

# Water, the [Delicate] Thread of Life

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COMPILED BY THE  
HERITAGE AGENCY CC

EXHIBITION

Water, the [Delicate] Thread of Life

29 July – 1 October 2011  
Standard Bank Gallery  
Johannesburg



Norman Catherine, *Requiem*, 1994. Oilstick on paper. 130 x 112 cm. Private Collection

‘WATER, THE [DELICATE] THREAD OF LIFE’, SETS OUT TO EXPLORE THE MANY WONDERS AND COMPLEXITIES OF WATER AND TO CHALLENGE THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT AND RESPOND TO ONE OF THE MOST PRECIOUS SUBSTANCES ON EARTH.

THE EXHIBITION SEEKS TO BRING HOME JUST HOW FRAGILE LIFE ON EARTH WOULD BE WITHOUT SUSTAINABLE WATER RESOURCES. THROUGH THE EYES OF SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS, IT SHOWS HOW INTEGRAL AND FUNDAMENTAL WATER IS TO LIFE. WATER IS INDEED THE DELICATE THREAD ON WHICH LIFE DEPENDS.

A number of works have been made especially for this exhibition, including Willem Boshoff’s *Walking on Water* (2011) and a unique piece by Karel Nel. Boshoff’s *Walking on Water* plays off the multiple interpretations of the ‘word’, as he cleverly combines ideas about Christian religion with science and technology to warn against the abuse of clean water resources. Nel’s site-specific installation, *Reflective Field* (2011), explores the space between knowing and not knowing, the mysterious realm symbolised in his work by reflections of water against the gallery ceiling in what the artist describes as a “scientific exploration of divination”.



Durant Sihlali, *Kliptown Floods*, 1997. Acrylic on masonite. 153 x 122 cm. Standard Bank Corporate Collection



Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, *Untitled*, 1999–2001. Oil on canvas. 203 x 101 cm. Private Collection

Water is an important feature in religious practice and rituals throughout the world, and is shown on this exhibition through the work of southern African ‘traditional’ artists in an exploration of ‘living water’ believed to have been sent by a supreme deity, or god. Water is also associated with life and fertility, and is central to rainmaking ceremonies, including that of Modjadji, the Rain Queen of the Northern Sotho Balobedu people.

“the message of ‘Water, the [Delicate] Thread of Life’ is that it may not be too late to adopt a new approach towards water”

In his watercolour, *Mine Landscape* (1993), Alan Crump shows the once familiar landmark dumps that dominated the Johannesburg skyline together with slime dams, the catchment pools for mine waste. The grim and harsh consequences of mining are also explored in David Goldblatt’s hard-hitting photograph of a small group of men, young and old, bathing in a possibly toxic asbestos mine shaft.

Other themes covered in ‘Water, the [Delicate] Thread of Life’ include the devastation caused by floods; drought conditions, water pollution and severe water shortages in South Africa; water wastage; and the general depletion of water as a precious resource.

Part of the exhibition is made up of a selection of photographs, lithographs, objects and original artworks by Cyril Coetzee, that are concerned with the role of water as a ‘sculptor’ of form, and how the gestures of moving water create flow patterns that are also found in the human body, in the natural world, and in art and design.

The artworks on exhibition show how water touches every facet of our lives. However, life on earth is threatened by the unsustainable use and abuse of limited clean water resources. In general, the message of ‘Water, the [Delicate] Thread of Life’ is that it may not be too late to adopt a new approach towards water, a vital, fragile and miraculous substance. With creative interventions and a collective commitment to preserve and nurture our natural environment there can be a promise of new beginnings.

The exhibition is curated by Marion Dixon, a freelance art curator and author, and is accompanied by a catalogue.

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Paul Stopforth’s *Bather I* (1986) adds a political twist to the common theme of bathing found in art history with his depiction of a man’s sunburnt face barely keeping afloat above the political sea of oppression in the South Africa of the 1980s.

Two other important themes with which the exhibition engages are the dramatic effect of global warming as a result of unsustainable human activity, and the huge amount of plastic debris that is choking our oceans. Georgie Papageorge’s video installation, *Kilimanjaro/Coldfire* (2010), deals with the problems of deforestation and melting ice in tropical zones. The latter theme is represented by Simon Max Bannister’s *Return* (2010), from his Plastikos series.

## Water, metaphor and ritual

“The notion of charting a course from one state of being to another as a ‘crossing of the river of life’ dates back at least to ancient Egyptian burials when gods travelled by boat to the next world, and souls were thought to continue their journey across the waters to the afterlife,” explains Marion Dixon in the exhibition catalogue.

