

***frugi bonae***

**Kim Gurney**

# ***frugi bonae***

A solo exhibition of mixed media works

by

**Kim Gurney**

Artspace gallery, 142 Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg, South Africa  
November 11 – December 2, 2009



## Artist's statement

***frugi bonae***: *To or for the good fruit, 'being honest and temperate, dedicated to long-term flourishing: as vital for human beings as for the earth itself'* (Harry Eyres In: [Financial Times](#), May 23-24, 2009)

This mixed media body of new work explores collective cause and effect, in particular relations between humankind and the environment. The exhibition, entitled *frugi bonae*, is my second solo exhibition and extends a broad artistic concern with generational legacies.

Bees are a primary source of inspiration. I came to view these vital pollinators, currently under various stresses worldwide, as environmental indicators. This connection was initially inspired by a series of 1920s lectures by philosopher Rudolf Steiner.

Thematically, the artworks lay particular emphasis upon mechanisation of natural processes, the consequences of human development on the environment and ecological impact. It also engages with individual and collective agency.

The exhibition includes lightboxes, mixed media works, paintings and artworks on paper.





## Introduction

One way of introducing this body of new work is via an intermediary artwork, entitled *Appendix*. This series of 12 works is essentially a stepping stone between ‘*frugi bonae*’ and my first solo, ‘*Disjecta membra*’, an exhibition of paintings exhibited at Gordart gallery in April 2008.

‘*Disjecta membra*’ took as partial subject matter family photographs of people who later ‘disappeared’ during apartheid – people most likely killed by the apartheid state’s agents and whose bodies were never recovered. The counterpoint is a partner series derived from my grandfather’s family snapshots taken during a similar era. All the paintings in ‘*Disjecta membra*’ are severely cropped, forcing a fragmented view of the figures that lays new emphasis. The paintings challenge rather than affirm the particular reality self-consciously projected by such imagery suggesting a less cohesive, more ambiguous condition beneath the constructed façade.

The names of the ‘disappeared’ are listed in an appendix in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was set up during the 1990s to deal with human rights abuses under apartheid. This list of 477 names is transcribed from A-Z in my artwork, also entitled *Appendix*, which both commemorates their lives while critiquing the unfinished business of the country’s past. Engraved sketches sourced from generic autopsy reports hover in a ghostly superimposition.

Besides acting as a coda to the subject matter of ‘*Disjecta Membra*’, *Appendix* cued a visual language more fully explored in ‘*frugi bonae*’. This included beeswax as medium, selected in *Appendix* in part for its visceral qualities. It also introduced the use of hexagons, in reference to bone structure, to evoke how bones record and reveal identity. This was revealed during my attendance at an exhumation and forensic examination of skeletal remains.

While experimenting with beeswax as medium, a gift of Steiner’s book *Bees* proved inspirational to trigger an engagement with generational legacies on other levels - most notably environmental. My artwork shifted to this domain and ‘*frugi bonae*’ simultaneously evolved.

### ***Appendix***

2008

Series of 12 (*Abdulwahab* to *Zwinge*)  
beeswax, embroidery thread, tracing  
paper & ink on fabriano, engraved  
perspex

290 x 150 x 50mm (each, framed)







## Production & media

‘Frugi bonae’ was produced over the course of 18 months from my inner-city studio in Johannesburg.

The production method for the mixed media works is generally an organic process that often begins with a particular material, chosen in turn with a certain concept in mind. The two are interconnected.

It usually takes many months for all the elements to fall into place and for concept and material to reflect one another. The artwork itself evolves over time through a period of intense cogitation as well as trial and error until finally resolved. New mediums or superior solutions will become evident over time and the process remains flexible enough to accommodate these without sacrificing methodology. Ideas are sifted over time to create conceptually layered artworks that hopefully offer the viewer multiple access points of meaning. My painting technique has a similar layered approach, even when it is thinly applied.

‘*Frugi bonae*’ has quite a delicate visual aesthetic that reflects the nature of its subject matter. There is a tension between extreme order or patterning and the chaos of entropy that threatens systematic rigour. This in turn conveys conceptual tensions in the work between harmony and disorder.

Beeswax is made from the blood and gastric juices of the bee. It recurs as a medium in ‘*frugi bonae*’, chosen for its multifarious associations and visceral properties. Hexagons and threading also repeat as visual devices. And dismembered elements of a defunct handmade beehive make their way into various artworks.

There is a visual seduction in ‘*frugi bonae*’ that can be enjoyed for what it is. However, the apparent beauty is also a tool of visual trickery to entice the viewer into looking in order to deliver an embedded critique.





