

CATRIONA
TOWRISS
TIME AS
METHOD

Catalogue of the exhibition TIME AS METHOD.

28th November 2024 - 9th January 2025

Association for Visual Arts Gallery
35 Church Street,
Cape Town, 8001,
South Africa

All images in this catalogue were taken by Mia Thom.

**CATRIONA
TOWRISS**

TIME AS METHOD

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

EXHIBITION STATEMENT

In *Time As Method*, Catriona Towriss presents a body of artwork that explores ritual and care as ways of being with land and trees. Working with deep listening, reflection and compassion, her work emerges from her desire to repair lost and damaged connections to the life-forms that surround her.

The raw natural materials used in her work draw her into the deep rhythms of earth-time, as the foraging for seeds and materials depends on seasonal passages of water through the soil and the blossoming of trees. Journeying into the forests and mountains, the artist found in Eucalyptus a place to rest her stories. In them she finds companions that mirror her migration story and rootedness in new soils. Inspired by their abundant offerings, she sees their seeds as future books, offering her a safe and generative space to contemplate tomorrow.

In these works, seed materials are woven together in a careful and expectant repetitive process, as the artist's dexterous fingers string and sew, obeying the call to create. This method asks for spaciousness, solitude and all attention. Being led by time, through time and with time, the resulting artworks have carried the artist through grief, love, joy, pain, hopelessness, delight and acceptance. The artist sees this as a reminder that the journey of creativity is all about process, with artworks witnessing the hearing and telling of their creation story.

Time As Method builds on the existing collaboration by the same name, which documented the embodied ritualisation of different forms of time with artists Raquel Torres-Arzola (San Juan, Puerto Rico) and Zayaan Khan (Cape Town, South Africa), in an online exhibition on WhatsApp in May, 2023.

TIME AS METHOD

THE SEEDS

In some ways, TIME AS METHOD is a love-note to the eucalyptus tree, whose seed pods are present in almost all of the artworks. I remember the first time I picked up a eucalyptus seed-pod. It was on a chilly Cape-winter morning in July 2021, as I was walking the Tokai wetlands with a friend. I noticed a fallen tree-branch by the path; hanging from its smaller branches were bell-shaped seed-pods, dusty red-brown in colour, clustered in groups of twos, threes and fours. Drawn to the regularity and weightiness of their form, I broke off a handful of these clusters and carried them home to the studio in my rucksack. That day marked the start of my relationship with eucalyptus.

In working with the seed-pods, I have learnt that eucalyptus are a generous tree, each one producing an abundance of seeds in a season. The eucalyptus family is also large, with a great variety of individual species within the eucalypt genus. While foraging for the bell-shaped seed pods, I began to notice that other trees, which were clearly also eucalypts, produce very different pods. Some have the bell-shaped pods which are the size of my little finger and are formed of dense wood, others are smaller than the nail of my little finger and are fragile and easily crushed. Many pods form a five pointed star at their opening, some open to reveal a four-pointed cross, while others have an empty opening that reminds me of satellite images of black holes. Every time I think I have seen every possible permutation, I discover one I have never seen before.

In part, this body of work is about the wonder and delight that the materials I work with bring me; and what their diversity in form, texture and colour tells us about the vitality and creativity of the living world around us. But the works are also about what these materials teach me about the nature of time, as one of the fundamental dimensions of the universe.

In the process of preparing for TIME AS METHOD, I have been led by time, through time and with time. The artworks in this exhibition have carried me through delight, joy, pain, grief, hopelessness, love and acceptance. I see this as a reminder that the journey of creativity is all about process, with artworks witnessing the hearing and telling of their creation story.

TIME AS METHOD emerged from an existing collaboration by the same name, which unfolded with two other artists, Raquel Torres-Arzola (San Juan, Puerto Rico) and Zayaan Khan (Cape Town, South Africa). Our collaboration documented our practices as embodied ritualisation of different forms of time and culminated in an online exhibition on WhatsApp in May, 2023. This experience expanded the lens through which I view my creative work, and provided the foundational framing for this exhibition.

CYCLES OF TIME

My work is time-intensive. The phases of collecting and then cleaning, cutting and drilling each involves days and weeks of repetitive labour. Before I even begin assembling the seed-pods, tree bark or sticks, I have dedicated countless hours of work into their preparation. Capitalism dictates that 'time is money', it moves in a linear pattern, as a resource to be extracted, from ourselves and from others. Sometimes I experience my creative labour as a meditative escape from this suffocating regime. At other times, the work pulls me right up against my internalisations of extractive time: Am I wasting it? How can I better monetise my practice? Can I work more effectively, productively? In these moments I feel like I am being pulled into a breathless rip-tide of hours, minutes and seconds, when what I really long for is to be held by time, to collaborate with time.

