

FROM THE DEPTHS DEEPLY BURIED

Emma Willemse





FROM THE DEPTHS DEEPLY BURIED

Emma Willemse

Reservoir Gallery
Oliewenhuis Art Museum
Bloemfontein

7 July to 30 August 2026

Thank you to:

The curator and staff of Oliewenhuis Art Museum

Kobus Moolman

Heléne van Aswegen

Heinrich Joemath, Spier Arts Trust and HUB Studios

Gillian Barrett from Timber Gill

Tanya Mayo and Dirk Roux from Format Framing

Victor van Aswegen

Gwen Miller

Jean Dreyer

Erynne de Bruyn

Rufaan de Bruyn

Rudolph Willemse

CONTENTS

2	List of Illustrations
6	<i>From the Depths Deeply Buried</i> : notes on the exhibition by Emma Willemse
8	The Archaeology of Absence by Kobus Moolman
20	Suspended Installations
30	<i>101 Ways to Long for a Home</i> as an Ecyclopaedia
38	Collaborations: <i>We Came with Bridges</i> <i>Displaced</i>
40	Bibliography
42	Artist's Biography

All artworks and images by Emma Willemse, except when credited otherwise.
Editing of texts by Kobus Moolman
Design, printing and construction of catalogue: Hélène van Aswegen.
TheBookWorkshop, Stellenbosch, June 2026

List of Illustrations

Fig 1. Emma Willemse in her studio. Still from *Displaced* (2020) by Victor van Aswegen, Film, 101 min. <https://displaced-thefilm.com> (accessed on 21 May 2026).

Fig 2. Emma Willemse, *De(part)* (2013). Installation view in the Lovell Gallery, Woodstock, Cape Town. Suspended installation, parquet floor blocks, steel cable, 4 x 1.2 x 1m. Photo by Tamzin Miller.

Fig 3. Emma Willemse, *101 Ways to Long for a Home* (2014 – 2026). Installation view (detail) at La Motte Ateljee, Franschhoek, 2026. Mixed media, size variable. Photo by Rudolph Willemse.

Fig 4. Emma Willemse, *Rupture III* (detail) (2017). Artist's book, parquet floor blocks, paper, 26 x 52 x 10cm.

Fig 5. Emma Willemse, *Living under the Bridge* (2021). Covers: parquet floor blocks. Inner: monotype and linocut on Fabriano, 36,7 x 65 x 5,5cm.

Fig 6. Emma Willemse, *The Book of Remains* (detail) (2017). Linocut and wooden shards on two colours Fabriano. 21 x 137 x 14,5cm.

Fig 7. Emma Willemse, *The Weeping Book* (2014). Covers: parquet floor blocks. Inner: giclée print from digital collage on Hahnemühle, 22,2 x 195 x 12,5cm.

Fig 8. Dane Mitchell, *Post Hoc* (installation view) (2019). Mixed media installation, size variable. Palazzina Canonica, New Zealand Pavilion, 58th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. Courtesy the artist and Mossman Gallery. <https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/events/artist-dane-mitchell> (accessed on 12 May 2026).

Fig 9. The Dufuna canoe being excavated. AlTakruri, Egyptsearch Reloaded. Sv "Africa's history in water crafts, canoes 2 ships", 3 October 2010. <http://egyptsearchreloaded.proboards.com/thread/591/africas-history-water-crafts-canoes> (accessed on 12 May 2026).

Fig 10. Emma Willemse, *The White Paper Boat* (detail) (2024). Suspended installation, found mokoro, handmade paper, found antique printing press, 60 x 265 x 40cm.

Fig 11. Emma Willemse, *Incision* (detail) (2019). Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, Eucalyptus bark, mutton cloth, 390 x 50 x 68cm.

Fig 12. Emma Willemse, *Ruin* (2018). Parquet floor blocks and scrim fabric, 12,5 x 110,5 x 12,5cm.

Fig 13. Emma Willemse, *The Raft* (2024). Installation view. Suspended installation, found mokoro remnant, paper pulp, wooden sticks, 45 x 45 x 320cm.

Fig 14. Emma Willemse, *The Wake II* (detail) (2026). Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, paper pulp drawing on scrim, 130 x 50 x 370cm.

Fig 15. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819). Oil on canvas, 491.5 x 716.5cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/theodore-gericault-the-raft-of-the-medusa> (accessed 12 May 2026).

Fig 16. Emma Willemse, Handmade paper (detail) in *The White Paper Boat* (2024). Suspended installation, found mokoro, handmade paper, found antique printing press, 60 x 265 x 40cm. Photo by Annjanegeu Niemand.

Fig 17. Emma Willemse, *The White Paper Boat* (2024). Suspended installation, found mokoro, handmade paper, found antique printing press, 60 x 265 x 40cm.

Fig 18. Emma Willemse, *Incision* (2019). Installation view at *Disrupt I*, Union House, Cape Town, 2021. Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, Eucalyptus bark, mutton cloth, 390 x 50 x 68cm.

Fig 19. Emma Willemse, *Incision* (detail) (2019). Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, Eucalyptus bark, mutton cloth, 390 x 50 x 68cm. Photo Rudolph Willemse.

Fig 20. Emma Willemse, *The Raft* (detail) (2024). Suspended installation, found mokoro remnant, paper pulp, wooden sticks, 45 x 45 x 320cm.

Fig 21. Emma Willemse, *The Raft* (2024). Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, sticks, paper pulp, 45 x 45 x 320cm.

Fig 22. Emma Willemse, *The Wake I* (2024). Installation view at Reservoir Gallery, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, 2026. Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, paper pulp drawing on scrim, 310 x 40 x 75cm.

Fig 23. Emma Willemse, *The Wake I* (2024) in process. Suspended installation found remnant of a mokoro, paper pulp drawing on scrim, 310 x 40 x 75cm.

Fig 24. Emma Willemse, Paper pulp drawing on scrim fabric in process, part of *The Wake II* (2026). Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, paper pulp drawing on scrim, 130 x 50 x 370cm.

Fig 25. Emma Willemse, *The Wake II* (2026). Installation view at Reservoir Gallery, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, 2026. Suspended installation, found remnant of a mokoro, paper pulp drawing on scrim, 30 x 50 x 370cm.

Fig 26. The display unit for Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Walnut, glass, steel, linen, 184,5 x 82,5 x 31,5cm.

Fig 27. Emma Willemse, *The Scroll Carriage* (detail) (2018) in its display case. Parquet floor blocks, Awagami mulberry paper, 37 x 55 x 9,5cm.

Fig 28. Emma Willemse, *The Grieving Book* (2014), Volume 2 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Box: Kiaat and laser engraving. Artist's book: covers made from parquet floor blocks, inner is giclée print from digital collage printed on Hahnemühle, 22,2 x 195 x 12,5cm.

Fig 29. Emma Willemse, *A Book about Loss* (2018). Part of Chapter 1, Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Covers: parquet floor blocks. Inner: monotype and cut-outs on Fabriano, 39,5 x 65 x 6cm.

Fig 30. Emma Willemse, *The Remnant Book* (2021). Part of the Books about Loss, Volume 3 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Covers: parquet floor blocks. Inner: wooden shards on Sisal lightweight paper, 21,5 x 122 x 5,6cm.

