

Creating sacred spaces: A study of storyworld building

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on artworks that Colette Lotz produced for the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition. The article is structured along the lines of pre-production, production, and post-production as the practice-led methodological approach. The works were made using photographs of clouds and other structures taken by the artist and main author,¹ and rendered digitally into symmetrical reflections. Thus, sacred spaces were created – the works predominantly show skyscapes and are therefore “celestial”. Because of this structuring of the works, the imagery becomes abstract and otherworldly, appearing like Rorschach Inkblot tests. We relate the works to sacred spaces as storyworlds. The term storyworld stresses the constructive and imaginative nature of the works.

Keywords: Digitally manipulated photography, liminal spaces, postclassical narratology, practice-led research, Rorschach inkblot test, sacred space, skyscape, storyworlds.

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Introduction

We not only live in the world but also have an image or picture of the world. People in any society exist within a system of signs through which they identify themselves and understand their world. This process is conditioned in part by fundamental beliefs in God or about the nature of the human condition (Sheldrake 2000:3).

... the present intellectual experience of place has been characterised as a movement through a wasteland among the ruins of former theories of meaning (Sheldrake 2000:2)

Several scholars have explored the spiritual, religious, and mythological aspects of spaces to make sense of human existence on Earth (Certeau 1966; Sheldrake 1995; Sheldrake 2000). This exploration gave rise to various expressions of the sacred – and to existential responses to the condition of being human. The artist's fascination² with clouds relates to a yearning for spiritual truths about existence and reality, and establishing her place in this world amidst its harsh realities. Thus, titles of the artworks, such as *Faith*, *Power*, *Contemplation*, *Peace* and *Ruins, new beginnings* reflect this yearning. Although some artworks contain clear references to physical locations, the subject matter mainly comprises cloudscapes in and around the artist's hometown, in Potchefstroom, South Africa. Clouds can have a mystical character, and because they are mostly seen in the sky, there can also be associations of the divine or the celestial, and thus the sacred, with clouds.

The images of clouds and some landscape elements discussed in this article are encoded with personal and spiritual associations and meanings. These artworks, layered with various cloud formations, can spark interpretations of a symbolic and metaphysical nature that invite reflection and meditation on notions of the sacred. These scenes thus function as spaces that are imbued with half-formed meanings and open-ended possibilities. We argue that these skyscapes represent a sense of sanctity, relating to the sense that our humanity is connected to “something bigger and beyond us”.

This article sets out to elucidate the process of creating the works as well as reflections on these works created for the 2023 exhibition *Stairways and Ruins* under the ambit of the research entity ViNCO (Visual Narratives and Creative Outputs through Interdisciplinary Research)³. The aim is to trace the creative process of making the works and reflect on the works, to explore ways in which the works invite one into a contemplative and meditative mind space.

The article unfolds as follows: we start with a brief introduction of the works, followed by unpacking the methodological steps of our practice-led approach. These include pre-production, production, and post-production, as set out in Combrink and Marley (2009). The last sections of the article comprise the post-production analyses of the works.

Introducing the works

In the work titled *Ruins, new beginnings* (Figure 1), the reflected landscape divides the earth-like sphere into a dramatic, thunderous scene in which the viewer might recognise a bird-like reflection that could resemble an owl.



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Colette Lotz, *Ruins, new beginnings*, 2023. Digital printed photography. 600mm radius. Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

Traditional and cultural symbolism connects an owl with wisdom, but seeing an owl is also sometimes associated with a bad omen in religious terms⁴. Scripture relates the owl to uncleanness, ruin, and desolation – a vigilant bird of prey living in solitude. As a harbinger of the spiritual realm, the owl can also relay a sense of wisdom that suggests a flight from the ruins of life's challenges.

The other four artworks, *Faith*, *Power*, *Contemplation*, and *Peace* are thematically linked to spiritual wellness and relate to contemplation and reflection in an existential sense. *Faith*, for instance, has no physical earthly structures except for lines of tiny trees in the shape of a cross in the centre of the picture plane. The image of a cross is not clearly visible, but the impression is there.



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Colette Lotz, *Faith*, 2023. Digital printed photography. 53 cm x 63 cm (framed). Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

Faith is ‘the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen’, according to Scripture (Hebrews 11:1 NKJV). In a world filled with turmoil, one may feel that one’s faith is often tested.

Most things in the spiritual realm are unseen. In this spirit, this artwork creates a sense of the unseen angelic realm and beyond. The strange forms of the clouds are reminiscent of angelic forms with suggestions of wings and flight that are bathed in celestial light.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Colette Lotz, *Peace*, 2023. Digital printed photography. 53 cm x 63 cm (framed). Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

Peace (Figure 3), with its layered appearance, combines earthly and heavenly spheres of existence, creating an in-between, liminal space in which one feels neither grounded nor in flight. The structure suspended in the middle of the picture plane is an old shed and bushes on the smallholding where I live. Living on a smallholding, outside of the business of town activities, provides me with a sense of peace, calm and love of nature. Superimposed in the work are man-made structures, such as electrical pole lines and overhead train lines, indicative of human interference in nature. Thus, there is tension between the peacefulness of nature and clouds against the pervasive and penetrating presence of power lines and other manufactured structures.