When I am able to move with time, rather than against it, everything expands. As I forage for materials, which depend on the seasonal passages of water through the soil and the blossoming of trees, I am carried by the deep rhythm of earth-time, which is cyclical and not linear. I find moments to observe the tentative movements of the tiny green spider who made a home in the seed I carried into the studio. I trace the foamy purple strands of fungi that have squeezed themselves between the cambium and the bark of the cork-oak. Time invites me to wonder at the ways that some eucalyptus seeds grow from their stem in merged-pairs like conjoined twins. There is so much joy here. The radiating, circular shapes of *Shield i*, *Shield ii* and *The trees look at us and wonder* emerge from this joyful, expansive experience of cyclical earth-time.

There is also discomfort and unease. While I seek to exist beyond the extractive notions of time, I reflect on the loss of that possibility for so many people. For most of our existence, humans existed in collaboration with earth-time, living within the rhythm of the seasons and the cycles of the cosmos. I imagine the people and animals who found home in the places I have walked and collected materials: in Tokai, in the Tankwa Karoo, in the Uilkraal valley. Their eyes traced the same mountain horizons, looked up into the constellations of the same night-sky. How

might they have experienced time before the arrival of Europeans, my cultural ancestors, ensnared them into a net of extraction? Before their lives were forced into labour and the land was reduced to a resource. What notions of time, what rituals and rites of passage were destroyed by this intrusion?

My questions about the loss and damage of human-land connections not only arise through the manifestations of time within my creative process, they are also bound up in the very materials of my work. Almost all of the seed-pods, bark and sticks that I work with are grown by trees that are foreign to the landscapes I find them in. I have never made a deliberate decision to work with the materials from non-indigenous trees and plants, I was simply drawn to their particular shapes, textures, colours and durability. It took me time to recognise that the majority of materials I work with are not indigenous to South Africa. They provide a mirroring of my own migration story and rootedness in soils that are new to me. It is this shared experience, the particular companionship that I share with my materials that enables me to work with the difficult questions that arise through my practice.

THE LAND

To work with the trees is to work with the stories of the land from which they grow. Many of these stories unfold around themes of loss and alienation, destruction and exploitation. The video *Dreaming and Lucidity* shows a site-responsive sculpture that I built in the Tankwa-Karoo in 2024, while on the Tankwa Artscape residency. In this video, I am seen moving towards the sculpture, pausing to look back before entering the circles of sticks and lying down on the ground to rest. At the end of the video, I am seen getting back up onto my feet and leaving the enclosure of the sculpture, with the long length of my shadow following me as I leave the shot. The video shows the vast openness of the landscape, and leaves the viewer with a sense of an undefined passage of time.

The sculpture itself forms a shelter: both for those who are living and for the traces of life that, while no longer visible, remain strongly present on the land. A shelter for the spirit of the ancient ocean that once covered this landscape, the |Xam people killed by colonial genocide, the herds of springbok brought to near-extinction by European hunters, and the flocks of sheep, fed on the seeds of the Mesquite Trees, who temporarily replaced them. In this sense, the sculpture, and video are about the timelessness, or perhaps time-fullness of the Tankwa-Karoo

The sculpture is created from sticks that I harvested from dead mesquite trees over a period of seven days. This tree was introduced into the sensitive desert landscape of the Tankwa-Karoo by farmers who wanted to settle and farm sheep. The tree, a precious source of medicine and food for the people of its native home in the arid lands of America, was to provide seed-fodder, shade and shelter for the flock of sheep whose role was to make this wild and arid landscape profitable. Today, there is much less sheep farming in the Tankwa-Karoo. And with fewer flocks feeding on its seeds, the mesquite tree proliferates along the waterways, sucking up the precious-little water remaining in seasonal riverbeds. Now redundant to the human being responsible for their migration, the mesquite tree is considered highly biologically invasive.

While its river-beds seem to be suffocating under a dense blanket of mesquite, the Tankwa-Karoo desert also has a subtle power to nurture small forms of indigenous plant life. It is this subtle nurturing power that the sculpture in *Dreaming and Lucidity* taps into. The dry sticks of the sculpture will act as a shelter for soil particles blown on the wind, and over time will be encircled with a band of soft-soil which will become a bed for wind-carried seeds. I learnt that it is only the indigenous plants which have seeds light enough to be carried by the wind. In the seasons to come then, this mesquite-stick sculpture will become a nursery for the plants that have an ancient and balanced relationship with the land of the Tankwa-Karoo. A reminder that Time is Method.

THE FUTURE WEEPING

As a body of work, *TIME AS METHOD*, with its particular focus on seeds, has asked me to give special consideration to questions of the future. For me, seeds are packages of the future. Each pod contains the seed for multiple future trees, unborn descendants of those I have collected from. I think of the eucalypts I sit under in Tokai; old giants, with gnarled bases so large that it would take two adults to embrace their circumference. Their trunks rise into towers with bark that peels back to reveal a smooth, soft-silver under layer. Some of these trees are so tall you have to bend backwards to see their apex, to take in the fullness of their grey-green crown-foliage. The seed-pods used to create the works in this exhibition contained multiple seeds, each of which is a tiny parcel of potential, a huge tree not-yet-grown. These future descendants will become collaborators with the future-sunlight, wind and water; with the birds, rodents, insects and fungi of tomorrow.