Fig 31. Emma Willemse, *Bark Container Book* (2017). Part of Chapter 2, Volume 3 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Parquet floor blocks, metal hinges, Eucalyptus bark, mutton cloth, 5,5 x 30 x 15 cm.

Fig 32. Emma Willemse, *Rupture III* (2017). One of the Rupture Books in Volume 2 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Parquet floor blocks, paper, scrim fabric, 26 x 52 x 10cm.

Fig 33. Emma Willemse, *Book of Departures* (2018). Part of the Boat Books in Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Covers: parquet floor blocks. Inner: linocut on Fabriano, 16,5 x 80 x 7,5cm.

Fig 34. Emma Willemse, *Ruin II* (2018). Part of the House Books in Volume 2 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Laser cut parquet floor blocks, scrim fabric, 22 x 130 x 17cm.

Fig 35. Emma Willemse, *The Dislocating Book* (2014). Part of the House Books in Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Covers: parquet floor blocks. Inner: linocut on Fabriano, 45,7 x 106 x 7cm.

Fig 36. Emma Willemse, *The Index: Volume 2* (2026). Covers: parquet floor blocks. Inner: giclée print from digital collage and text on Hahnemühle, 22,2 x 302 x 5cm.

Fig 37. Emma Willemse, *101 Ways to Long for a Home* (2014 – 2026). Installation view (detail) in the artist's studio.

Fig 38. Emma Willemse, Spier Arts Trust and HUB Studios, *We Came with Bridges* (2026). Mosaic and steel frame, 1,1m x 2m x 4cm.

Fig 39. A still from the film *Displaced* (2020) by Victor van Aswegen. Film, 101 min.



Fig 1. Emma Willemse in her studio. Still from the film *Displaced* by Victor van Aswegen (2020).

FROM THE DEPTHS DEEPLY BURIED

notes on the exhibition by Emma Willemse

This exhibition brings together the books and the boats of my practice. The more than a hundred and one artist's books in the installation, titled *101 Ways to Long for a Home*, took 12 years to complete. The five boat-like suspended installations are the latest of my explorations of the motif of the boat. They were created between 2019 and 2026.

Although these works are not the only mediums and formats that I am working in, they are the modes of making that I am spending the most time on in my quest to reveal the underlying depths of the phenomenon of displacement.

In the 1990's I was displaced from several homes consecutively. During this period, I entered one of my previous homes that was about to be demolished. Everything that was of value in the building, was already ripped from its origins including the wooden roof rafters and the parquet floor blocks. On the spur of the moment, I collected some of the floor blocks in plastic bags to take with me as a memento.

I later recognized this act of collecting the floor blocks as the first step in documenting the experience of the loss of my homes.

It was a vital step, because it sparked several artworks. My first boat-like installation, created in 2013 and titled *De(part)* (fig 2), was made entirely from discarded parquet blocks.

More than 20 years of dealing with notions of loss in my art practice have made me realise that many works arrive from the depths of the unconscious before the awareness of all their layers of significance is known. In addition, works are sometimes an enigmatic forecast of times to come. This was certainly the case with *De(part)*. It was during the great refugee crisis, starting in 2015, at which time news channels were inundated with images and footage of capsizing boats — detailing the plight of people who had lost their homes — that I fully grasped that the boat could be an apt metaphor for the experience of displacement.

In Jungian psychology, water is a symbol of the unconscious – the deep, dark side of the personality. A boat travelling over water is an act of displacement, alluding to a safe container transporting the psyche over the treacherous waters of the unknown. My question is: what happens if this safe container cannot fulfil its function anymore?

In his essay accompanying this catalogue, entitled *The Archaeology of Absence*, the writer and academic Kobus Moolman illuminates the ideas permeating both the artist's books and the five boat-like installations on display in this exhibition. He compares and contrasts the two bodies of work, highlighting the relationship between the two types of creative output. His text is rich with source references, tracing the depth of meanings generated by the works.

The artist's books on display use parquet floor blocks extensively — all the covers of the handmade books are constructed from the wooden blocks, showing the underneath side that was attached to the floor surface of homes. Although the collection is divided into five volumes, each with its own foreword, introduction, five chapters and index, the entire collection is documented and archived on the website www.101waystolongforahome.co.za.

I came upon the idea to create artist's books as an infinite encyclopaedia of sorts, when I realized, during my academic research on the topic¹ that the knowledge field of displacement resists theorization due to its complexity. Its nature is not linear, but rather multi-layered, repetitive

and fluid. The title *101 Ways to Long for a Home* is meant as an ironic reference to the quick-fix nature of contemporary knowledge available at the fingertips on the web. The multi-faceted approach to the making of the books is intended as a critique on how the experience of the loss of a home is often approached with assumptions and oversimplification.

It is a great privilege to extend this expedition into the depths of the earth, so to speak. The Reservoir exhibition space has an interesting history related to many of the ideas in my work. Built in approximately 1904 as a water reservoir, the interior was excavated out of solid dolerite. Its purpose and construction speak about preservation, exhumation and archaeology. The space was forgotten and rediscovered in 1994, after which it was repurposed as an exhibition space which opened in 2002 (Crampton 2003: 31).

To see my boats and books, with their ideas about loss and sense of place, their engagement with the repurposing and transformation of materials, and their references to history, memory and identity — to see them float and seep into a re-discovered underground space for water — is such an honour.



Fig 2. *De(part)* (2013). Installation view in the Lovell Gallery, Woodstock, Cape Town.

Endnotes

1 | Willemse, E. 2010. *The Phenomenon of Displacement and its Manifestation in Contemporary Art*. See the reference in the bibliography.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ABSENCE

by Kobus Moolman

Two fundamental impulses of epistemology and practice are embedded at the heart of Emma Willemse's work in her installation, *From the Depths Deeply Buried*. There is the impulse toward plenitude on the one hand. Toward increase and complexity. And on the other a contrary impulse toward simplification. Decrease. A distillation of the many down to the singular.

On the one hand we have the unfolding amplitude and gymnastic display of her installation of artist's books, *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. And on the other we have the stripped-back ceremonial procession of her five boats: *The White Paper Boat*, *Incision*, *The Wake I* and *The Wake II* and *The Raft*. Are these two impulses or gestures in opposition? The one drained, the other filled. The one still, the other animated. Do they pull in different directions? How do they exist at one and the same time and perform their respective acts in balance? And what creative force, what mysterious elemental energy, holds them together and prevents them collapsing into self-contradiction?

101 Ways to Long for a Home is a highly intricate, interlocking and interrelated compendium of handcrafted artist's books (more than one hundred and one actually). It consists of five volumes; each comprising its own distinctive foreword, introduction, five chapters and an index. The foreword is entitled *Scroll Carriage* and appears as a limited variable edition of five works, one for each volume. The introduction comprises *The Weeping Book* and *The Grieving Book* and also appears as limited, variable editions of five books across the five volumes. The five chapters of each volume contain unique books with the following titles: *Books about Loss*, *Container Books*, *Rupture Books*, *Boat Books* and *House Books*. And the index, as per its nature, contains all the information on each of the volumes.