Finding peace in this chaotic world is difficult, as one is often overwhelmed by fear and anxiety of the unknown. The notion of peace, for many, goes hand-in-hand with faith. I believe that without faith, one cannot have peace, only anxiety and fear. We are not exempt from troubles in this world; the ultimate peace to calm the everyday storms can be found in meditating on the spiritual.



FIGURE **Nº 4**



Colette Lotz, *Power*, 2023. Digital printed photography. 53 cm x 63 cm (framed). Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

Power is the literal subject matter of this work, when considering the overhead electrical lines, pylons, and street poles in this artwork. Lights and electricity are crucial elements for a sound economy and social well-being. At the time of making (2023), the national power provider ESKOM often failed to provide sustainable electricity, and South Africa continues to face ongoing industrial decline and poor economic growth. According to Raine Adams (2024), in 2023, 335 days were marred by electricity interruptions (called load shedding).

Like many other works in this series, the composition of this artwork is based on a cross formation that hinges on associations with Christ and redemption.



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Colette Lotz, *Contemplation*, 2023. Digital printed photography. 53 cm x 63 cm (framed). Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

The work *Contemplation* shows a vertically reflected skyscape and horizontally reflected branches of a tree and television antennas. The result is a superimposition of different planes of man-made and natural realities, resulting in patterns and contrasts. In a sense, a new fictional world is created, neither suspended nor grounded, but rather spiritual. This leaves different (and liminal) planes that invite a sense of reflection and contemplation. In *Contemplation*, I urge the viewer to dig deep into the spiritual self and ‘transcend the boundaries of religion and religious dogma’ and arrive ‘at a personal understanding of a situatedness in this world and a connection to the here and now of existence to the beyond, the unknown and the unknowable’ (Mazumdar & Mazumdar 1993: 239). This may incite an awareness or yearning for the spiritual dimension of our existence.

Because the photographs that constituted the raw material of the works were manipulated into images of bilateral symmetry, all the works have the aspect of Rorschach Inkblot Test images, on which we elaborate in the last sections of the article.

The brief introductions to the works above suggest several salient themes that guided, rather intuitively, the production of the works and the later, more scholarly reflections upon these. These themes are the sacred, the liminal and the Rorschach blot-like appearance of the artworks.

The following section sets out the methodological approach of the article and elaborates on the production cycles of the artworks produced for this exhibition.

Practice-led research methodology

In the context of the larger *Stairways and Ruins* project, researchers of the NWU ViNCO research niche and invited artists followed a collaborative approach. This approach to practice-led research was developed specifically for large collaborative projects such as *Stairways and Ruins* by Combrink and Marley (2009). The process begins with pre-production (conceptualising the theme, inviting artists to submit ideas, and having workshops on the theme and the aims of practice-led research). This is followed by the production phase, where artists produce creative outputs and present an exhibition of their works. Finally, post-production entails reflecting on the creative outputs, often in the form of scholarly articles, as is the case with the present endeavour. The same process that was followed by the overall *Stairways and Ruins* project was also followed for the structure of this art-making process and subsequent reflection on the process.

During the pre-production phase of the *Stairways and Ruins* project, discussions about possible themes took place to determine the project's focus. The title of the project, the emerging themes, and possible approaches – practical and theoretical – were then distributed to interested contributors in the form of a brief and a call for participation. As part of the pre-production phase of the methodological approach and based on the *Stairways and Ruins* exhibition brief, possible practical outcomes, medium, thematic and theoretical options, and time management were also determined.

In a practice-led research context, the focus is essentially on the creative knowledge produced by and embodied in the artwork. Thus, through practice-led research, new knowledge is gained through producing creative artworks (that maintain their agency as creative outputs and contribute to the larger field of knowledge).

The process of creating the artworks under discussion in the present article reveals the initial intuitive nature of the production of these artworks. The creative urge often derives from sometimes unconscious ideas and inspiration – what one may call tacit knowledge, which provides an inclining or creative spark to produce an artwork (cf. Biggs & Büchler

2007). For that reason, it makes sense to use a practice-led research approach that focuses on the conceptualisation and making of the artwork and, subsequently, on the knowledge produced – in other words, looking first at the creative spark (as a function of pre-production), and the actual process of making (namely production) as well as a final reflection on the works in a more scholarly sense (as the present article sets out to do, constituting the phase of post-production) (Combrink & Marley 2009).