Read the fact file on water and the transition to adulthood and answer the questions that follow.

- Deborah Bell’s sculpture, *Crossing*, depicts the ‘crossing of the river of life’, described above. Does your religion, culture or faith use the symbolism of water in any of its rituals or beliefs?
- Do you participate in initiation or a rite of passage when you reach a certain age? What other kinds of rituals or celebrations do you know of that symbolise the transition to adulthood?

Many cultures celebrate and give thanks for rain and the abundance it brings. Look at Helen Sebidi’s painting. Says Dixon, “With *Untitled*, Sebidi has skilfully captured the sheer wealth of iconography associated with one single substance, water.”

- What symbols of the life that water sustains can you spot in the artwork?
- Can you think of any other icons or symbols associated with water?



Deborah Bell, *Crossing*, 2005–9. Maquette in resin for bronze edition of 3. 204 x 815 x 68 cm. Boat with Dog: 108 x 430 x 75 cm; Boat with Man: 200 x 295 x 75 cm. Collection: The Goodman Gallery

### FACT FILE: Water and the transition to adulthood



Unknown artist, *N’wana/child figure* (Tsonga/Shangaan) (Limpopo Province), early to mid-20th century. Textile, thread, glass, plastic and brass. 19 x 5.8 x 5.8 cm. Brenthurst Collection (long-term loan)

In many African cultures, where initiation rituals celebrate the passage from childhood into adulthood, immersion in water symbolises rebirth. The ‘child figure’ dolls on this exhibition are part of a tradition in several South African cultures: these figures, which symbolise the union of male and female reproductive parts, are carried by women hoping to conceive a child after they marry. Nessa Leibhammer in the exhibition catalogue recounts the story of Nsatumuni. “Nsatumuni, her friends and sisters, make child figures and show them to people in the village. Nsatumuni’s is declared the most beautiful and she receives much praise and attention. The girls take their child figures to the river to be washed, but, tired, Nsatumuni drops hers into the water and goes after to retrieve it. Under the water she meets many strange creatures and undergoes a number of trials in this netherworld that test her moral character and ability to make appropriate decisions. She passes these successfully, and during the night her child figure turns into a real child and her mother and sisters receive her with joy.”

### GLOSSARY WORDS

#### DEFORESTATION

THE PERMANENT DESTRUCTION OF INDIGENOUS FORESTS OR WOODS

#### DIVINATION

THE PRACTICE OF SEEKING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE FUTURE OR THE UNKNOWN, USING SPIRITUAL OR SUPERNATURAL RITUALS OR METHODS

#### ICON

AN IMPORTANT AND ENDURING SYMBOL

#### ICONOGRAPHY

PICTORIAL MATERIAL RELATING TO OR ILLUSTRATING A SUBJECT

FACT FILE: Water challenges facing South Africa



Alan Crump, *Mine Landscape*, 1993. Watercolour on paper. 53 x 73.5 cm. Standard Bank Corporate Collection

Industrialisation, climate changes and modern living have affected the quality of water, as well as access to it. Caroline Crump in her essay, 'Troubled Waters' in the exhibition catalogue, notes that in South Africa, we are faced with several challenges in connection with water quality. These include the problem of maintaining water quality in the face of the increasing problem of acid mine drainage, the threat of global warming and how this could worsen existing problems, as well as increase the incidence of droughts and floods in the country.

In 'Water, the [Delicate] Thread of Life', different artists show a profound response to environmental challenges, such as droughts, floods and pollution. Durant Sihlali's *Kliptown Floods* (1997) for example, depicts the devastating impact of flooding in Kliptown on the people living there. As with *Kliptown Floods*, Noria Mabasa's *Carnage II* (1988) also deals with catastrophe caused by excessive rainfall, possibly as a result of global warming.

Read the fact file on global warming and answer the following questions:

FACT FILE: Global warming and climate change

Global warming is the increase in the average temperature of the air close to the earth's surface and the oceans. This has occurred since the middle of the 20th century and is expected to continue. Global warming causes the sea levels to rise, the retreat of glaciers at the poles, species extinction due to shifts in temperature, changes in agricultural yields and more frequent occurrences of extreme weather events, including heat waves, droughts and heavy rainfall. Warming and related changes vary from region to region around the globe.