When stored the five volumes are housed in specially built cabinets with drawers and compartments that immediately recall the seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities and their encyclopaedic collections which were a microcosm or theatre of the known and unknown world.



Fig 3. *101 Ways to Long for a Home* (2014 - 2026). Installation view (detail) at La Motte Gallery, Franschhoek, 2026.

The work is a complex system of divisions and sub-divisions and sub-sub-divisions; tunnels into the buried depths, as it were, that keep on bifurcating in front of our eyes. The central motif is borrowed from the idea of cataloguing, of systematizing knowledge so that it can easily be identified and retrieved. It is, of course, no accident that Willemse trained initially as a librarian. And cataloguing in itself is an ancient profession, reflecting the fundamental human desire to attempt to contain the knowledge of the world indexically. There are examples of the indexes of such 'ordainers of the universe', as they were called by the ancient Sumerians, amongst the oldest remains of libraries. In his study, *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel notes the example of the catalogue of an Egyptian House of Books dating from circa 2000 BCE, from the excavations of the sacred Temple of Edfu, which begins with a list of several other catalogues such as *The Book of What is to be Found in the Temple*, *The Book of the Domains*, and (intriguingly) *The Book of Places and What is in Them* (2014:91).

The idea of places (homes, in particular) and what is in them is pertinent to Willemse's installation, and much of her work in general. The covers of each of the books have been constructed from parquet floor blocks that clatter and clap their concertina hands as they are opened and closed. It is worth noting that the word parquet derives from the Old French *parchet* (the diminutive of *parc*), literally meaning 'a small compartment or enclosed space' (Oxford English Dictionary 2005. Sv "parquet"). Significantly, Willemse's parquet

blocks are not new. Some were salvaged from one of her previous homes in Rustenburg that was demolished to make way for a town house development. Others were sourced from builders' yards in Woodstock, Cape Town. The unique patterns of the leftover glue and cement on the undersides of the blocks (almost like fingerprints) make visible what had once been concealed and are thus, in fact, archaeological traces of displacement, trauma and loss.

In his essay, *As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese: on the Pictures of Jan Peter Tripp*, the novelist W.G. Sebald describes the relationship between objects and us: "In principle, things outlast us, they know more about us than we know of them: they carry the experiences they have had with us inside them and are – in fact – the book of our history opened before us" (2004:79).

When the covers of Willemse's books are opened the inside pages unfold slowly and solemnly in a concertina format. The pages themselves are made from various papers (handmade and commercial), fabric and discarded parquet blocks. The pages have been cut or torn. The floor blocks are broken and thinned. The fabric is gauze-like and brings to mind bandages and dressings. Wounds and wounding, pain and healing, are unmistakable motifs in these materials. In her catalogue to the 2018 exhibition of this work, Willemse addresses the aesthetics of pain as "relevant to the contemporary world due to the ongoing uprooting of people through warfare, political strife and xenophobia" (2018:10).



Fig 4. *Rupture III* (detail) (2017).



Fig 5. *Living under the Bridge* (2021).



Fig 6. *The Book of Remains* (detail) (2017).



Fig 7. *The Weeping Book* (2014).

The internal pages of the books contain digital prints, collages, drawings, linocut prints and etchings. But in Willemse's work there is no easy separation between traditional ideas of external and internal, between container and content. Container is content and content is container. And this is also the case when we come later to examine her boats. For Willemse, the art object cannot be bound by conventions of representation and presentation. Her works redefine the practice of art and how we make meaning out of it – in much the same way as they redefine, in fact, what a book is. They emphasise bodily experience and the complex ways in which a viewer / reader is drawn into a work through their senses and the activation of their deeply buried memories. Ashraf Jamal, in his review of the joint exhibition, *Realign* (2025) by Willemse and Ingrid Bolton¹, describes this as “the basis of a kincentric vision, the root of an art that seeks to thrive beyond its mere objectification and fetishization – an art that allows for the wholesome transformation sought under the most grotesque circumstances” (2025:[sp]). In this regard, her silent

performances, in which she retrieves the volumes from their cabinets and solemnly opens each of the one hundred and one books and re-curates them (in-person on select occasions, but on video throughout the exhibition), is noteworthy for its charged emotional effect.

Certainly there are specific motifs such as houses and boats and fragments of objects (such as shards of wood) that predominate in the pages. But they do not function as representational elements in and of themselves. The dominant motif of the house, for example, is a collage of old National Geographic magazine images of different homes. These have been cut up and worked on to the point almost of abstraction. In *The Weeping Book* an enormous house is balanced precariously on a very slender leg or pole (we are not sure exactly what), which itself is embedded in a fingerprint of Willemse's thumb. The image of this house, poised like a giant house of cards over the depths, is one of several that are repeated throughout the entire five volumes in a dizzying variety of iterations.



Fig 8. Dane Mitchell, *Post Hoc* (installation view) (2019).

The relationship between these fragmented, evocative images and memory is of particular significance. In her study, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Laura Marks argues that such images function as a “fossil bed, where the fossils are those strange and stubborn images that seem to arise from a reality that is at odds with its surrounding . . . These images refer to the power of recollection-images to embody different pasts. When an image is all that remains of a memory, when it cannot be assigned a present by an act of remembering but simply stares up at one where it has been unearthed, then that image is a fossil of what has been forgotten” (2000:84). In this reading, fossils are not cold, inert objects, but alive and dangerous. Dangerous, in fact, because they are radioactive; that is to say, the past that they speak from and speak about is not ever over. This reminds us of those famous words from William Faulkner’s novel *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (1953:81). If this is so, then memory itself is a never-ending process because the past from which memory is built (and past can literally be a split-second ago or millennia) and into which it is ceaselessly cast, is not actually finite. It continues unfolding behind us, deeper and deeper, in the same way that the inexhaustible galaxies unfold infinitely before us. In this way, then, Willemse’s installation is a profound engagement with and staging of the human experience of time. Let us recall, in fact, the actual title of her installation: *101 Ways to Long for a Home*. Not one hundred, but one hundred and one: the number of infinity. It is a palindromic number that indicates beginnings and continuation. Not ending. And thus the process of longing for a home casts us both backwards (in a nostalgic mode) and forwards (in a mode of seeking); that which was and that which is still to be.

It is instructive to compare Willemse’s practice of retrieval and re-enactment of the past with that of the New Zealand artist Dane Mitchell in his installation, *Post Hoc*², which similarly projects an encyclopaedic inventory of extinctions and losses in the form of “an unfathomably long list, read each morning on NTS Radio by an artificial intelligence entity named Amy. The vast list spans an incomprehensible range of subjects. This strange amalgam of types of things [are] ... ghostly reminders of what once was – that is now gone. Fossilised on the NTS radio waves, *Post Hoc* is a vast tomb of things that our present moment sits on top of” (2019: [sp]).

Willemse’s excavation of loss and time is given a poignant, lyrical dimension in her five boats – *Incision*, *The White Paper Boat*, *The Wake I* and *The Wake II* and *The Raft* – which complete the installation. Floating in the air, suspended in their still pools of light, the boats communicate wordlessly with the books; their ancient ancestor through their shared connection with wood.