In the pre-production phase, the brief sparked my interest in extending a series of photographs of clouds, presented in reflections, into artworks that represent storyworlds as sacred spaces. My initial vision for this brief was of a staircase reaching into the clouds, reminiscent of Jacob's ladder, referring to a dream reflected in the book of Genesis in the Bible. In this dream, Jacob sees a ladder that reaches up to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, and God speaking to him. When Jacob awakens the next morning, he names the sacred place Beth-el, which means 'House of God' (Genesis 28: 16-19 NKJV). A church is often referred to as a 'House of God', representing His divine omnipresence in spiritual form. The connection that I made relates to the spiritual notion of having a metaphysical bridge, ladder or axis mundi connecting earth or the material world with the heavenly, celestial realm, represented by my cloudscapes. I saw the potential of establishing a spiritual connection between heaven and earth by combining photographs of the sky, clouds, and man-made structures to promote this connection. This notion that the natural, visible world 'contains hidden, spiritual meanings that can be unlocked in the higher consciousness of an artist and conveyed to an audience by means of a symbolic language' (GHDI, n.d.), is also the premise of, for instance, German Romantic art. Within this tradition and reminiscent of the search for a connection between the natural and symbolic, *Small morning* (1808) – part of an incomplete four-part cycle called *The times of day* by the artist Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810), shows correlations with my body of work. The vertically symmetrical artwork portrays budding flowers, musical instruments, and small children resembling cherubs, seemingly moving upwards towards the sky, almost like the angels in Jacob's ladder. In the foreground of the altar-like centrepiece lies a baby covered in the first rays of the morning sun. This work is relatable to my work in that it alludes to the cycle of life and the nature of existence.

The mysticism associated with skyscapes and cloud formations has fascinated me for a long time. For months, I had been photographing cloud formations and landscape scenery, inspired mainly by the breathtaking, thunderous clouds that define the skies of the North-West Province (in South Africa). Living on a smallholding outside of town, I often find these scenes to be an escape from my busy life of work and taking care of children. During the isolation period of the Covid-19 pandemic, being housebound, these scenes provided a sense of sanity and calm in uncertain times – a connection to 'something bigger' that grew stronger over time. This mystical notion of realising one's smallness

compared to the vast, majestic universe seemed to invite me to try to capture something of the essence of these scenes. This realisation enticed me to consider manipulating these images into more complex, multi-layered artworks.

The second phase of the methodological approach, namely production, involves the actual execution of the artwork. During the making phase, I took photographs with my cell phone camera, which I found adequate for the purpose of getting raw photographic material. At the initial stage, the photographs were not intentionally geared towards a perfect technical and artistic end result, but rather attempted to capture the drama and ambience of the scenery. However, the potential of these photographs to be developed into artworks with layered meanings was soon noticed. In the experimentation process, I used a software application to manipulate the photographs in various ways, including experiments combining and superimposing various landscape images (see Figure 6).



FIGURE **Nº 6**



Colette Lotz, Untitled experiments with photography in Adobe Photoshop, 2023. Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

The results were, in most instances, unexpected and fascinating. The most striking results, however, emerged when photographs were manipulated to obtain a bilateral symmetry of two identical halves (see Figure 7).