GLOSSARY WORD

## ACID MINE DRAINAGE

THE OUTFLOW OF ACIDIC WATER FROM A (USUALLY ABANDONED) COAL OR METAL MINE. THIS OCCURS BECAUSE MINING TAKES PLACE BELOW THE WATER LEVEL UNDERGROUND, SO WATER MUST BE CONTINUALLY PUMPED OUT TO PREVENT FLOODING. WHEN A MINE IS IN DISUSE, THE PUMPING CEASES AND WATER FLOODS THE MINE, AND IS EXPOSED TO ACIDIC ROCK, MAKING THE WATER ITSELF ACIDIC.

## TRY OUT

Without water, there would be no life on earth. There would be no animals and plants, and the planet would be a hostile wasteland. Can you imagine what the planet would look like without life? Your task is to make a painting, drawing or a collage depicting the earth as a wasteland, so conveying the idea that, without water, life would not be possible.

## Facts about water

- South Africa's tap water quality is among the best in the world, and is one of few developing countries where tourists do not need to buy bottled water.
- It is estimated that 12-14 million South Africans do not have access to safe, clean drinking water.
- If we continue at our present rate of water consumption, South Africa could run out of fresh water by 2040.
- Roughly 70% of an adult's body is made up of water.
- Somewhere between 70 and 75% of the earth's surface is covered with water.
- 97% of the water on the Earth is salt water, and only 3% is fresh water, most of which is frozen in glaciers and polar ice caps. The remaining unfrozen fresh water is mainly found as groundwater, with only a small fraction present above ground or in the air.
- You can survive about a month without food, but only 5-7 days without water.

## You can make a difference

These are some ideas about how you can save water in your community:

- **Re-use water. Instead of pouring used water down the drain, you can recycle water that has been used for bathing or washing dishes to water a garden or pot plants.**
- **Report water losses to your municipality. If you spot a leaking tap or burst pipe, tell an adult so they can report it immediately.**
- **Don't put anything down the toilet other than toilet paper. This saves water on flushing.**
- **If you are able to, choose to shower rather than run a bath. A bath uses about 200 litres of water; a shower can cut this down by 66%.**
- **If you do shower, place a bucket in your shower to collect water for the garden.**
- **Encourage your school to promote water conservation. If your school is in Johannesburg, ask a teacher to organise for Tappie, the water mascot, to visit your school to educate learners about saving water. Call 011 688 1451.**

## DID YOU KNOW?

On its journey to reach you, one cup of coffee requires 140 000 litres of water to make! This includes water used to grow the crop, harvest, process and transport the coffee beans.

FACT FILE: Water in the world

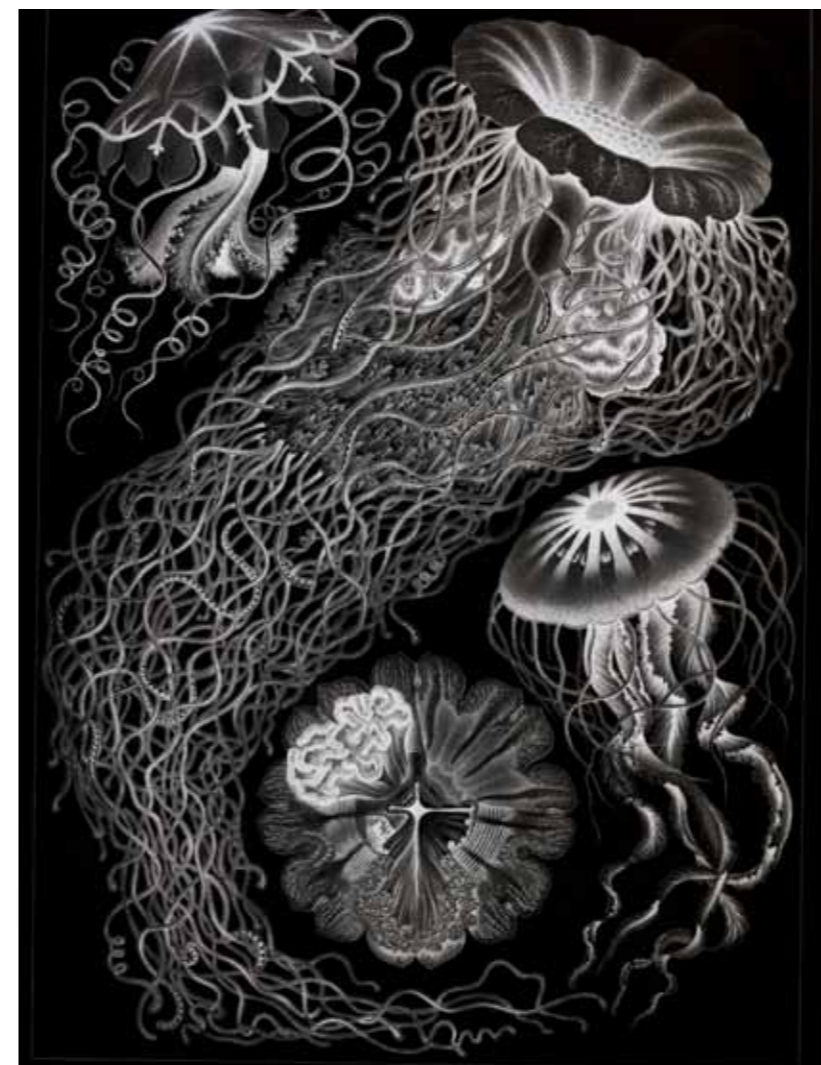
Water shortages are a serious and worrying problem, but too much water can be just as destructive! Flooding happens occasionally in South Africa, but we have recently seen reports on enormous damage caused by tsunamis in other parts of the world. Tsunamis are usually the result of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or other underwater explosions: these displace large bodies of water which results in a series of waves which are exceptionally large and forceful. A tsunami devastated the coast of Japan in March 2011, after a strong earthquake affected the region. The worst tsunami in history occurred on 26 December 2004 as a result of an earthquake in Indonesia. The tsunami affected Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives, Somalia, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Thailand, and took 230,000 lives.