The boats are actual *mokoros* – canoes dug out from the trunks of trees – which Willemse found on a Free State farm where they were being used as decorative plant containers. Dug-out canoes are one of the world’s most ancient form of boat. The Dufuna canoe, discovered buried near the village of Dufuna in Yobe State, Nigeria, and subsequently excavated, was carbon dated to 8000 years old, making it the third oldest dugout canoe in the world after the dugouts from Pesse in Netherlands, and Noyen-sur-Seine in France (Adewumi [Sa]:6).

As physical modes of transport across waterways, rivers and the buried depths of the ocean, boats are potent signs of journeying, endeavour and risk on both a physical and a spiritual level. Long connected in various world religions with transformation, death and rebirth, the boat as archetype has a powerful significance in the human imagination. From Noah’s ark that carried the vestiges of human and animal life aloft on the cataclysmic flood to the magic boat, the Argo, with its speaking prow that transported Jason and his Argonauts in search of the mythical Golden Fleece, from the Mesopotamian cult of Inanna in which the boat is a symbol for the vulva and the womb, to the Egyptian funerary boats of Dahshur, the vessel has endured over thousands of years as myth and relic.

Connecting this cultural potency to the installation of Willemse, Ashraf Jamal, in his review referred to above, argues:

Willemse’s evocative use of the boat – a vehicle that embodies a crossing along a fathomless watery deep – is physically and psychically apposite. A figure for traversal and displacement – consider the ‘boat people’ then and now, trapped between worlds, *one dying, the other powerless to be born*, to quote Matthew Arnold – the boat exemplifies human precarity. That Willemse conceives of the boat as a physical and psychological ‘motif’, pertaining to both the conscious and unconscious realm, reveals the degree to which the artist has densified the human condition. (2025:[sp])



Fig 9. The Dufuna canoe being excavated.



Fig 10. *The White Paper Boat* (detail) (2024).

In the same way that Willemse's books tell their embedded stories of loss and longing through their visual motifs and their materials, her boats narrate the buried trajectories of the indigenous cultures that made and once used them. Their hopes and their labour are scored into these boats in a tactile and sensory manner, as if they were flesh, preserved like the peat bog victims of Northern Europe. Her boats thus are both object and sign at one and the same time. They are a silent language marked by trauma that forces the reader / viewer into remembrance and mourning. In their edited collection, *Loss: the Politics of Mourning*, David Eng and David Kazanjian describe this linkage between mourning and remains: "If loss is known only by what remains of it, then the politics and ethics of mourning lie in the interpretation of what remains – how remains are produced



Fig 11. *Incision* (detail) (2019).

and animated, how they are read and sustained" (2003:ix). This, then, returns us to the references to fossils used earlier by Laura Marks and specifically to the archaeological theory of stratigraphy which is echoed in the artistic practice of layering employed by Willemse in many of her printed book pages.

The reading of remains – the multiple ways in which the past is coded and deciphered (or resists decoding) – is fundamental to *The White Paper Boat*. Constructed out of a found dugout canoe, a found antique printing press and sheets of A4 sized handmade paper, *The White Paper Boat* initially references the traditional idea of a child's folded paper boat, but rapidly inverts this reading with its bulky and rusted printing press located at the rear of the boat like some primordial

outboard engine. The press itself seems to be churning out the rough sheets of handmade paper squashed against each other – a visual reminder of the squashed, broken shards of wood in *The Book of Remains*. The sheets of paper speak of bureaucratic processes, officialdom and the exercise of authority via policies and decrees. And yet, though tactile and alluring, the sheets themselves are blank, unlike, for example, *The Cargo Vessel Book*, that speaks in a similar way of trade and commerce, the "global flows of capital, power and desire" (Marks 2000:79), but bursts, quite literally from its centre, with unmanageable force. The force in *The White Paper Boat* is powerfully present, but held in check, pervaded by stillness.

Incision is the oldest of Willemse's five boats, made in 2019. Like *The White Paper Boat*, the dugout canoe remains of *Incision* – excavated from its past usage – is packed full, but not with paper. This boat carries bundles of eucalyptus bark, the same bark that appears in her small *Bark Container Book*. But in *Incision*, the bark is bound together with mutton cloth, both funerary bindings and bandages, both loss and healing, in the same way that a surgical incision is a break in the wholeness of the skin to return it ultimately to health.

According to the artist's statement in the film about her work, directed by Victor van Aswegen (2020), "the eucalyptus bark originates from a tree next to the house in which I live. The tree had to be chopped down because its roots were starting to lift the floor of my home. After the tree died, it shed its bark – like shedding skin".

Everything in Willemse's installation, *From the Depths Deeply Buried*, is bound up intrinsically with the idea of trees. Her boats are made of wood, as are her books – from their parquet blocks to their paper sheets and the dyes she uses. Why? What is the fundamental, archetypal connection between the tree and the boat and the book and the human body, even though the latter is nowhere present? And why are Willemse's boats all broken, impotent, unable to fulfil their intended function, or so weighted down that they are unable to float, as in her *Stone Boat Book*? In the same way, her books, despite their display of inventiveness, all ultimately are shattered fragments (*The Rupture Books*, *The Dislocating Book*, *Dismembering Book*, *Fragment Book*, *Ruin*). And why is the human figure only represented, in fact, by its absence?



Fig 12. *Ruin* (2018).



Fig 13. *The Raft* (2024). Installation view.

Something calls to mind immediately the words of David Seabrooke from his un-categorisable book, *All the Devils are Here*: "To highlight what was lost by describing what was left" (2018:82).

Something else calls up the words of Gilles Deleuze: "If we want to grasp an event we must not show it, we must not pass along the event, but plunge into it, go through all the geological layers that are its internal history" (quoted in Marks 2000:29).

Willemse's *The Raft* echoes poignantly this double act of the 'lost' and the 'left'. A raft is both the remains of something consequent upon a disaster, and it is that which rescues us from that disaster, that which enables us to survive the trauma of loss, be that loss individual or social, for people, places or even ways of inhabiting the world. What here, then, in her lonely vessel enables us to survive, to go on? There is a fragile and ethereal quality to this dugout canoe that holds a few centimetres above its body a skin made of paper pulp and sticks. How can this thin, brittle layer or covering ever hope to protect those of us who have remained after the shipwreck?

Of course, we cannot but hear echoes of Géricault's epic *The Raft of the Medusa*.³ But the twenty-first century has lost faith in such operatic gestures, such grand sweeping claims for intervention and salvation. Willemse's drama of shipwreck lies not only off-stage, it lies buried. Absent. And yet, as we have seen and felt, this very absence is still volatile, radioactive. The Latin root of the word absence (*absentia*) means not nothing or a void, but being-away; a being that is away from itself. Her boats, though broken, though bored through with gaping holes and missing parts, despite themselves hold still their own presence. And this presence in absence, this very presence of the absent, is a mystery of encounter; the encounter of the viewer / reader with what poet Paul Celan in his "Meridian" speech called "something that listens, not without fear, for something beyond itself, beyond words" (1986:54)

In her final boats, *The Wake I* and *The Wake II*, Willemse empties out and fills at the same time the fearful silence that encounter requires in order for us to hear that which is "beyond itself, beyond words". And by "beyond words" we understand that which is beyond representation. In each of these boats there is a double presence: there is the wooden form of the found remains of the dugout canoe, and then there is a drawing in paper pulp on fragile scrim that floats above that physical form like an echo or ghostly presence.

