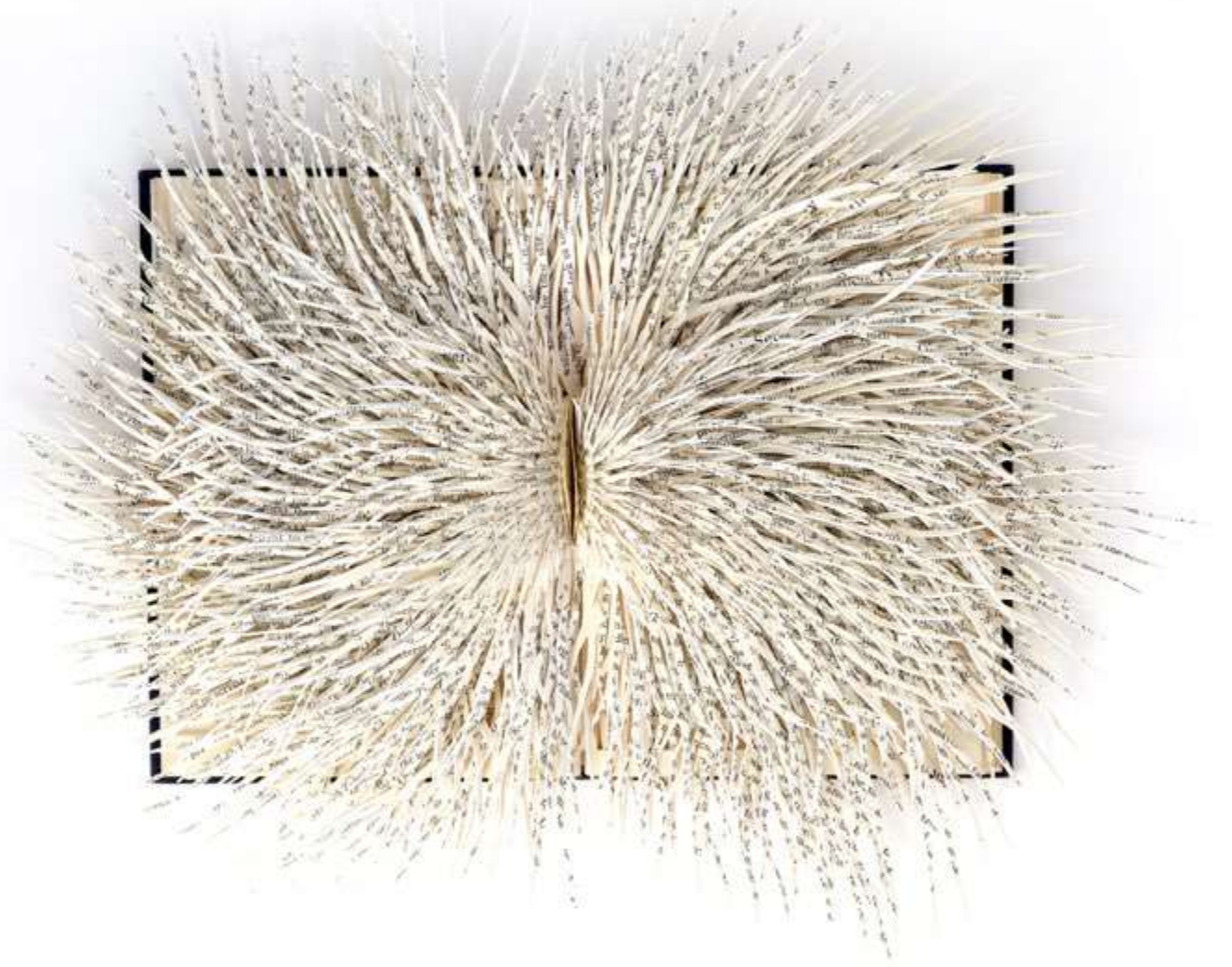
550 x 650mm

2014



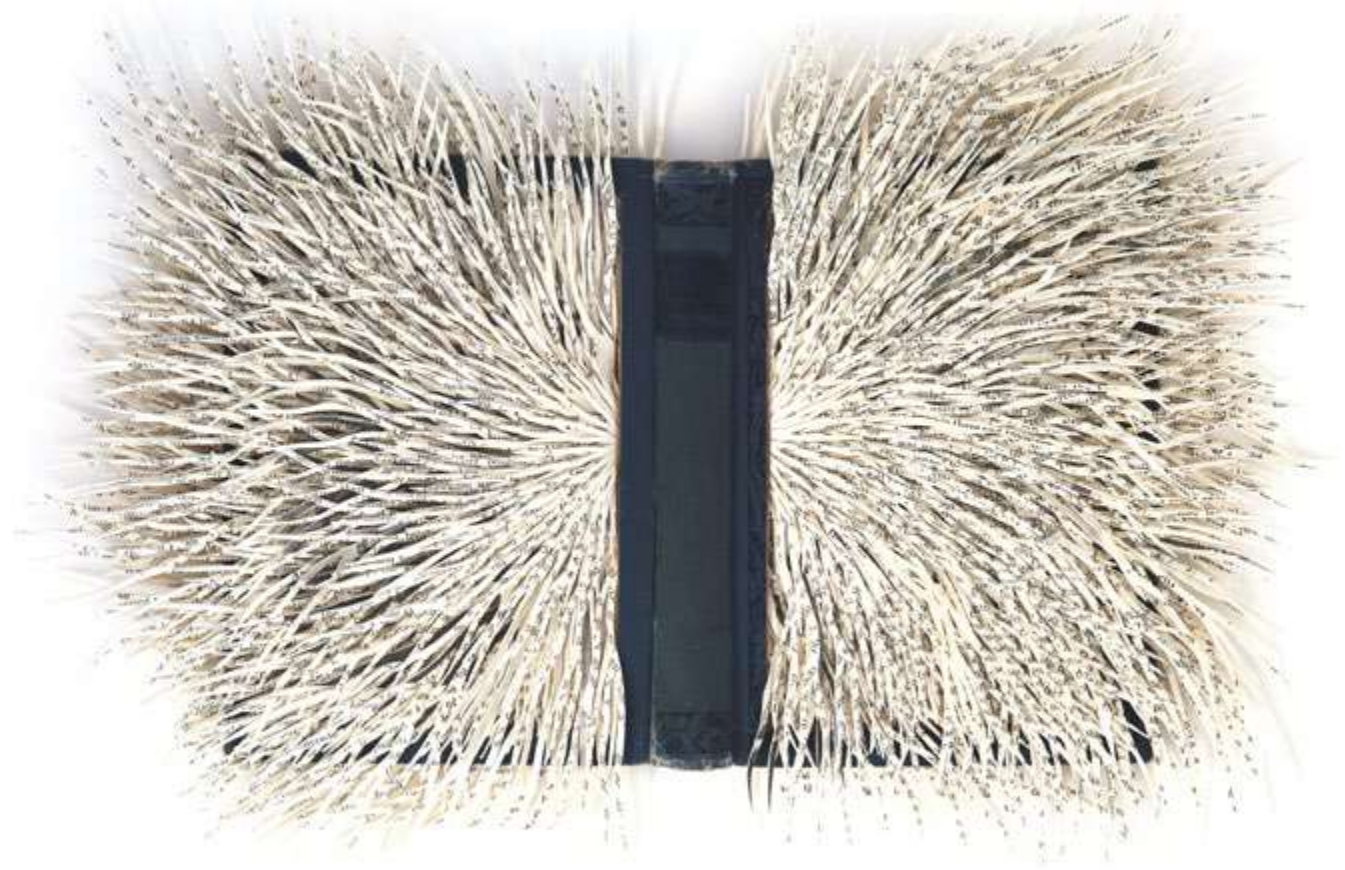
*The Odyssey I (Homer's Odyssey)*

Altered book  
550 x 650mm  
2014



*The Odyssey II (Waves in Liquids)*

Altered book  
550 x 650mm  
2014



*The Odyssey III (Great Voyages and Discoverers)*

Altered book  
550 x 650mm  
2014

*The Odyssey I (Homer's Odyssey) (detail)*  
Altered book  
550 x 650mm  
2014





*Deluge*

Paper construction with found maps  
675mm, 565mm and 420mm in diameter  
2013/14



*1%*  
99 suspended glass drops and sound installation  
(sound design by Wim Kock)  
Lengths: 300mm, 250mm, 200mm, outside diameter 100mm  
2014