What future might those descendent-trees live into?

This is a difficult question. To consider the future is to be in the realm of the abstract and work with the multitudinous possibilities of what is not-yet. I fear getting lost in the vastness of this question. I am reminded of the words of a former Professor colleague from my days working in population research, who told me that predicting the future is a tricky business and almost no-one gets it right. Even though I approach this question as an artist, freed from the academic expectations of objectivity, reliability and validity, a part of me still worries I might imagine the future wrongly. But more than this, I struggle because I know that to truly consider the future of the life-forms around me will mean grieving many imminent deaths.

I have read the facts on environmental collapse: every time I open a news website, I see numbers and percentage signs next to words like 'biodiversity loss', 'annual warming' and 'carbon emissions'. But, like oil sitting on the surface of water, I am unable to absorb the violently damaged reality that underlies those neatly summarised numbers. On top of the losses that have already happened, the ecocides that took place before we had that name for them, it seems incomprehensible. To allow that reality to enter me, means my heart will break and I fear I might never recover.

In the early days of preparation for this exhibition, I read a poem by Ben Okri, called *The Broken*. While creating the works for *TIME AS METHOD*, I have read this poem over and over again. Spanning over twenty pages, *The Broken* describes the depths of the environmental crisis and asks us to turn to love to save our future. It has been a lifeline through the frightening territory of comprehending the future, a compass that orientates me towards hope. All of the works in this series are titled using stanzas from the poem.

So I thought that maybe love could shift our vision

Shift our breath

Shift our dreams

....

With love we act wisely,

And comprehensively

Hold our breath

And wait for the madness

To pass

Let the seed show

What acres it may may grow

Excerpt from *The Broken*, by Ben Okri

The message resonated deeply, as I had just fallen in love. The arrival of this romantic love has taught me a lot about the nature of time. In the company of my lover, time takes on a different quality. The present moment, often so elusive, becomes available and expansive. The knocking of external world duties upon my door is quietened and I am effortlessly able to notice the way my own breath falls into rhythm with my lover's. In this spaciousness, I hear the full orchestra of birdsong in the morning and watch rays of dawn light emerge, frond-like, through the tangled leaves and branches of dense forest in front of his bedroom window.

This experience has also brought lessons about comprehending the future, about finding what exists beyond the fear of heartbreak. The nature of loving another human is that it also brings potential pain, hurt and loss. I have experienced more than enough heartbreaks in my life and have many good reasons to be afraid of where I might land after the 'falling'. More than once I have allowed love to nearly destroy me. But somehow I know that life wants me to keep my heart open, to dare to trust that this love might be the container for future ruptures and healings. I am under no illusions; I know that the container will develop cracks over time, perhaps it will break. Maybe it will get damaged beyond repair. But I know love gives us the tools to piece together broken hearts.

In *The Broken*, Ben Okri reminds us that love for others, love for self and love for the world as a whole, are manifestations of the same force:

In the Tao Te Ching
There's a light-crammed
Passage which says
That the sage loves
The world as they love their body.
If the earth were our body
Would we do half the thing
To it that we're doing?

Armed with these lessons in love, I find the courage to step fully into my work and listen to the message the seeds have to tell me about the future. In the spacious solitude of my studio, I work and I allow my heart to break. Each morning, I return to pick up the seed-pods scattered across the workbench from yesterday's labour, as if they were pieces of my broken heart. One by one, I string them onto lengths of cotton thread. In the same way that a loving relationship can help us endure the ruptures of life, this way of working acts as a container for me as I listen to the future weeping. Sometimes there is also physical pain: the muscles of my shoulder seize with the strain of repetitive movements or a finger gets punctured by the stabbing of a needle. But each work comes with a determination to be born and slowly, over days and weeks, each string of seed-pods incrementally creates the conversation of an artwork.

I am reminded that creating is an act of hope and an act of love.