It is worth noting that a wake is two things at the same time. It is a ritual of mourning for someone who has died – and here the ancient metaphor of the boat as symbolic vehicle for carrying the soul to the otherworld is apposite, and we are also reminded of the pre-Christian Anglo Saxon log coffins. Wake, too, refers to the waves left behind a moving vessel; hence we have the phrase 'in the wake of', in the aftermath of. Significantly, Willemse's entire installation, *From the Depths Deeply Buried*, foregrounds in varying motifs and materials the aftermath or consequences of some event, and she is concerned ultimately with the ethics of the representation of this aftermath. It is a challenge deeply connected to memory and human time. What happens when we remember? When we re-member, when we put back together. And is to re-member the same as to re-present (show again)? Both seem to be acts of repetition. But to re-member is to repair, while to re-present is to copy. Willemse is interested, I believe, in the transformation of loss, not in the mere showing of it. She is interested in the returning of presence to absence in such a manner that the emptiness is preserved but rendered fertile and active.

The definitions of the word 'wake' above are all nouns. But there is, in fact, a third use of the word. As a verb. As action. To wake up. To waken. And perhaps her scrim forms that float above her two boats are not echoes or ghosts, forlornly waving behind us, turning our heads back to the past. Perhaps they are wings. That release us to renewal.



Fig 14. *The Wake II* (detail) (2026).



Fig 15. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819).

Endnotes

- 1 | The exhibition, *Realign*, was presented in February 2025 at 196 Victoria, Woodstock, Cape Town.
- 2 | Dane Mitchell, *Post hoc* (2019). Mixed media installation. Aotearoa New Zealand National Pavilion, 58th Venice Biennale, Venice.
- 3 | Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19). Oil on canvas, 90 x 716cm. Louvre, Paris.

SUSPENDED INSTALLATIONS

The White Paper Boat

"[Willemse's] boats are ... both sign and object at the same time. They are a silent language marked by trauma that forces the reader / viewer into remembrance and mourning."

Kobus Moolman: *The Archaeology of Absence*.



Fig 16. Handmade paper (detail) in *The White Paper Boat* (2024).



Fig 17. *The White Paper Boat* (2024).



Fig 18. *Incision* (2019).



Fig 19. *Incision* (detail) (2019).



Fig 20. *The Raft* (detail) (2024).

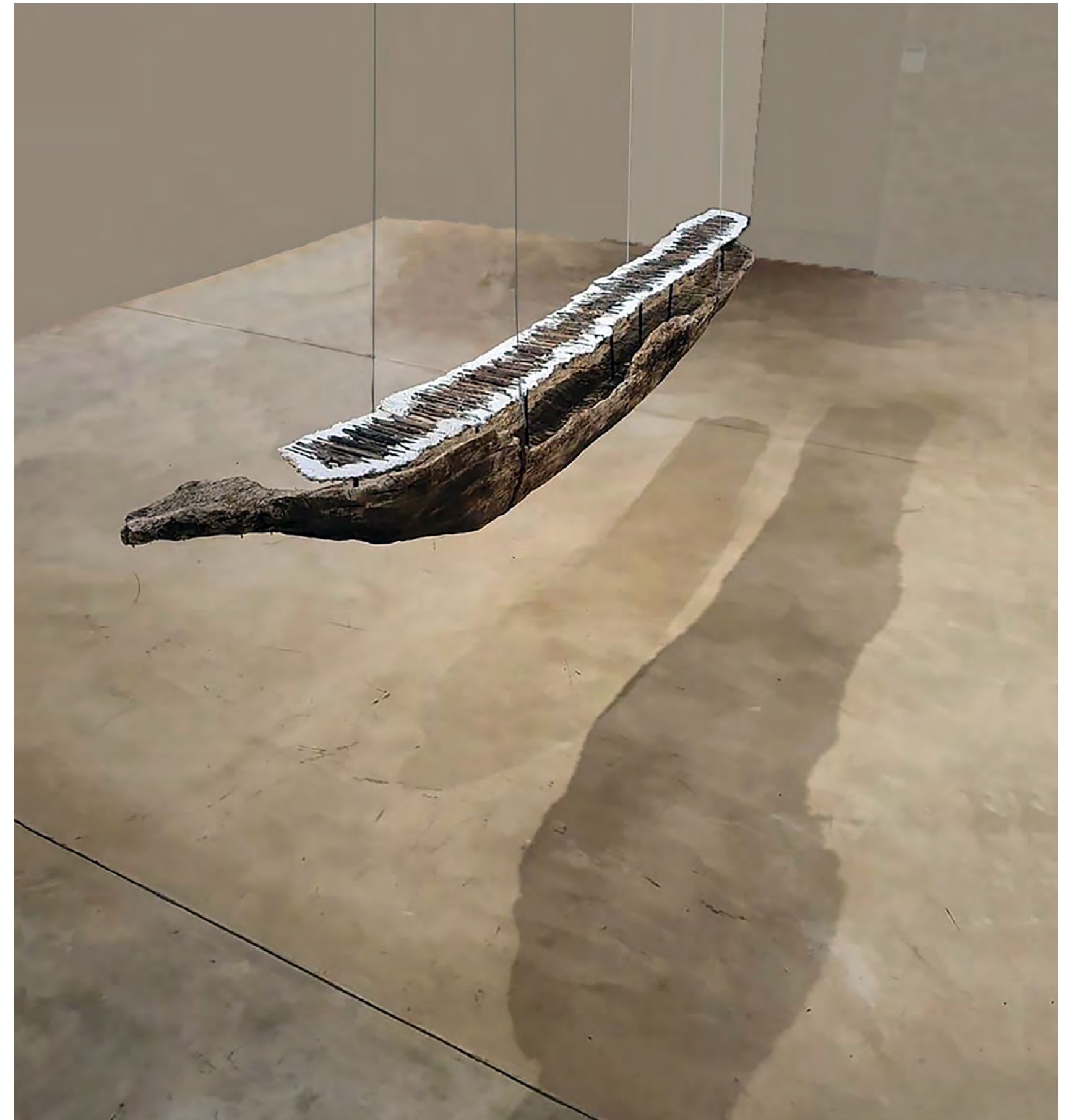


Fig 21. *The Raft* (2024).



Fig 22. *The Wake I* (2024).



Fig 23. *The Wake I* (2024) in process.