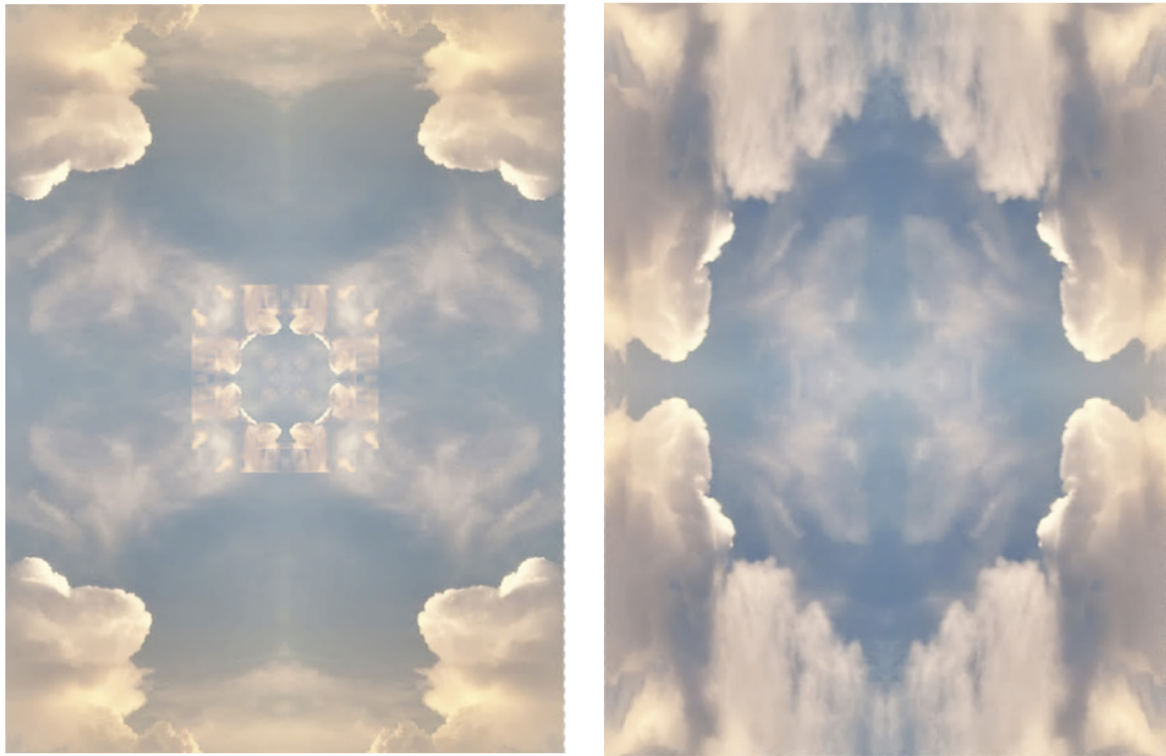


FIGURE **Nº 7**



Colette Lotz, Experimentations with symmetrical applications of photography in Adobe Photoshop, 2023. Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

These symmetrical reflections seemed otherworldly, removed from the reality of the original scenes. Different shapes and symbols could be observed, befitting a new imaginary world. The use of symmetry was fortuitous, although it was initially not planned during pre-production. Instead, I stumbled upon this as a device, but I realised that the bilateral symmetry removed the images from the sphere of the actual into the realm of the possible. Symmetry is a form of repetition because the two halves of the work repeat precisely, in a bilateral formation. Usually, things in nature do not repeat without some form of alteration; hence, Genette (1980:114) refers to precise repetitions as abstractions that deviate from the natural. Since the images are bilaterally ‘repeated’ exactly, these can be read as abstractions that point to a different realm governed by possibilities of negation. In his book *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Gilles Deleuze also purports that repetition is a way of experiencing difference and creating new forms. Deleuze’s understanding of repetition can be best understood by contrasting it to generality, which, in turn, refers to events that are connected through cycles, equalities, and laws. Most phenomena that can be directly described by science are generalities. However, exact repetition is not natural – Deleuze links such repetition to unique events. In art, repetition disrupts the natural order of things, creating the possibility of the metaphysical because it creates a

sense of distance from natural laws and norms, even while re-enacting them. It hinges on (im)possibility and memory (Deleuze 1968).

This production process initially did not involve major manipulation of the photographs, apart from photoshopping them into symmetrical formations. The imagery became more intentionally encoded as the experiments developed into multiple layered effects (physically overlaid in Adobe Photoshop). The realisation that I wanted to bridge the divide between heaven and earth resulted in considering more human-made (earthly) elements in my photographs. I also experimented anew with the superimposition of different landscapes, trees, buildings, and structures in the context of this symmetrical manipulation, further resulting in abstract scenes. There were recognisable shapes, structures and symbols that provided multiple cues for interpretation. The results were further enhanced with different layer effects in Adobe Photoshop that contributed to the specific mood I wanted to obtain. Some effects appeared softer, whereas dramatic ‘scenes’ demanded stronger colours and contrasting effects (see Figure 8).

These steps represent the meaning-encoding process, where certain elements were highlighted, and others were made to appear more subtle. By this stage in the process, I usually had a strong inkling of what the subject matter could suggest – liminal aspects,