THE ART WORKS

Shield i

Shield ii

The trees look at us and wonder

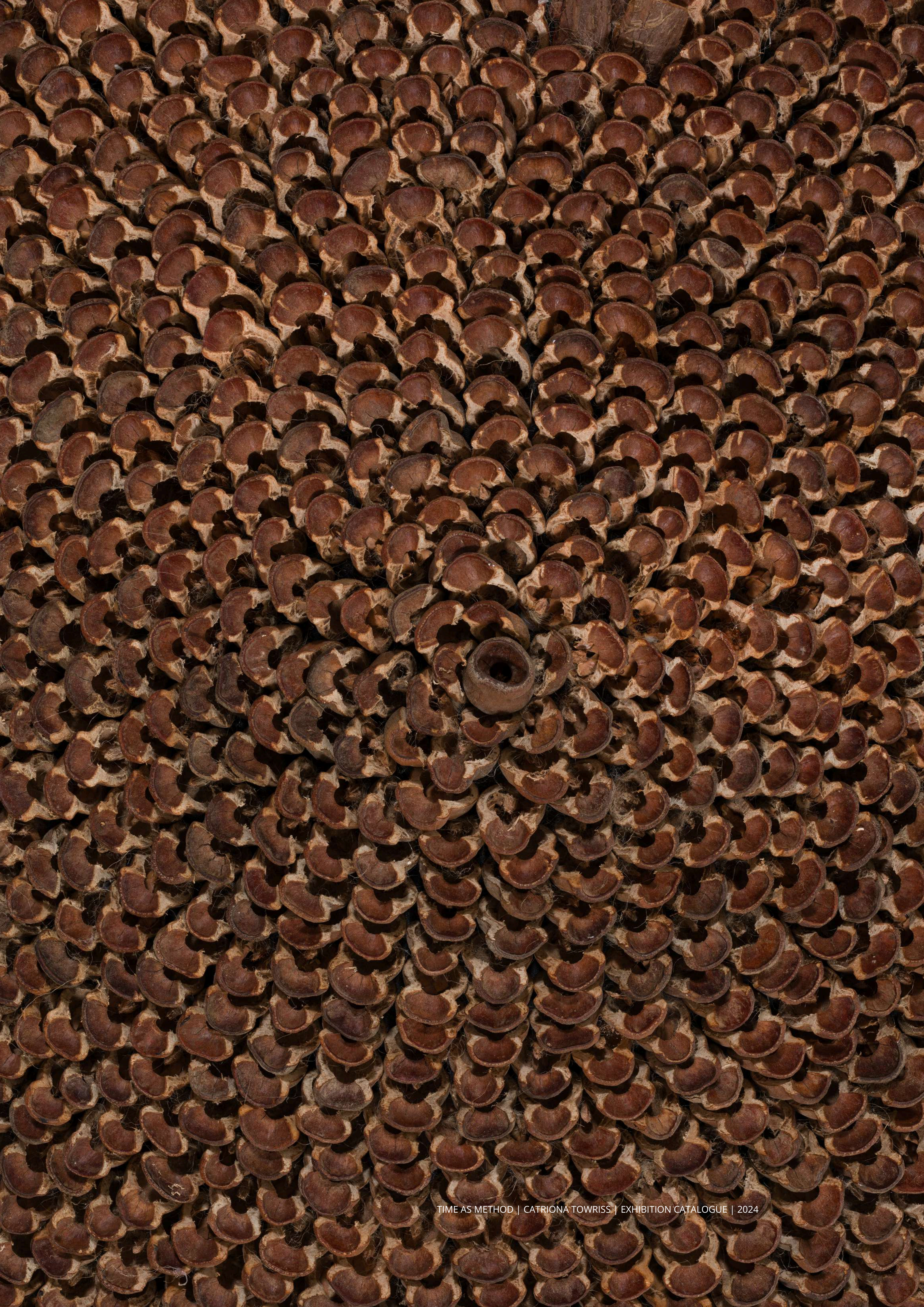


Catriona Towriss
Shield (i), 2022
Tree bark (various) on fibreglass mount
132 x 132 x 25 cm
R42,400 (Inc. VAT)