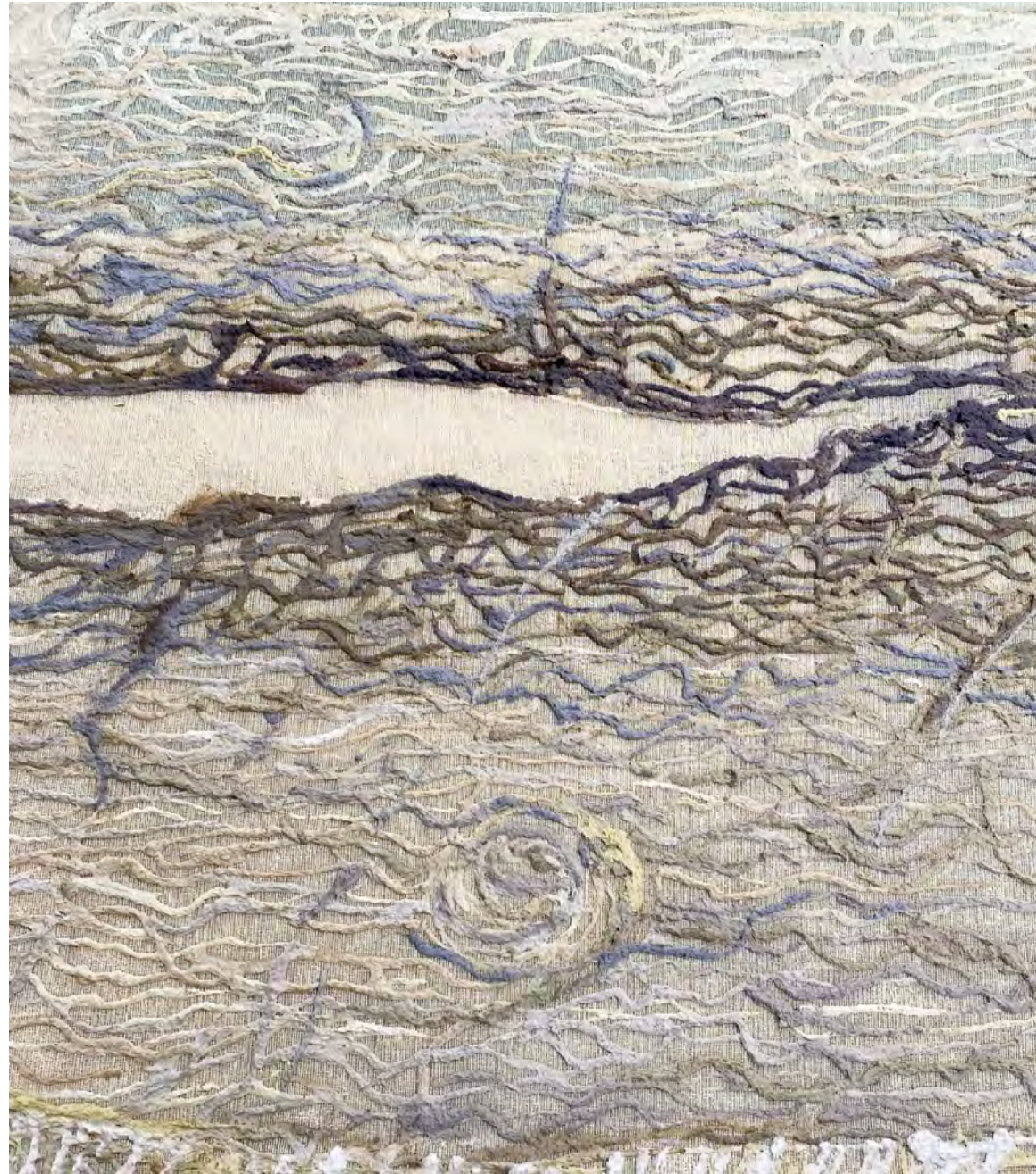


Fig 24. Paper pulp drawing on scrim fabric in process, part of *The Wake II* (2026).



Fig 25. *The Wake II* (2026).

101 WAYS TO LONG FOR A HOME AS AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA

As a reference to how knowledge systems in traditional encyclopaedias are organised, the artist's books in the *101 Ways to Long for a Home* collection are divided into 5 volumes. Each volume contains a foreword, introduction, 5 chapters and an index. A volume of books is housed in a bespoke display unit.



- 1 THE FOREWORD
The Scroll Carriage
- 2 THE INTRODUCTION
The Weeping Book and The Grieving Book
- 3 CHAPTER 1
Books about Loss
- 4 CHAPTER 2
Container Books
- 5 CHAPTER 3
Rupture Books
- 6 CHAPTER 4
Boat Books
- 7 CHAPTER 5
House Books
- 8 The Index
- 9 Retractable drawer
- 10 Sand timer
- 11 Drawer with gloves

Fig 26. The display unit for Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

1

The Foreword

The Scroll Carriage is the foreword for each of the five volumes. The scroll of this sculptural book can be unrolled when exhibited, setting the stage for displaying the rest of the books in that volume.



Fig 27. *The Scroll Carriage* (detail) (2018) in its display case.

2

The Introduction

The Weeping Book and *The Grieving Book* reveal the introductory concept of *101 Ways to Long for a Home* as encyclopaedia: a collection of narratives dealing with the loss of a home. Each of these books is contained in a bespoke handmade wooden box.



Fig 28. *The Grieving Book* (2014), Volume 2 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

3

Chapter 1: Books about Loss

This chapter deals with the ongoing exploration of the ephemeral characteristics of loss. Using visual devices such as bleaching, staining and excavation, the books in this chapter are fragile, abstract and unique for each volume. The examples illustrated here are from various volumes.



Fig 29. *A Book about Loss* (2018). Part of Chapter 1, Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.



Fig 30. *The Remnant Book* (2021). Part of the Books about Loss, Volume 3 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

4

Chapter 2: Container Books

Unique for each volume, the books in this chapter are lidded boxes constructed from parquet floor blocks and filled with fragments and remnants. They are intended as portable containers that carry precious relics, reminders of the lost home.



Fig 31. *Bark Container Book* (2017). Part of Chapter 2, Volume 3 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

Chapter 3: Rupture Books

The Rupture Books for each volume are unique flag-books in various sizes and shapes. The inner pages of the books are constructed from parquet floor blocks, sawn in half lengthwise, rendering them thinner and more fragile than the covers. The action and sound created by opening and closing these books are reminiscent of the noise and brute physicality faced when wooden floors are ripped out of their foundations.



Fig 32. *Rupture III* (2017). One of the Rupture Books in Volume 2 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

Chapter 4: Boat Books

Each of the unique books in this chapter carries recurring motifs of broken or decaying boats, metaphors for the experience of displacement.