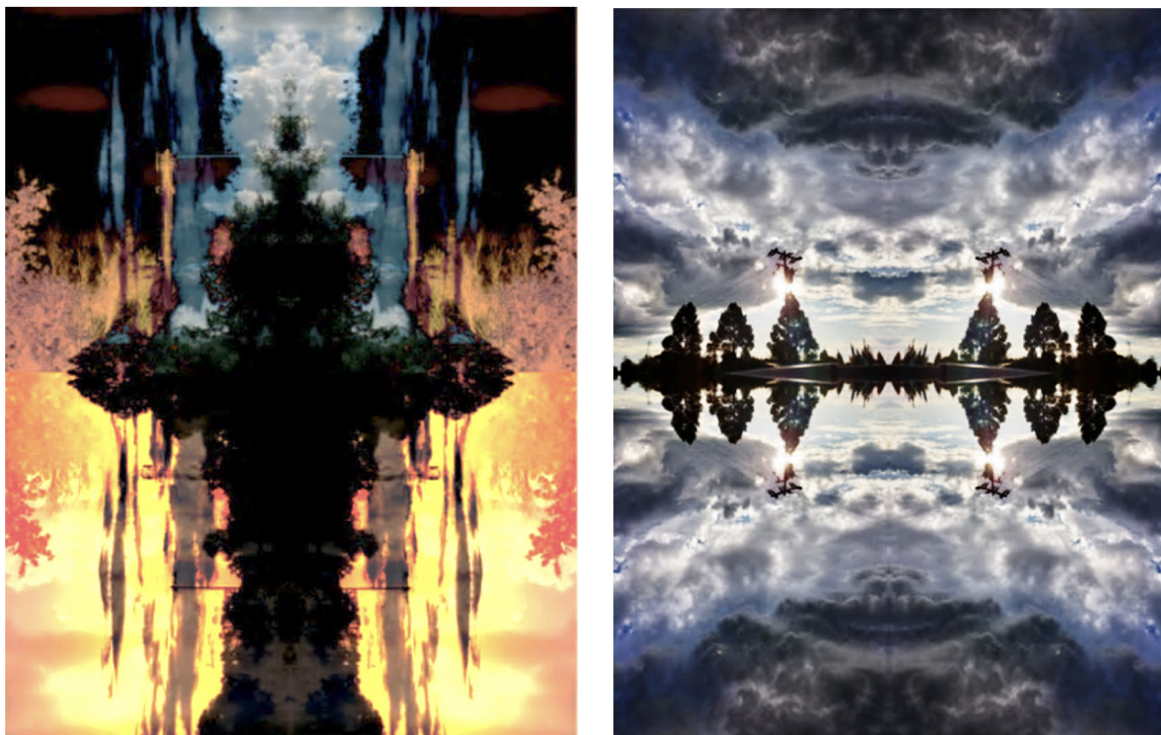


FIGURE **Nº 8**



Colette Lotz, Experimentations with symmetrical applications of photography, together with superimposition of layers of photographs in Adobe Photoshop, 2023. Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

Rorschach-like suggestions, and most centrally, a sense of the sacred – all bound into abstractions that brought about otherworldly associations. The works assumed the aspect of storyworlds, as elaborated later in the article.

The selection of finalised digital artworks was saved at an optimal resolution and printed in colour on 200 gsm semi-gloss poster paper (see Figures 1-5). The 53cm x 63cm prints were then framed with simple white mountboards and thin, black wooden frames, not to distract from the imagery, although *Ruins, new beginnings*, in my opinion, required a round frame (see Figure 9). The decision to print the works instead of, for example, displaying them as projections was based on the gallery's physical limitations, but also because the printed versions allow for a sense of intimacy when viewing the works up close.



FIGURE N° 9



Colette Lotz, *Power* (left) and *Ruins, new beginnings* (right) framed examples, 2023. Courtesy of Colette Lotz.

As noted, the artworks were exhibited at the NWU Gallery, Potchefstroom, as part of the *Stairways and Ruins* research project (see Figure 10).



FIGURE **Nº 10**



Exhibition space, *Stairways and Ruins*, 17 July to 15 September, 2023. North-West University's Art Gallery, North-West University campus, Potchefstroom. Screenshots by author/artist.

The final stage of the project, namely post-production, involved reflecting on the works, culminating in the writing of journal articles to document the process and contribute to a creative and scholarly knowledge bank of practice-led work. These reflections follow in the subsequent sections of this article.

Storyworlds as a framework for interpretation

The artworks can, as noted, be regarded as storyworlds, within the ambit of postclassical narratology. Postclassical narratology entails reworking and expanding salient narratological concepts (such as storyworlds) so that these concepts can find application in contexts other than text-based narratives (see Ionescu 2019). Thus, narratological tools and concepts can be used to interpret opera, visual arts, and the like in a postclassical narratological context (see Nünning 2009:53 et seq.).

Pavel (1986) introduced the concept of a storyworld in the context of classical narratology, which we, in the spirit of postclassical narratology, adopt for the present purposes of working with visual texts. Like a literary storyworld, the visual storyworlds established in the artworks can be regarded as narrative-like instances that are not direct representations of reality, but coherent and imaginative universes created through various meaningful cues. A storyworld has its own logic and rules, distinct from the real world, so that a viewer or reader can immerse themselves in the fictional reality suggested by the text – including, here, visual texts.

The visual cues relating to tensions emanating from the use of man-made structures and natural elements such as trees and clouds are handled intuitively by the artist – these present open-ended spaces or states of being. The interpreter activates the reading process by reflecting on the works' cues to arrive at constructs of the storyworlds in an imaginative process.

Storyworlds relate to the notion of space, although they are not synonymous with space, because a storyworld encapsulates all the facets related to spatial understanding in a text. Ryan *et al* (2016:3-6) differentiate between different kinds of narrative space: the space that serves as context, the space taken by the text itself, and the spatial form of text. Ryan (2012) elaborates by categorising narrative space to include 'spatial frames', 'settings', 'story spaces', 'narrative [or story-] world' and 'narrative universe'. The storyworld as universe is based on the assumption that the artwork represents the actual world and that it is supplemented by 'counterfactual worlds constructed by characters as beliefs, wishes, fears, speculations, hypothetical thinking, dreams and fantasies' (Ryan *et al* 2016:25; Ryan 1991), thus again reiterating the imaginative process of reading the artwork. The works invite an awareness of how space (inner and outer space), place (as a tangible, real position in the world), and the fictionalised versions of space and place constitute a new and abstracted storyworld.