## TRY OUT

You have been asked to create a poster raising awareness about a water issue affecting your community. Choose one problem to focus on and one way in which you want the public viewing the poster to help. How will you illustrate this in a bold, simple way, so that people will understand your message without having to stop to read the poster? Make some sketches in your visual diary before making your poster.



Noria Mabasa, *Carnage II (Natal Flood Disaster)*, 1988. Fig tree wood. 79 x 197 x 219 cm. Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery



Ernst Haeckel, *Various Species of Semaestomeae (the most familiar order of jellyfishes)*, Lithograph, plate 8

# The gestures of water

Artist Cyril Coetzee has carefully selected botanical, zoological and geological specimens from the Life Sciences Museum and Bleloch Geological Museum, University of the Witwatersrand, for his installation on the exhibition. All the specimens are related in some way to water, and Coetzee observes that the typical shapes formed by the flow of water are repeated in many living organisms, especially aquatic forms.

- Look at the Maiden Hair Fern and jellyfish images, and Walter Oltmann's *Shell*. What similarities do you notice?

GLOSSARY WORD

## AQUATIC

RELATING TO, LIVING IN OR NEARBY WATER, OR TAKING PLACE IN WATER



Walter Oltmann, *Shell*, 2011. Aluminium wire. 82 x 130 x 50 cm. Collection: the artist and the Goodman Gallery

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Circles, spirals and curves are shapes that are commonly found in nature, especially in aquatic life. Try to think of examples of these from your own neighbourhood and environment. Now look at man-made structures – your school building, your family home, cars, buses and furniture. What sorts of shapes do these take?

## REFERENCES

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Karl Blossfeldt, *Maiden Hair Fern/Adiantum pedatum*, 1994. Photographic plate

## ABOUT THESE WORKSHEETS

This educational supplement accompanies the exhibition 'Water, the [Delicate] Thread of Life'. In it artworks are explored by means of thought-provoking questions, fact files, glossary words and practical projects. Discussion topics help learners to develop a critical attitude to art, rather than just a grasp of media, styles, subject matter and themes. The questions also refer learners to other African and European art styles, drawing on previous educational supplements in the Gallery Learner Series. These worksheets are designed primarily for grade 10-12 learners, but are easily adapted for younger learners. Together with the introductory text, they are a stand-alone educational resource on water, its role in, and impact on, our lives and the planet.

### Note on assessment

We recommend that educators develop assessment activities based on this learning experience. Assessment ensures that learners integrate and apply knowledge and skills. It also provides teachers with indications of achievement. When assessment is focused, say in the form of continuous feedback over a year, learners understand more clearly what they are required to know. Self-assessment helps learners set personal goals, evaluate performance and build self-confidence. Peer assessment encourages a sense of responsibility. When planning an assessment programme, school teachers need to refer to 'Learning Outcomes and Standards for the Visual Arts', as envisaged in the National Curriculum Statement.

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