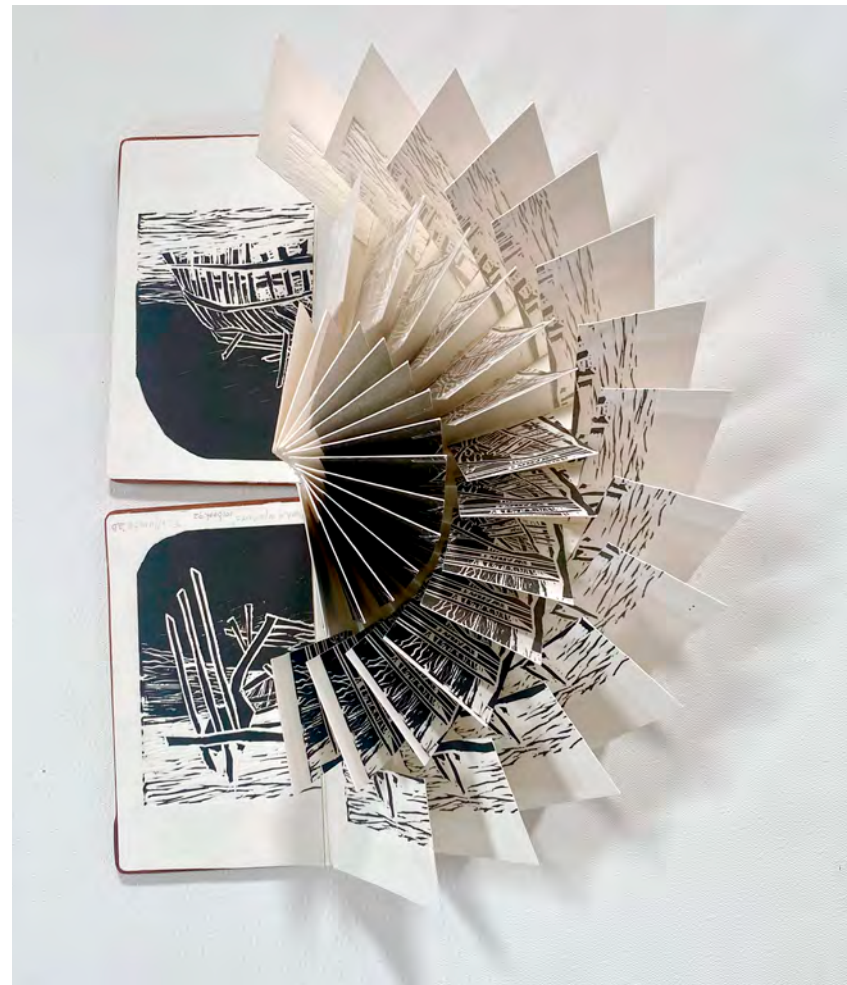


Fig 33. *Book of Departures* (2018). Part of the Boat Books in Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

Chapter 5: House Books

The House Books in each volume reference broken or decayed house-like structures in multiple ways. The experience of the loss of a home is reiterated by invasive visual strategies, such as fragmenting, cutting and burning. The examples illustrated here are from various volumes.



Fig 34. *Ruin II* (2018). Part of the House Books in Volume 3 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

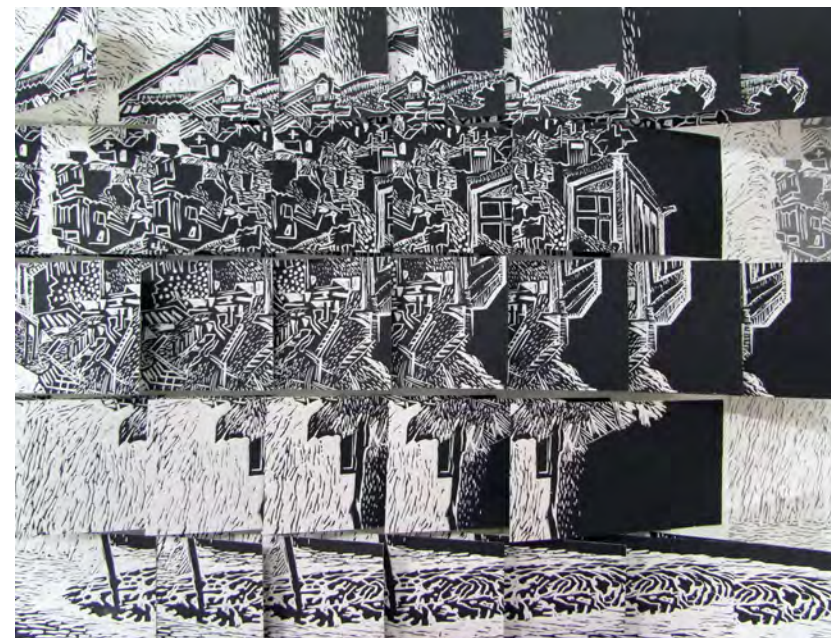


Fig 35. *The Dislocating Book* (2014). Part of the House Books in Volume 1 of *101 Ways to Long for a Home*.

The Index

The index of each of the 5 volumes contains all the information, including titles, media and dimensions of all the books in that volume. A QR code gives access to the website where the entire collection of more than a hundred and one artist's books is brought together. The website, www.101waystolongforahome.co.za, serves as an archive and a catalogue for the collection.



Fig 36. *The Index: Volume 2* (2026).

Fig 37. *101 Ways to Long for a Home* (2014 - 2026). Installation view (detail) in the artist's studio.

COLLABORATIONS

We Came with Bridges

The original artwork that constitutes *We Came with Bridges*, was created by Emma Willemse in a laborious hand collage process, pasting together carefully selected cut-out snippets of images found in old National Geographic Magazines. The intention of transforming this image into a large-scale mosaic artwork was not to create a mere realistic depiction of the image, but rather to interpret it in the medium of stone fragments. A team of six artisans from HUB Studios in Cape Town, under the leadership of Heinrich Joemath, worked for a period of 4 months to complete the project.

"We came with vessels laden to the brim with things to come. A condensed inventory of the freight includes: fences, maps and parameters; dogma, doctrine and procedures; mines, minerals, drills and quarries; buildings, bridges and bureaucracy; urban sprawls layered below with ducts and drains.

All this and more were contained and imbedded in the cargo. All this, as well as the seed of the Eucalyptus tree which was planted inland, next to my future dwelling. The tree grew and prospered through the years, and later uprooted the floor of my home."



Fig 38. Emma Willemse, Spier Arts Trust & HUB Studios, *We Came with Bridges* (2026). Mosaic.

Displaced

With the kind permission of filmmaker Victor van Aswegen, an extract of the multi award-winning documentary, *Displaced*, is shown during the exhibition titled *From the Depths Deeply Buried*. The extract deals specifically with artist's bookmaking by Emma Willemse. The film is a retrospective of her entire practice, against the background of one of the major geopolitical themes of our time: displacement.