## Bees

While working in the studio with beeswax, I was fortuitously gifted a book of lectures by philosopher Rudolf Steiner about bees, lectures originally delivered in the 1920s. In these addresses, Steiner set out to describe not only the practical art of beekeeping but also various social, philosophical and even esoteric aspects of these insects.

The book helped trigger the possibility of viewing bees as environmental indicators, manifesting broader collective problems on a micro scale. Bees are currently subject to various stresses and diseases that Steiner predicted all those years ago. As such, they offered themselves as an interesting artistic metaphor for exploring collective legacies in a different way. Thus began the journey towards '*frugi bonae*'.

Bees are reportedly in decline around the world, suffering from 'colony collapse disorder' (CCD). As Donaldson writes in Sunday Times: "Across the Americas, Europe and Asia, they have been dying in their billions. Hives have been struck by CCD, caused by a combination of factors like pesticides, climate change, drought and disease" (October 4, 2009). And locally, a bacterial infection called American Foul Brood has been spreading in the Western Cape. It targets the bee larvae, ultimately killing infected colonies.

It is not just honeybees that are affected. As The Economist adds, bumblebees are in distress too: intensive farming means there are fewer wildflowers from which bumblebees sip nectar and fewer hedgerows in which they can build their nests. "That is a problem for agriculture: some commercial crops, such as apples, tomatoes and strawberries, need bumblebees to pollinate them" (September 19, 2009).

Both the causes and even the extent of such phenomena are in some dispute however. There is evidence that it is normal for bee populations to increase and decrease naturally over time, while theories for their ailments seem as varied as the ailments themselves. But despite these mysteries, the general consensus appears that honeybees are in apparent distress. And since they are vital pollinators, responsible for an estimated third of what human beings eat, there are probable ramifications for our species as well as broader ecological balance.



Left: Bees & their keepers at The Honeybee Foundation, Maitland, Cape Town





Bees and the hive have through the centuries provided inspiration to philosophers, politicians, poets and the like. As Simon Schama writes in Financial Times: “The beehive, with its miraculously regular hexagonal cells, became a favourite model for poets, playwrights and political philosophers searching in the animal kingdom for an exemplum of a productive and well-governed commonwealth, with its orderly division of labour between worker drones and sedentary sovereigns ... and its prolific production of wax and honey ... Dynasties such as the Barberini of baroque Rome and the Bonapartes annexed the image of the busy bee as an emblem of beneficent tirelessness; the rulers armed to sting in the interest of the hive. As an instance of how man and insect could live in harmonious interdependence, the tended hive testified to the Creator’s genius at complementing the needs of the humble and the mighty” (June 27/28, 2009).

Schama states that the story of insects is, inevitably, also a history of man’s relative place in creation. And the more we know about the former, the more sobering the evaluation of our own species. He cites in a review of a recent book the rather sobering fact that ants constitute about the same biomass on the face of the earth as humans.

Certainly, in a world of complexity, one could look to a community of bees for inspiration. The world is in great flux and established modes of working are shifting while new ways of relating have yet to take hold. But if we are in an age where “mass collaboration changes everything”, as the author of *Wikinomics* Don Tapscott puts it on his blog, then perhaps nature can provide us with new models of ways forward.

Alison Benjamin and Brian McCallum write in their book A World Without Bees that it is the bee’s social behaviour rather than ecological importance that has fascinated people down the ages. “No other creature has in turn been used as a metaphor for feudal hierarchy, absolute monarchy, republicanism, capitalist industry and commerce as well as socialist aspirations” (2009: 14). Evolution of human society can be traced through bees, their honey and wax, as the authors suggest.

Their current distress is just the latest chapter in this rich history, which we are busy writing. What we will learn from it is another matter.