Furthermore, a storyworld comes into being by being imagined as a 'coherent, unified ontologically full and materially existing geographical entity' (Ryan *et al* 2016:24). Wherever gaps in terms of the relation to "reality" emerges and the spaces represented in the works seem "impossible", the interpreter can imaginatively co-construct the storyworlds suggested by the works. These gaps will be filled by the interpreter's real-world and fictional-world knowledge in a reception-like fashion (cf. Iser 1972). In the work *Power* (Figure 4), for instance, the presence of power lines, pylons and the Mooirivier Mall (Potchefstroom), suspended in mid-air amongst sky and clouds, suspends this scene between reality and fantasy. The symmetrical appearance of the image enhances this sense.

Therefore, we propose that in manipulating the images into symmetrical constellations, they become abstractions that fictionalise their content – they become storyworlds. Storyworlds, as these relate to spaces and places, are explored next.

Storyworlds, place and space

Space relates to geography, but also to disciplines like physics, mathematics, and psychology, as well as transmedial dimensions that refer to spaces. Place, in turn, refers to the qualities that make spaces unique and distinctive with regard to how environments

and settings have been moulded and shaped by human action and habitation (Ryan *et al* 2016:7). Place also refers to spaces that are imbued with ‘the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious’ (Sheldrake 2000:1). The concept of ‘sense of place’, according to Ryan *et al* (2016:7), relates to the attachments that people develop or experience in particular environments, from the microscale of the home (or a room) to the neighbourhood, city, state, or nation. The works presented here relate to the physical places where the photographs were taken. However, after being processed and manipulated, various interpretations of storied possibilities and spiritual associations with these places emerged – as also suggested by the manipulation of place references that became abstracted spatialities.

Our concern, therefore, is with how one can read the works in spatial terms, but also in a more abstract and existential manner. Space is often understood in a metaphorical sense. For example, cyberspace can be perceived as an abstract domain; in her pivotal publication, *The pearly gates of Cyberspace: A history of space from Dante to the internet*, Margaret Wertheim (1999) highlights correlations between cyberspace and the spatial dualism of the Middle Ages. This era was characterised by a shift from the belief that space is only physical. Religious beliefs actuated a non-physical, spiritual space metaphorically paralleled with the material world – ‘a separate and unique part of reality’ (Wertheim 1999:229). Wertheim demonstrates how the concept of cyberspace is an accumulation of a long history of imagined spaces. A story space functions similarly when regarded as a storyworld – it is an imagined space with various and multifaceted possibilities. We explore some of these spatialities in the sections that follow.

Liminality, liminal spatialities: Storyworlds

Looking at the works, it is clear that they represent spaces, places and features that are in some way grounded in reality – they are photographs of ‘real’ and observable elements that have been manipulated. In the manipulating process, the images lost their ‘reality’ – they show symmetrical versions of a world where the normal expectations of photographic images as representative of some form of ‘reality’ are undermined. In this way, they assume an aspect of the otherworldly and thus hinge on what Genette (1980) refers to as repetition-as-abstraction. They become, as we note above, storyworlds.

This means that the images are distinct from but nonetheless based on reality (cf. Pavel, 1986). As storyworlds, the images take their cues from the observable world but transcend the visible to become mental constructs that viewers put together to make sense of them. Being storyworlds, the works, therefore, have tangential relationships with the real and

the imaginary, drawing on both. Since they are neither real nor imaginary, the works have qualities that hinge on the liminal. In this sense, the notion of in-betweenness is salient and also underscores the tensions between several dualities.

These dualities can be elaborated as follows: The images suggest and reference both heaven and earth; thus, celestial and terrestrial evocations are brought to bear when contemplating them. However, they are neither of these and also both – earth and sky, tangible and intangible. These dualisms create a sense of floating and ephemerality, which can also be related to the liminal. As such, the viewer experiences a feeling of disorientation, of being neither here nor there. In this way, the works establish a spatial awareness that is not, in the first instance, located in any particular physical space. Instead, the spaces become emotional and conceptual, even though the source material (the photographs) speaks of a very real space – indeed, a place – where the pictures were taken. Thus, while the original source images were ‘real’, they become fictional storied spaces through the process of digital manipulation. Therefore, the images retain some aspect of place as a tangible, specific, and relational entity. However, the places in the images are, through manipulation, both transformed and transformative.

The liminal and the Rorschach Inkblot Test

One can thus speak of the works as suggestive of liminal spaces. A further element that has a bearing on the liminal qualities of the works is their symmetrical appearance – the ‘real’ (where absolute symmetry is absent) has been transformed into perfect symmetrical halves of the same image, thus creating an impossible world.

This symmetry and appearance are reminiscent of the Rorschach Inkblot Test, a psychological assessment tool used to evaluate emotional functioning, personality characteristics, and even thought disorders.