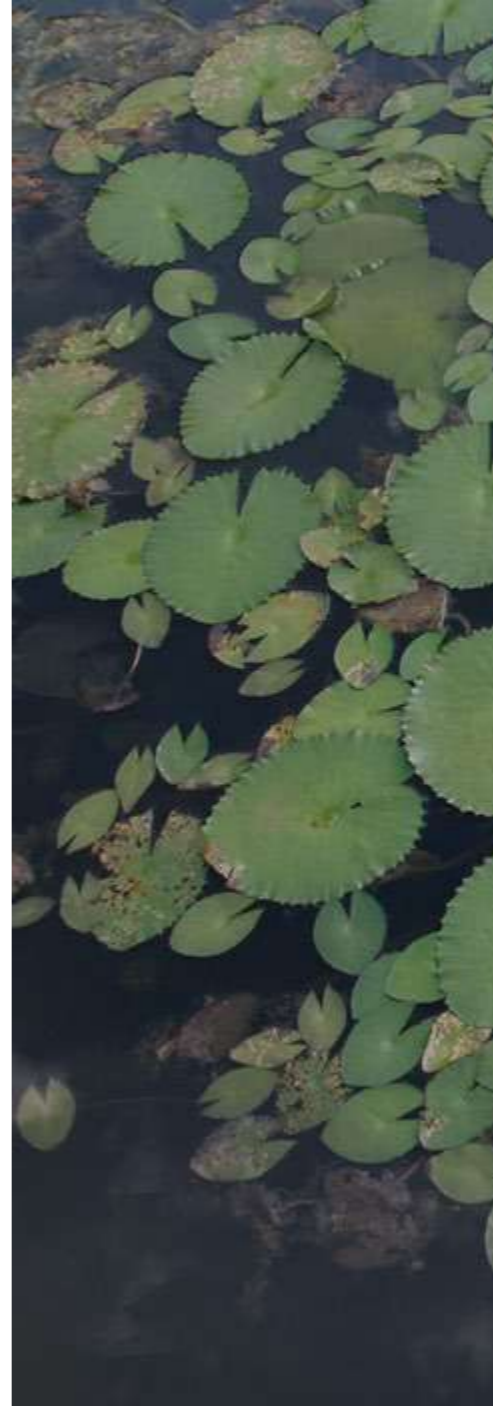
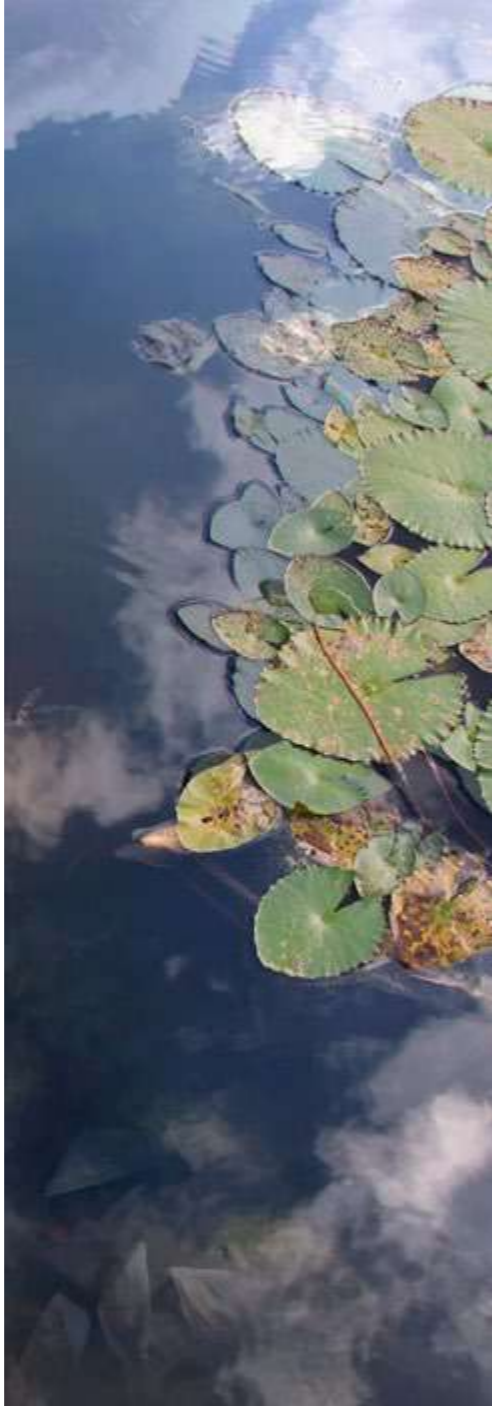
*Water Thief (am and pm)*