--Kim Gurney, Johannesburg, November 2009

Left: Bees and their keepers at The Honeybee Foundation, Maitland, Cape Town



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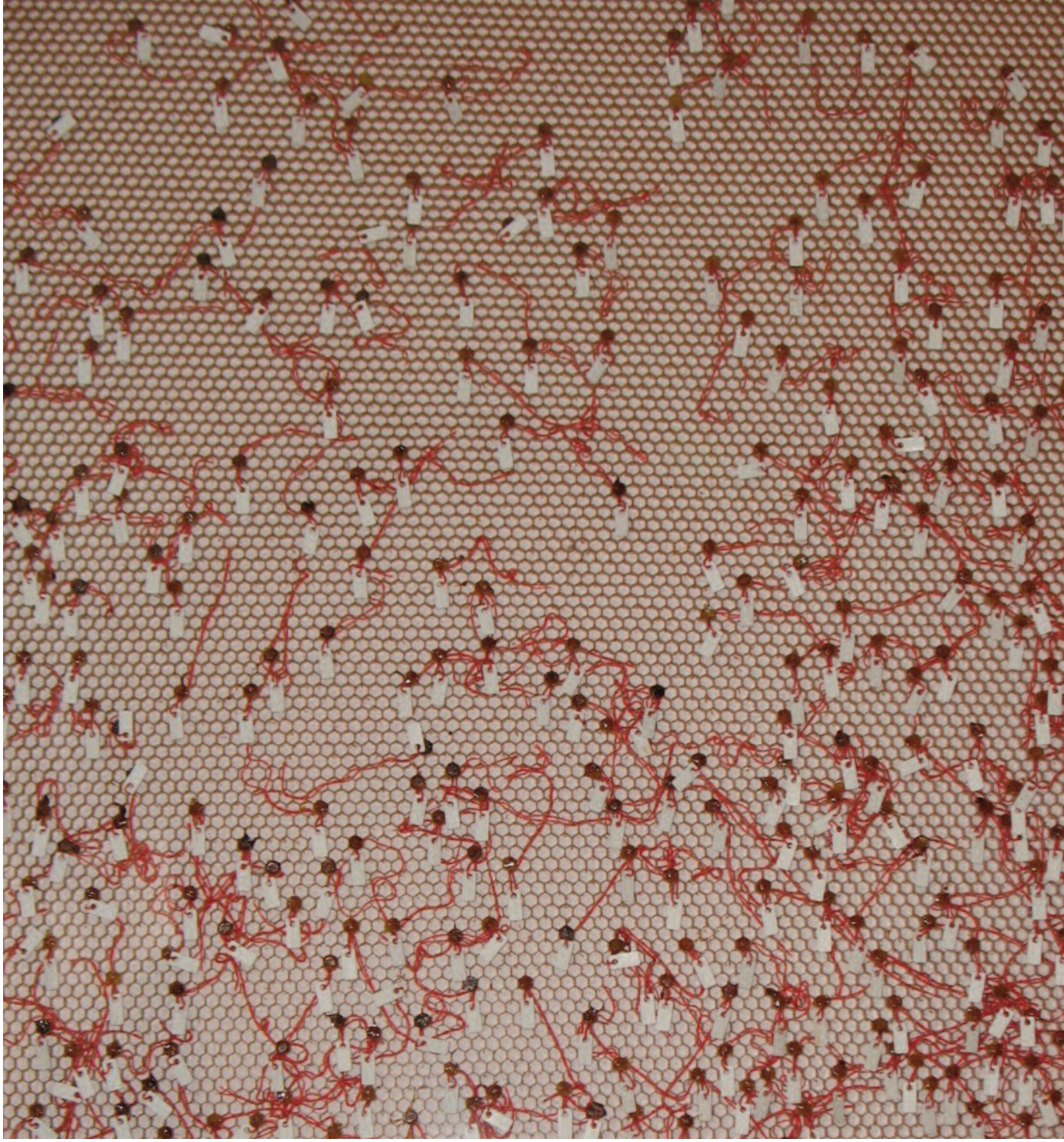
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# Catalogue of Artworks





**323 gymnosperms – IUCN Red List (2008)**

**626 insects – IUCN Red List (2008)**

**1,222 birds – IUCN Red List (2008)**

2009

honeycomb panel, string tags, wax, shellac

approx 123(h) x 99(w) x 4cm(d) (framed, width varies)

This triptych is a memorial to threatened species worldwide. The artist has selected from the 2008 IUCN Red List an example of a plant genus (gymnosperms), an invertebrate (insects) and vertebrate (birds) and created a triptych that replicates in string tags the number of threatened species for each.

The tags are left blank to reference that these species might one day cease to exist. The tags are arranged in a random bottom-heavy formation that mimics the growth of mould on an organic substance.

The red threads try to connect one with the other behind the honeycomb panel, like veins, keeping the fragile matrix of threatened species precariously alive.

Yellow wax holds each tag in place --yellow is the colour code for ‘vulnerable’ on the IUCN colour chart. Each wax plug is coated with shellac, which is a resin secreted by the female lac insect.

The honeycomb panel is an industrial core material commonly used in aeroplane manufacture. It has many unique structural properties. Its rigid hexagon format contrasts with the irregular edges of the honeycomb panel that hint at disorder and entropy.

Taken together, this triptych illustrates an incremental increase of density in threatened species as the ecosystem moves from plant genus to invertebrate to vertebrate. This mirrors a recent view, emanating from an American symposium, that vertebrates are of most concern to conservationists and are being lost most rapidly ([The Economist](#), Jan 17 2009).