The Rorschach Inkblot Test⁵ is a projective psychological test instrument involving subjects describing what they see when shown a series of inkblots. Their responses are then interpreted to assess aspects of personality, emotional functioning, or certain mental disorders. It was developed by the Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach, who published his book *Psychodiagnostik* in 1921, in which this test is put forward. The test assumes that how an individual interprets the inkblots, which are ambiguous in appearance, can reveal something about their personality and unconscious thinking (Exner 1993). Ten standardised inkblots are used, all bilaterally symmetrical, in black and grey. When conducting a Rorschach test, a person is shown a series of symmetrical inkblot images (see Figure 11) and then has to describe what they see, with the understanding that there



FIGURE **Nº 11**



Rorschach.org (est. 1996). *Rorschach Blot Card 4*. Screenshot by author/artist. .

are almost infinite possible interpretations of a given image. Aspects such as emotional states, motivations and interpersonal relationships can be analysed employing this test (Exner 1993; Garb *et al* 2005).

Of interest for the present article are the appearance of the inkblots used in the Rorschach Test (bilaterally symmetrical and ambiguous in terms of form), as well as its associations with the unconscious and emotional states. Like the storyworlds in the works, where interpretations are subjective and open-ended, the Rorschach test asks the viewer to delve into their subconscious (Rorschach 1951).

Because a Rorschach image evokes ambiguity, transition, and subjective interpretation – key features of liminality – it can also suggest the liminal. For example, the form of a Rorschach inkblot hinges on the recognisable and the abstractly imaginative – the same happens when the works are viewed.

Similarly, the works are both recognisable with some meaning-making concrete cues, but they gain an abstract aspect in their symmetry and other manipulations, creating uncertainty when looking at them. Also, the works demonstrate iconographies of both earth and sky and nature and man-made structures that work in tandem to create

ambiguous storyworlds. Furthermore, the significance of subjective perception is salient in a Rorschach image, and this is also true for the works, where personal associations with the cues in the work govern their interpretation.

In terms of the dualisms outlined above, a Rorschach image has liminal qualities in terms of the tension between the suggestions of fleeting images of familiar objects that quickly dissolve and gain an abstract aspect. In this dynamic, the known and unknown intersect to produce a liminal experience. In this dualism between the known and the unknown, the works similarly produce a liminal space.

In another sense, viewing Rorschach images can facilitate processes of self-reflection or reveal subconscious thoughts so that the viewer of such an image experiences a transitional mental state – this is an existential experience where hidden aspects of the psyche can emerge. The same holds true for the works, because viewing them generates a sense of the invisible, and of the transitional.

A further liminal tension or duality present in the Rorschach image is that of balance versus order. While the symmetry in the image relates to order, the chaotic blots suggest disorder, so that a tension between balance and instability resonates with themes of transformation and duality. Similarly, the works seem to indicate an orderly storyworld in their symmetry, but their ‘impossibility’ renders them strangely chaotic and disconcerting. The very balance emanating from the duplication of right and left, which may seem to sustain order, creates disorientation.

The most salient tangential point between Rorschach images and the works is their liminal sense of timelessness and placelessness. As such, there is a further sense of ambiguity, which relates to the experience of the liminal. Like a Rorschach image, the works do not speak of any particular temporal or spatial context, having lost this spatial and temporal anchoring in the process of digital manipulation. Indeed, the framing of the works (in actual frames) and their placement in a gallery add to their liminal spatiality (see O’Doherty 1986 [1976] for a discussion on the liminality of the gallery space).

Creating sacred spaces: bringing the liminal and the Rorschach into play: Hierotopy and hierophany

Relating to the notion that the works are suggestive of liminal spaces, and given the negation of peculiar temporal or spatial anchors brought about by the Rorschach-like symmetry, the works also assume an aspect of the sacred or the spiritual.

While sacred spaces may be associated with specific, tangible *lieux de mémoire* (cf. Nora 1989), the works demonstrate a duality in this regard – they derive from the “real” world but have transcended the real in their symmetrical becoming. Therefore, instead of suggesting the sacred through actual memory or historical significance (compare, for example, battlefields and other sites of memory – cf. Nora 1989), the sacred comes into being through the impossibility and fleeting nature of the images. In this sense, the works do not represent distinct physical spatial locations but spiritually immersive spatialities. This sense relates to what Sheldrake (2000:1) refers to as place that transforms into spatial experiences with a spiritual, even a theological, dimension.

We briefly explore two terms useful to gauge the nature of this spiritual dimension in the works: hierotopy and hierophany. Lidov (2021) speaks of hierotopies and explains that the concept has two Greek roots: *hieros*, to denote the sacred, and *topos*, meaning place or space. In short, hierotopy refers to the creation of sacred spaces as a special form of creativity – in a research-related sense, hierotopy guides the researcher to explore and reveal examples of this type of creativity. Lidov (2021) refers to a hierotopy as spaces beyond the physical; these spatialities are (actual) environments that are imbued with spiritual and symbolic meaning and become narrative storyworlds. According to Lidov (2021), examples of such worlds can include a church where mosaics, the choreography of rituals and icons can collaborate to create a narrative storyworld relating to a theological theme. In essence, hierotopies are sacred spaces that engage the imagination to sustain spiritual narratives.