Colour photographic composite on Hahnemuhle paper  
7200 x 850mm  
Edition 1/1  
2013/14

[next page]

*Water Thief (pm) (detail)*

Colour photographic composite on Hahnemuhle paper  
7200 x 850mm  
Edition 1/1  
2013/14





*Nymphaeaceae*

Colour photographic composite on silk  
1800 x 1100mm  
Edition 1/1  
2013/14



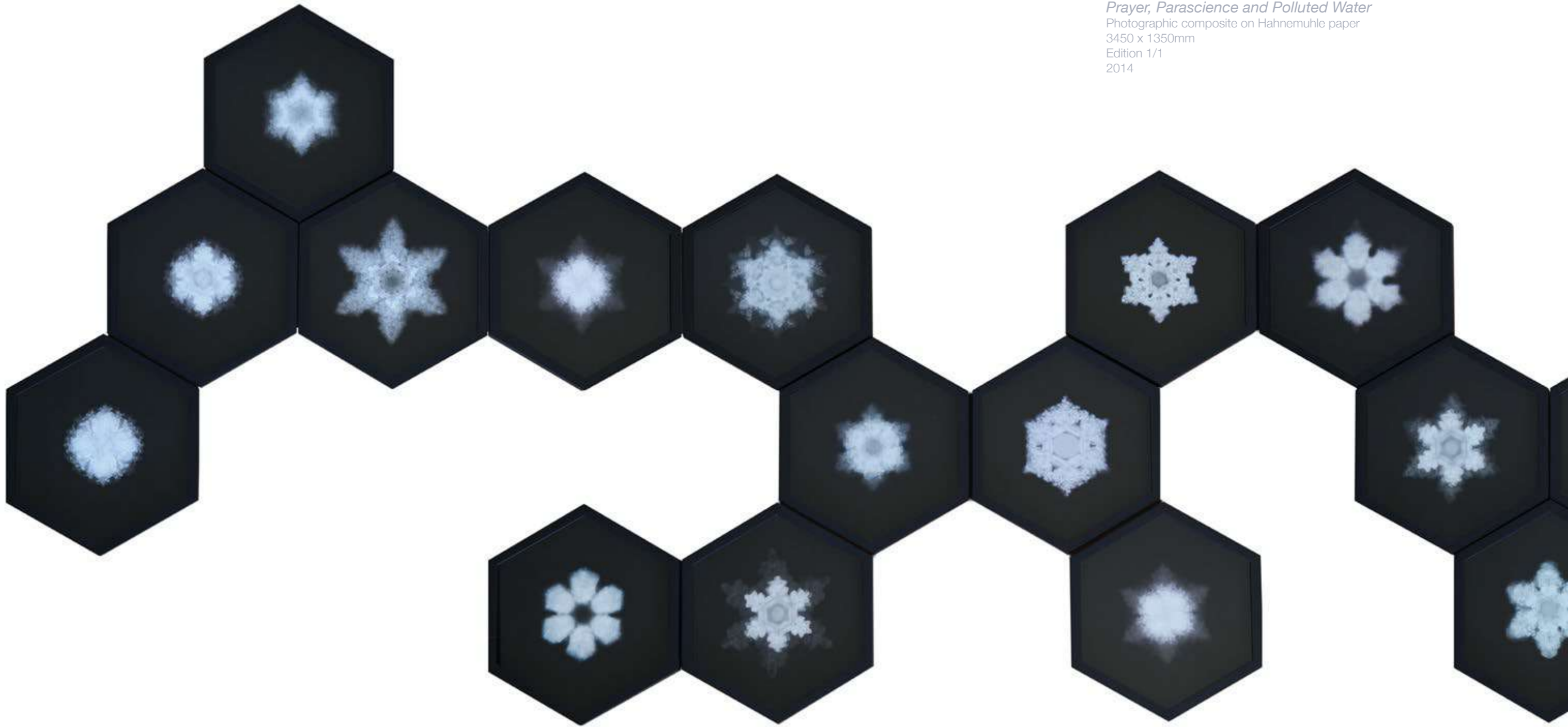
*Tumulus*  
Carved pine and stone  
350 x 450 x 2000mm  
2008/2014