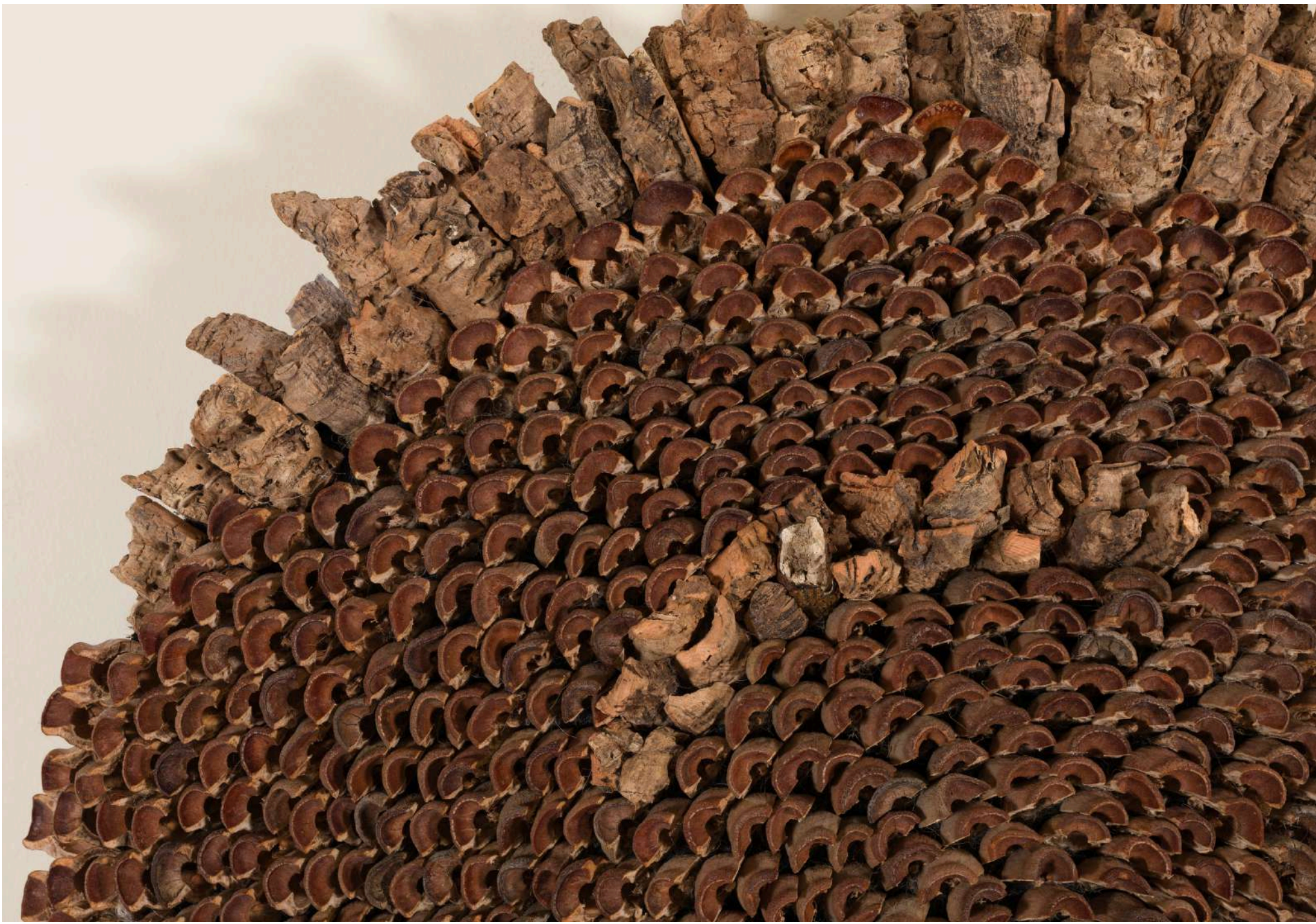
Catriona Towriss
Shield (ii), 2022
Eucalyptus seed pods and pine tree bark on fibreglass mount
142 x 150 x 15 cm
R47,700 (Inc. VAT)







Catriona Towriss
The trees look at us and wonder, 2024
Eucalyptus seed pods and cork tree bark on fibreglass mount
100 x 100 x 15 cm
R31,800 (Inc. VAT)



Dreaming & Lucidity



Catriona Towriss
Dreaming and lucidity, 2024
Single channel video
00:04:03
1/3
R15,900 (Inc. VAT)





Catrina Towriss
Dreaming and lucidity, 2024
Single channel video
00:04:03
1/3
R15,900 (Inc. VAT)

Dreaming and Lucidity

by Catriona Towriss

Here
In this place, where
The veil between sleeping and waking, between
Dreaming and lucidity
Is pulled back
I listened for what was unseen

A rock began to roar with the noise
Of an ancient ocean.

And time was swept off its feet

I searched through a gaping absence for |Xam
Who showed me circular shelters,
Hugging the horizon

The wind transporting their stories from the stars

At dawn a current of Springbok moving
Across the plateaus to their winter grazing
Chased by khaki-clad ghosts with guns

The seeds of the thorny new arrivals feed
Flocks of sheep, jostling
Liberated from the scars of iron fences

For days
I spoke with the spirit of the Tankwa River,
Cracked into a dry clay bed

The cosmos is in swift movement
But
Here we all gather

Where the past
And the present
And the future
Coalesce
Into
Now





Catrina Towriss
Dreaming and lucidity, 2024
Single channel video
00:04:03
1/3
R15,900 (Inc. VAT)



I went out into the dark today

If the earth were our body

*Let the seed show what acres it may
grow*

We know not the world for how long

*Will the new energy of the future be
spiritual?*

*So I thought that maybe love could
shift our vision*



Catriona Towriss
I went out into the dark today
2024
Eucalyptus seed pods (various) on hessian cloth
78 x 42 x 7 cm
Unframed
R15,000 (excl. VAT)





Catriona Towriss
If the earth were our body
2024
Eucalyptus seed pods (various) and cotton thread
90 x 27 x 8 cm (variable according to installation)
Unframed
R15,000 (excl. VAT)





Catriona Towriss
Let the seed show what acres it may grow
2024
Eucalyptus seed pods (various) and cotton thread
78 x 33 x 10 cm (variable according to installation)
Unframed
R17,000 (excl. VAT)





Catriona Towriss
We know not the world for how long
2024
Eucalyptus seed pods (various) and mossy oak acorn cups on hessian cloth
73 x 35 x 7 cm
Unframed
R15,000 (excl. VAT)





Catrina Towriss
Will the new energy of the future be spiritual?
2024
Eucalyptus seed pods (various) on hessian cloth
56 x 50 x 5 cm
Unframed
R20,000 (excl. VAT)