Thus, hierotopy relates to the physical spaces and places where the photographs were taken – but, as we note, the works suggest spatialities that are more imaginary, fictionalised and transcendent. The works create a new spatial reality. Thus, on a further level of reading, Eliade’s notion of the hierophany is useful (as elucidated by Tarasov 2024). *Hierophany* extends from hierotopy, and is elucidated as such:

Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different (Eliade 1959:26 in Tarasov 2024).

Indeed, Eliade (in Sheldrake 2000:5) believes that a sacred space is something of an *axis mundi*, the centre of the world – a kind of Jacob’s ladder separating heaven and earth. For the present reading, the terms hierotopy and hierophany thus encapsulate aspects of the sacred as emerging from both the making and reading of the works. Compare, for example, Lidov’s (2021:64, 81) contention that there is an interplay between hierophany (the mystical phenomenon) and hierotopy (the actually made spatial milieu) – and these have a bearing on both the act of creating these spaces, as well as the analysis and experience of such spaces.

Therefore, the works represent the actual world, depart from the world, create new worlds, and in the process, create spiritual spaces – in which the viewer is invited to make sense of these spaces as storyworlds, with their own ‘rules’ and possibilities. These storyworlds, as we argue, become spiritual spaces. However, what makes a space or place spiritual or sacred? The spiritual nature of a thing or a place relates to how humans invest it with such value. The spiritual is, of course, not bound to official sacred spaces (surrounded by a sea of, say, secularism) – rather, the mundane and the everyday (such as a simple landscape) can be invested with emotional and spiritual significance. The semi-tamed spaces of a smallholding and its skies that constituted the raw material of the works (the photographs) also play into the notion that nature has an inherent spiritual presence.

Conclusion

With this article, we wished to explore the creation of storyworlds that pertain to a sense of the sacred in the series of works by Colette Lotz. As storyworlds, the works depart from the “real” to bring about universes with their own logic, requiring imaginative co-construction of these storyworlds in the viewer’s mind. We determined that the sacred essence of the works relates to aspects of the liminal, which was imbued into the works through various means. Firstly, the dichotomies of sky/earth and nature/construction in the works point to a tension in which the works hinge on the liminal. These dichotomies bring about ambiguity and indeterminacy. A further element is the Rorschach-like bilateral symmetry found in the works, which was achieved through digital manipulation. This aspect of the works helped to bring about a sense of timelessness and spacelessness. From here, we explored further aspects of the sacred, where a sense of spirituality emerged, and the works seemed to depart from ordinary logic to become realms of contemplation and reflection on the spiritual and the meditative.

The present article hopes to contribute towards the application and scholarship of practice-led research in the sense of (1) a practical exploration of devices such as symmetry towards exploring issues of the sacred and the liminal vis-à-vis playful suggestions of Rorschach-like imagery in digitally manipulated art, and (2) demonstrating a collaborative approach towards post-production reflection where the artist collaborates with a colleague as a co-author (cf. Combrink & Marley 2009).

Notes

1. The body of work created for the *Stairways and Ruins* (2023) exhibition paved the way for more layered experimentation, culminating in a solo exhibition by the artist and primary author of this article at the Momentum Aardklop visual arts showcase (2024). The exhibition, named *Cumulonimbus*, was nominated for best visual arts exhibition during the festival. This further successful exploration of the theme and practice-led approach followed by the artist, demonstrates the usefulness and relevance of the methodology applied to the work discussed in this article.
2. The main author of the article is Christian, and is the creator of the works. The secondary author holds a belief in the spiritual, but is not affiliated with a particular faith. The reflections and discussions presented in the present article are a synthesis of discussions and insights that emanated from working together on this text. Thus, when the pronoun “I” is used, the main author and artist are referenced, while “we” refers to the collaborative reflections of the authors.
3. <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/vinco/stairways-and-ruins-exhibition>
4. In the New King James version, the owl is mentioned five times – in Leviticus 11:16–18 it is noted that certain breeds of owl are not allowed to be eaten by Jews, as part of the Kosher dietary rules. Deuteronomy 14:15–17 reinforces this, referencing Kosher rules. The Psalmist in Psalm 102:6 expresses despair, saying that he feels like ‘an owl of the desert’. A ‘house full of owls’ in Isaiah 13:21 refers to a place of desolation after a catastrophe, while Isaiah 34:11 reinforces that owls will dwell in places of emptiness following a period of judgement.
5. Although the Rorschach Inkblot Test is regarded as fairly divisive (Garb *et al* 2005:97; Lilienfield *et al* 2001:82 *et seq.*; Milhura *et al* 2013:548-9) in terms of its actual diagnostic capabilities, it is regarded as useful as an assessment instrument in the field of psychology and especially for working with psychological disturbances.

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