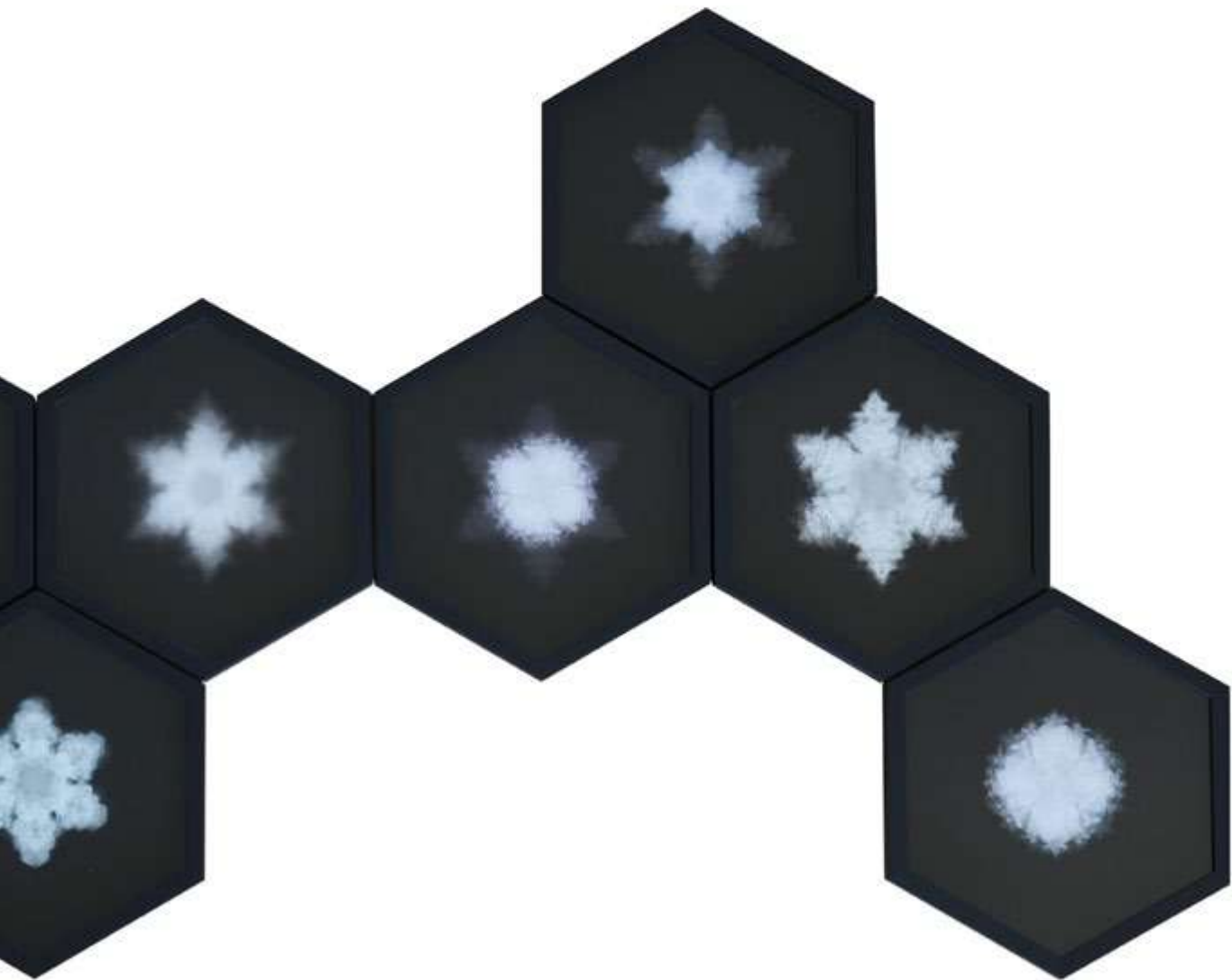
*Penelope's Web*

Colour photograph, pins and thread on Hahnemuhle paper  
530mm, 400mm and 290mm in diameter  
2014