Catriona Towriss
So I thought that maybe love could shift our vision
2024
Eucalyptus seed pods (various) and mossy oak acorn cups on hessian cloth
75 x 38 x 8 cm
Unframed
R15,000 (excl. VAT)

Cleanse the wasteland
Everything we need is here



Catriona Towriss
Cleanse the wasteland
2024
Mossy oak acorn cup, jacaranda seed pod and unknown fronds
33 x 30 x 10 cm
Unframed
R3000 (excl. VAT)

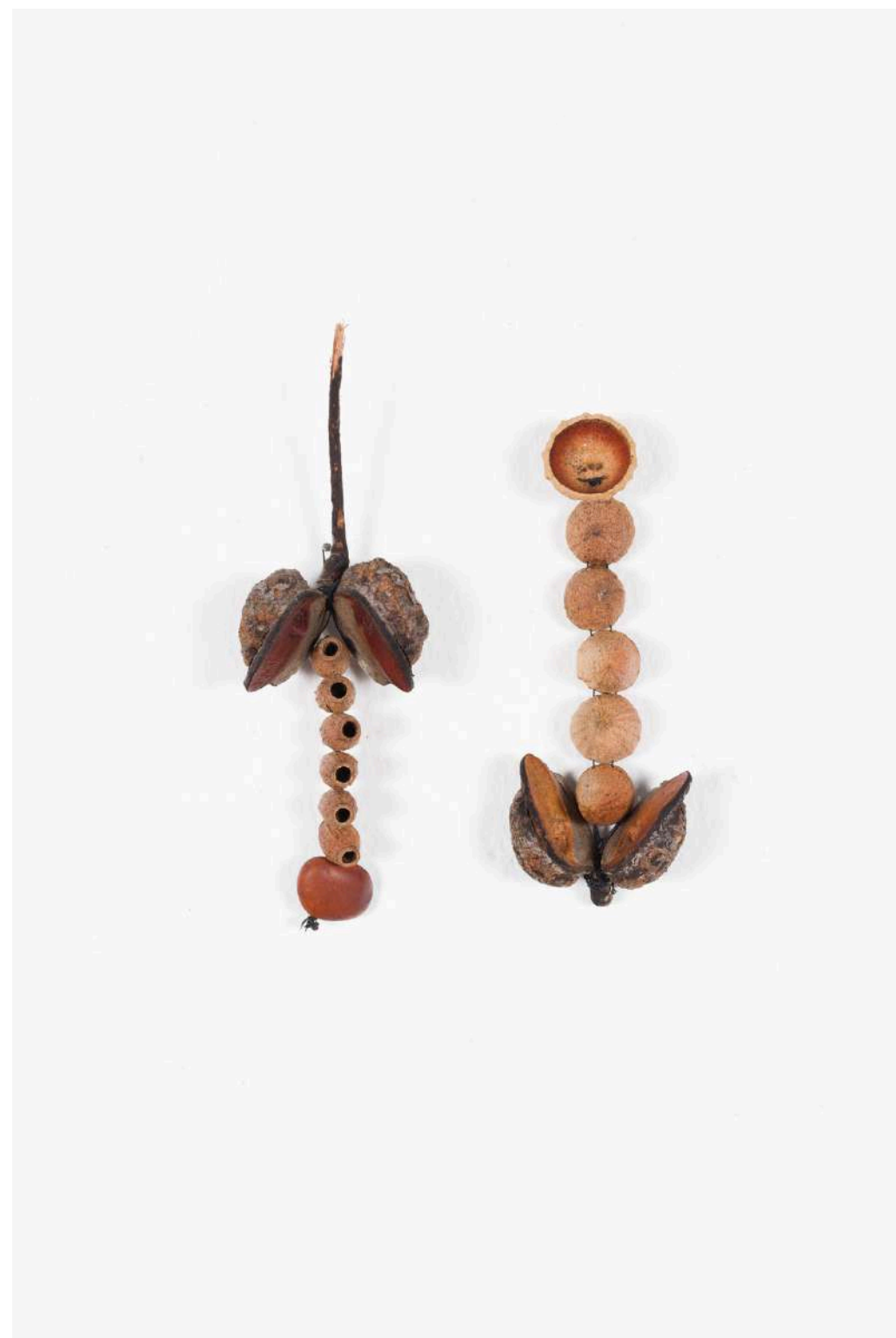


Catriona Towriss
Everything we need is here
2024
Palm tree seed pods, stone pine needles
53 x 26 x 10 cm
Unframed
R3000 (excl. VAT)

Place in exploration of itself (I - XIV)



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (x), 2024
Hakea, eucalyptus and red mahogany seed
pods
6 x 3.5 x 4 cm
NFS