The film can be viewed on six platforms accessible at the following link: <https://displaced-thefilm.com/#watch>

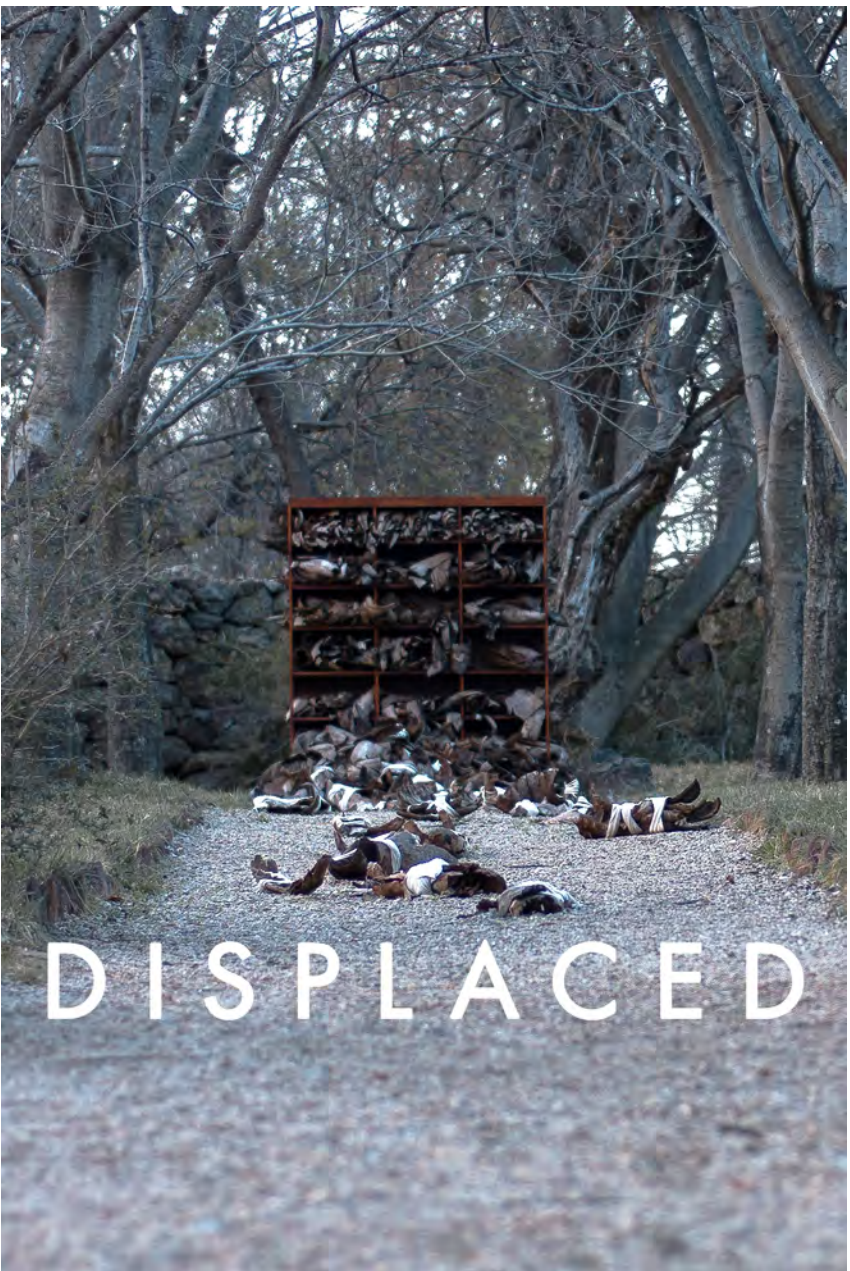


Fig 39. A still from the film *Displaced* (2020) by Victor van Aswegen. Film, 101 min.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

From the Depths Deeply Buried:
notes on the exhibition

by Emma Willemse

Crampton, S. 2003. Reshaping Oliewenhuis Art Museum, *Culna* 58 November 2003: 31 – 32. https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA10162275_67 (accessed on 6 May 2026).

Willemse, E. 2010. *The Phenomenon of Displacement and its Manifestation in Contemporary Art*. Pretoria: University of South Africa. <https://ir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/4343> (accessed on 7 May 2026).

The Archaeology of Absence

by Kobus Moolman

Adewumi, A. [Sa]. Dufuna canoe find: birthing the underwater cultural heritage in Nigeria. Sv "International Law". Academia. https://www.academia.edu/35514815/DUFUNA_CANOE_FIND_BIRTHING_THE_UNDERWATER_CULTURAL_HERITAGE_IN_NIGERIA#outer_page_2 (accessed 30 April 2026).

Celan, P. 1986. The Meridian, in *Collected Prose*. Translated by Rosmarie Waldrop. Manchester: Carcanet.

Eng, D. L. & Kazanjian, D. (Eds). 2003. *Loss: the Politics of Mourning*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Faulkner, W. 1953. *Requiem for a Nun*. London: Penguin Books.

Jamal, A. 2025. *Stoicism and Vulnerability – Art as Praise Song: Ingrid Bolton and Emma Willemse*. MOL 048. Art Times. <https://arttimes.co.za/stoicism-and-vulnerability-art-as-praise-song-ingrid-bolton-and-emma-willemse/> (accessed 30 April 2026).

Manguel, A. 2014. *A History of Reading*. London: Penguin Books.

Marks, L. U. 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mitchell, D. 2019. *Post hoc*. <https://www.posthoc.xyz/> (accessed 1 May 2026).

Oxford English Dictionary. 2005. Sv "parquet". https://www.oed.com/dictionary/parquet_n?tab=etymology. (accessed on 1 May 2026).

Sebald, W.G. 2005. *Unrecounted*. London: Penguin Books.

Seabrooke, D. 2018. *All the Devils are Here*. London: Granta Books.

Van Aswegen, V. 2020. *Displaced: a retrospective of the work of artist Emma Willemse*. CineSouth Studios, 101 min.

Willemse, E. 2025. *101 Ways to Long for a Home: installation of a hundred and one artist's books*. Issuu. https://issuu.com/emmawillemse/docs/101_ways_catalogue (accessed on 30 April 2026).

Willemse, E. 2026. *Boat Installations*. Issuu. https://issuu.com/emmawillemse/docs/boat_installations_61f8488144467d (accessed on 30 April 2026).

www.emmawillemse.co.za
www.101waystolongforahome.co.za
<https://www.art.co.za/emmawillemse/index.php>
Insta: @willemseemma

Emma Willemse is a conceptual artist and art educator living and working in Riebeek Kasteel in the Western Cape. Her art-making practice deals with issues of loss and place, such as displacement, sense of place and site-specific commemoration. As a former librarian, she is critical about dominant knowledge systems and through her artmaking, she investigates the interlinks between various alternative approaches to knowledge.

Her artworks are technically varied, and include sculptural installations, site-specific interventions, film, printmaking, artist's books, painting and drawing. In her work, she considers material as a meaning-making agent and she will often use and transform objects found at abandoned sites, as a way to signify history, memory and the experience of loss.

Emma has exhibited extensively in South Africa, Africa and abroad, and her works have been included in the Nando's Collection, the Spier Collection and the MAPSA collection. Her ongoing project, the artist's books installation called *101 Ways to Long for a Home*, was awarded in the *Installations Category* at the Florence Biennale.

She began to combine boat-like installations and the artist's books in 2018, when she was the festival artist at the *Woordfees* in Stellenbosch. Later in the year she repeated this combination at the 1:54 African Art Fair in London. The artist's books have consequently been exhibited in diverse configurations in Dakar, Paris, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Bloemfontein and Franschhoek.

The exhibition at Oliewenhuis Museum, *From the Depths Deeply Buried*, is the first iteration of *101 ways to long for a home* in which it is structured as an encyclopaedia, as well as the most extensive iteration, showing new books and combining it with five recent boat-like boat installations.

Emma holds a Master's degree in Visual Arts from the University of South Africa and qualifications in psychology and librarianship. She is involved in art related community projects in the area where she lives.