[below and next page]  
*Prayer, Parascience and Polluted Water*  
Photographic composite on Hahnemuhle paper  
3450 x 1350mm  
Edition 1/1  
2014







*Prayer, Parascience and Polluted Water (detail)*

Photographic composite on Hahnemuhle paper

3450 x 1350mm

Edition 1/1

2014



*3 Wishes (animation stills)*  
(collaboration with Michelle Prévost)  
Digital animation and 3000 paper boats  
folded from pages of Homer's Odyssey  
4 minutes (continuous loop)  
2014



*The Grandeur Scheme* (animation stills)  
(collaboration with Michelle Prévost)  
Digital animation  
3 minutes 57 seconds (continuous loop)  
2014



*1% (detail)*

99 suspended glass drops and sound installation  
(sound design by Wim Kock)

Lengths: 300mm, 250mm, 200mm, outside diameter 100mm  
2014

# The Warrior: Barbara Wildenboer

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Juliana Irene Smith

Once upon a time there was a water nymph with long legs who loved making paper boats by the ponds edge. She could sit there for hours listening to the sounds around her as her hands worked away. She adored how the current would take the little boats this way and that way. One day when she came of age, she met her frog prince. He was charming, very charming indeed. He took her around the pond and showed her all the secret gems in the area, like the drops of water at dusk, with their subtle hues of lilac. He even took her on a wooden boat to the eerie edges of the forest. She fell in love. It was grand. He entrusted his seed to her and two strong tadpole boys were born. For a while it was bliss. However after some time the frog prince dreamt of exploring the world of swamp diving and new adventures and a flood of pollution from a newly built factory swept over the forest. Every creature had to pack up their lily pads and look to start anew. The water nymph was sad but knew that the

future would be all right, and she took her tadpoles and moved to the big city by the ocean. She hoped for a life where the wind would blow away the smog. In her heart she continued to hear the gurgling of the pond...

Stop.

Life, if only it was a fairytale.

A single mother of two, she works hard, she pushes forward.

What is this about?

What is the moral of the story?

Should there be one?

Which is more important the artist's story or the one she wants to create for you?

The story: youthful, reminiscent, magical, and to some it is even true. There is also a dark side, just like the dark side of the moon. There is a concern, the concern of the artist's and the concern, possibly in the romantic for the audience, the onlookers, spectators and even the voyeurs.

Stop.

In viewing Barbara Wildenboer's artwork, one of the first reactions is to the beauty. Beauty is a difficult word in the language of contemporary art. But beauty is comfort and offers a pause. Her work has a soft pleasing quality. She challenges the observer not with 'what is art' but rather invites them to get closer and look below the surface. Nature is fragile. Her work questions the consideration of beauty in the natural world and gives us a journey to go on. There are no hard and fast statements, but rather eluding references.

Stop.

It refers to a pause.

What I want to do is to give a picture of both the artist and the work, through the voice of someone who has heard her fairytales, discussed her work and my own over countless coffees, beers and wine and to relay a story that exists both in the reality and the fantasy (I am her younger son's fairy godmother). We all continue to push through the swamps and the muck, sometimes catching glimpses of unearthly splendour when the light of the dewdrops is just right and the smog has been blown away.

Her work does not beg you to do homework to understand it, but rather it uses classic narratives, mythological guides and reflects on our most basic and important natural resource, water.

Pause.



# Biographies

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[Emily Brady](#) is Professor of Environment and Philosophy at the Institute of Geography at Edinburgh. She has been awarded the degrees of BA (Middlebury), MSc (Edin) and PhD (Glas). She is an Academic Associate in the Philosophy subject area at Edinburgh and recently served as President of the International Society for Environmental Ethics. She is a former Associate Editor and Co-Editor of, respectively, *Environmental Values* and *Society and Space*. Her new book, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature*, reassesses the eighteenth-century sublime and argues for its relevance to recent debates in aesthetics and environmental ethics. This research is feeding into a new project, a critical study of aesthetics of nature in eighteenth-century philosophy. Her research interests move between contemporary and historical approaches in aesthetics and environmental philosophy. Specific interests include: environmental aesthetics; environmental ethics; aesthetic experience and value; Kant and eighteenth-century philosophy; the relationship between aesthetic and ethical values; aesthetics of the everyday; theories of imagination and emotion; and animal studies.