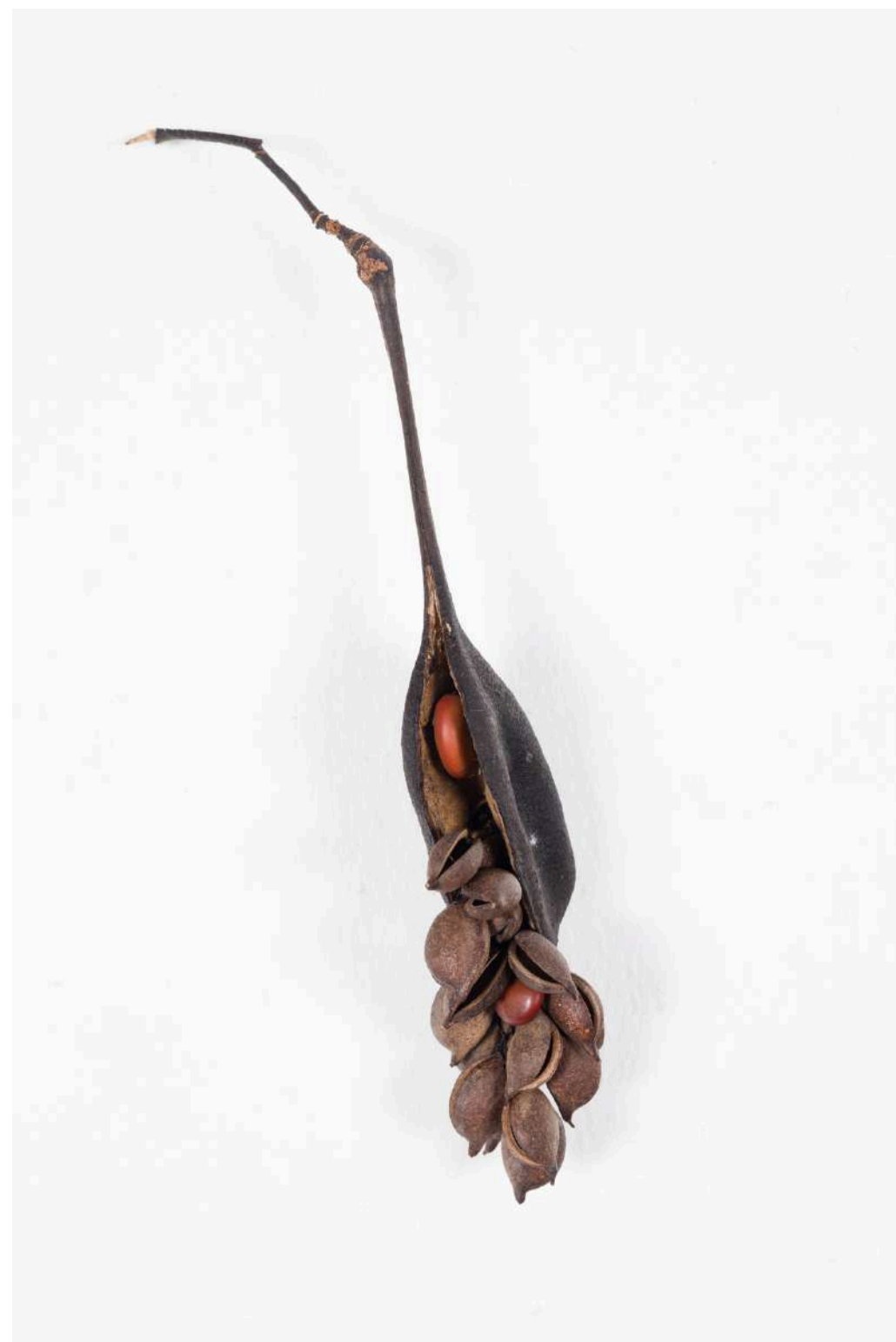


Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (v)
2024
Hakea and eucalyptus seed pods (various)
and unknown seed
12 x 4.5 x 2 cm (left), 10.5 x 4 x 2.5 cm (right)
Unframed
NFS



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (vi), 2024
Flame tree and eucalyptus seed pods
16 x 3 x 4cm
NFS

Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (vii), 2024
Flame tree seed pod, unknown seeds and pods
16 x 3 x 4 cm
NFS





Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (xiii), 2024
Cedar, palm tree and eucalyptus seed pods
5 x 13 x 4 cm
NFS



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (iii), 2024
Hakea and palm seed pods, and unknown frond
10.5 x 7 x 5.5 cm
NFS

Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (ii), 2024
Cedar seed pod, unknown seed and unknown frond
21 x 6.5 x 4.5 cm
NFS





Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (xi), 2024
Palm, cedar, eucalyptus and red mahogany
seed pods, and acorn cup
10 x 4 x 3.5 cm (left), 10.5 x 4 x 3 cm (right)
NFS



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (xiv), 2024
Acorn cup, red mahogany seed and
eucalyptus seed pod
5.5 x 4 x 4
NFS



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (xii), 2024
Acorn cup, palm stick and norfolk pine needle
5 x 14 x 4 cm
NFS