Originally from the USA, artist and curator [Juliana Irene Smith](#) now lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland. She has a BFA in Photography from Parsons School of Design in New York and a Masters in Public Art from the University of Applied Arts and Sciences in Lucerne, Switzerland. She has participated in numerous exhibitions, projects and workshops internationally and has been awarded grants from the Cultural Office in Switzerland, IKEA, the Goethe Institute and Pro Helvetica. Exhibitions include the *Central Switzerland Annual Exhibition* at the Museum of Art in Lucerne, *RIWAQ Biennale* in Palestine, *K3 Project Space* in Zurich, the Young Swiss Artists exhibition *Why We Worry* in Latvia, at the Elizabeth Foundation in New York as well as in Belgium, Switzerland and Turkey. She previously taught photography and video at UNRWA in Ramallah, at Dar Al Kaliyma in Bethlehem and currently teaches Art Context and Photography at the Art Preparatory School in Zug and Chur Switzerland. Her work focuses on the politics of belonging and the desperation of the individual, using humour as an access point to tackle socio-political concerns.

[Michelle Prevost](#) completed a BFA in Pretoria, specialising in Mew Media and an MFA (New Media) at UCT. She worked for eight years as a freelance art and design lecturer at UCT, Vega, the University of Stellenbosch, Varsity College and most recently, Concept Interactive, where she held the post of Academic Head. She is currently working as a graphic designer, copywriter and editor in Cape Town and is completing the final year of a Psychology degree through UNISA. She previously collaborated with Barbara Wildenboer on digital prints for the *Carnal Carnival Show* at the Exposure Gallery in Woodstock and animations for *Canaries in the Coalmine* at ErdmannContemporary. She has also exhibited work at *ABSA L'Atelier Award Exhibition* and *Kempton Park-Thembisa Fine Art Competition* in Johannesburg, *Sasol New Signatures Exhibition* at the Pretoria Art Museum, the group shows *four by three* and *[sic]* at the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria and the *South Africa Exhibition* in Budapest, Hungary. Her thematic area of interest is an investigation of the embodied self, the discreet worlds of self and other and that which is continuous between the two.

## Selected group exhibitions

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- 2014 Nantucket Book Festival, Nantucket, USA
- 2014 Butterflies in My Stomach, XVA Gallery, Dubai
- 2014 artMRKT Contemporary and Modern Art Fair, San Francisco
- 2014 The Art of the Book Seager Gray Gallery, San Francisco
- 2014 Crossing the Divide, ErdmannContemporary, Cape Town
- 2013 Wonder Works The Space, Hong Kong
- 2013 Conversations, Sydney, Australia
- 2012 Art International Zurich, Switzerland
- 2012 Clover Aardklop Arts Festival, Potchefstroom

## Solo exhibitions

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- 2014 The Lotus Eaters, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein; William Humphreys Museum, Kimberley; North West University Gallery, Potchefstroom
- 2013 Disjecta Membra, Amelia Johnson Contemporary, Hong Kong
- 2012 Canaries in the Coalmine, ErdmannContemporary, Cape Town
- 2011 The Library of the infinitesimally small and the unimaginably large, ErdmannContemporary, Cape Town
- 2008 Present Absence / Absent Presence, ErdmannContemporary, Cape Town
- 2008 Vanitas, AVA, Cape Town
- 2006 Everyday Alchemy, Darat al Funun, Amman, Jordan
- 2004 Rites of Passage, AVA, Cape Town

## Colophon

This interactive catalogue is published on the occasion of Barbara Wildenboer's travelling museum exhibition, *The Lotus Eaters*.

The Reservoir, Oliewenhuis, Bloemfontein  
27 June to 27 July 2014

William Humphreys Museum, Kimberly  
20 August to 28 September 2014

North West University, Potchefstroom  
13 October to 7 November 2014

Design  
Michelle Prévost

Photography  
Barbara Wildenboer & \*\*\*\*\*

*Oliewenhuis*  
ART MUSEUM

Oliewenhuis Art Museum is a satellite  
of the National Museum, Bloemfontein.



WVH  
M  
William Humphreys  
Art Gallery