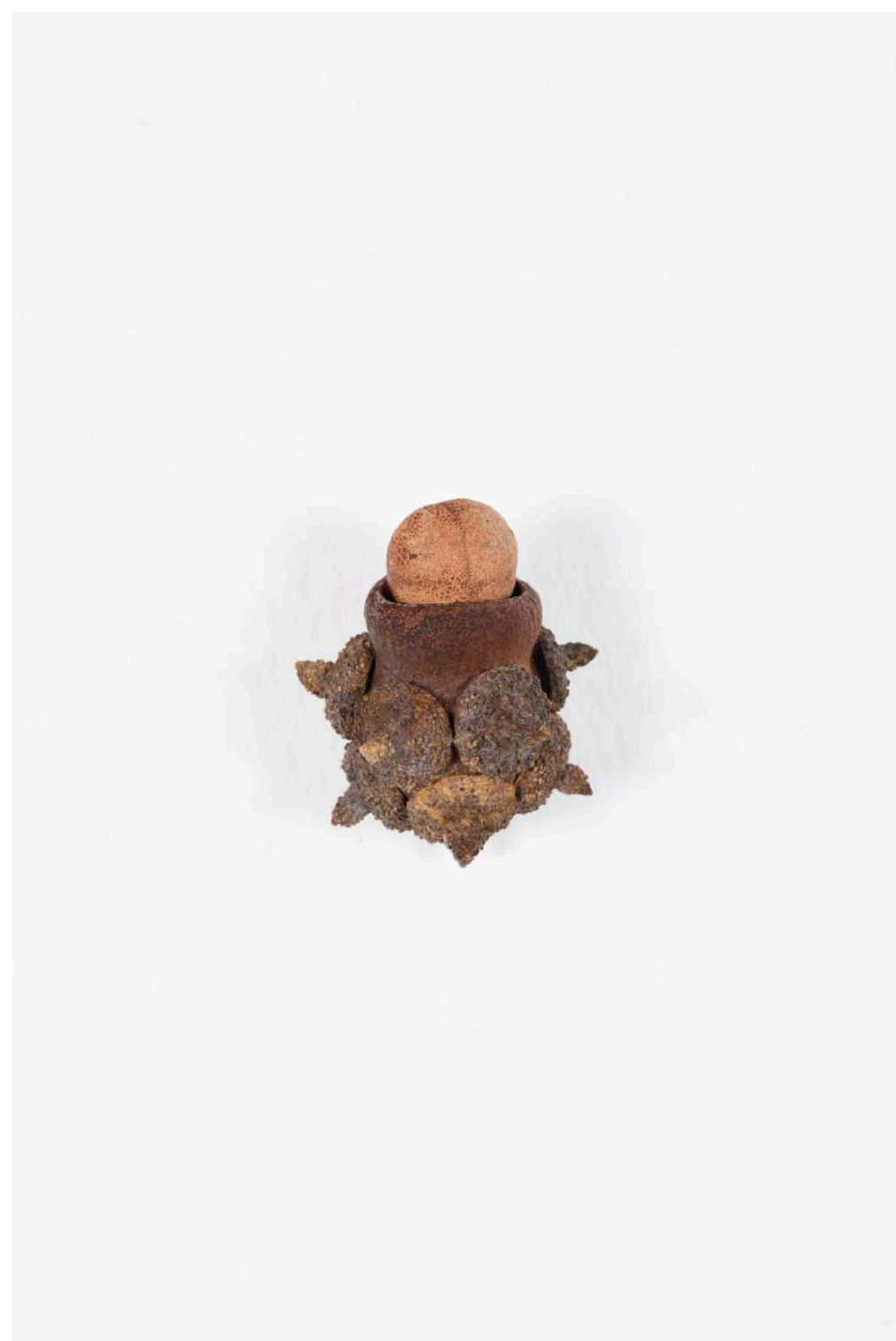
Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (iv), 2024
Eucalyptus seed pods and unknown frond
27 x 8 x 4 cm
NFS



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (i), 2024
Cedar seed pod and stone pine needle
8 x 7 x 4 cm
NFS



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (viii), 2024
Red mahogany seed and pod, sweet gum seed pod
8 x 5.5 x 5.5 cm
NFS



Catriona Towriss
Place in exploration of itself (ix), 2024
Eucalyptus (various) and red mahogany seed pods
6 x 5 x 5.5 cm
NFS

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY



Catriona Towriss, is an self-taught artist who creates sculpture, relief and site-responsive art from tree bark, seed pods and other foraged-materials. Born in the UK, Towriss' work examines her relationship to land in South Africa, where she practices. Her work is an exploration of what lies beyond the principles of time and resource extraction that govern our present reality, through which she seeks to repair and regenerate reverence for the land.

In 2020, after eleven years in public health research, Towriss transitioned into full-time artistic practice. In 2022, Towriss held her first solo exhibition at Alliance Française in Cape Town, and in 2023, she was shortlisted for Stauss & Co's Cassirer Welz Award. Towriss has participated in artist residencies across South Africa, including Tankwa Artscape (2024) and Bodhi Khaya residency (2023). *TIME AS METHOD* (2024) is her second-solo exhibition.