Left: **626 Insects: IUCN Red List (2008)** (detail)



***A Bee, Dreaming II***

***A Bee, Dreaming III***

2009

pine coated with shellac, perspex, balsa wood, tracing paper, embroidery thread,  
honeycomb panel, neon light

144 x 50 x 12cm (each lightbox)

These wall-mounted sculptural lightboxes engage with the habitat loss that is occurring for bees as the wild flora they pollinate becomes less available to them. Local bee-pollinated flowers are therefore stitched in red, which is a colour range that bees cannot perceive.

The square format of each window and its composite square panels reference the mosaic structure of bees' eyes. Each composite square constrains contorted honeycomb panel as a comment on distorted natural order. Each window depicts a closer view of the same flower, in a dream-like sequence of a bee landing on its petals.

The boxes are backlit with neon bulbs in simulated daylight.

*A Bee, Dreaming II* depicts the blooms of a Blue Afrikaner (*Gladilolus carinatus*).

*A Bee, Dreaming III* depicts the blooms of the Impala Lily (*Adenium multiflorum*).



*A Bee, Dreaming*



***Labour of Love II***

***Labour of Love III***

beehive frames, wax petals coated with shellac, aluminium rails, castors, nuts & bolts,  
engraved perspex  
approx. 250 x 30 x 3.5cm

*Labour of Love II & III* engage with the widespread practice in commercial apiculture of trucking hired bees long distances to pollinate vast orchards of agricultural crops.

Dismembered beehive frames (where honey is created and stored) are presented on castors along an aluminium production line. The frames are recontextualised as a kind of ecological abacus for artificially coloured wax petals that hang in delicate balance.

The petals reference sweet peas, used in early genetics experiments owing to their easily observable Mendelian traits. Yellow sweet peas, however, remain elusive and only possible with genetic engineering.

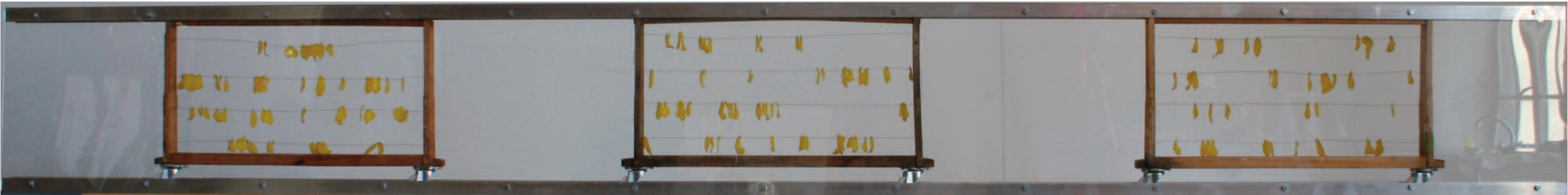
On the perspex façade is etched a natural bee-attracting bloom for each month of the year, as cyclical counterpoint to a mechanised natural process. The flowers are selected indigenous to a northern hemisphere country in *Labour of Love II* and indigenous to a southern hemisphere country in *Labour of Love III*.

The petals are coated with shellac (a resin secreted by an insect), which is used as a wood varnish and also as a preservative for some foodstuffs and sweets like Skittles.

In South Africa, about 40,000 hives are used for crop pollination (McKune, 18 May 2009). A study last year by the National Agricultural Marketing Council found that commercial bee colonies in the country added between R400-million and R1.6-billion a year to the deciduous fruit tree industry (Robertson, July 12).

*Addendum on materials:* the beehive frames used in this artwork were gifted the artist by Hennie Prinsloo. They were part of a hive handmade by his father, now deceased, who kept bees on his farm (not commercial apiculture). He also planted bee-attracting blooms for different months of the year, which inspired the idea for the perspex engravings.

Below: ***Labour of Love II***







***Algeria, Then***



***Algeria, Now***

***Algeria, Then***  
***Algeria, Now***  
***Mali, Then***  
***Mali, Now***

2009

oil on canvas

65 x 65 x 4,5cm each

These paintings engage with climate change, population growth and development – all factors cited in the speculation around possible contributory causes of declining bee populations. But they offer in their couplings a more nuanced view of topics that often evoke strident responses.

The paintings derive from satellite images of the African continent. The first pair originate in Algeria and the second pair in Mali - each landscape in both pairs is photographed twice, about 30 years apart.

The first pair, derived from images of Algeria's Ouargla province, taken together show a positive change in the landscape brought about by humankind's intervention, via the 'greening' effect of irrigation. This is in contrast to the oft negative perception of humankind's impact.

The second pair, derived from images taken at Lake Faguibine in Mali, shows a negative change in the landscape brought about by drying up over time. In 1974, Lake Faguibine covered 590km squared; 28 years later it had completely dried up due to less rain and reduced water flow from the Niger River.

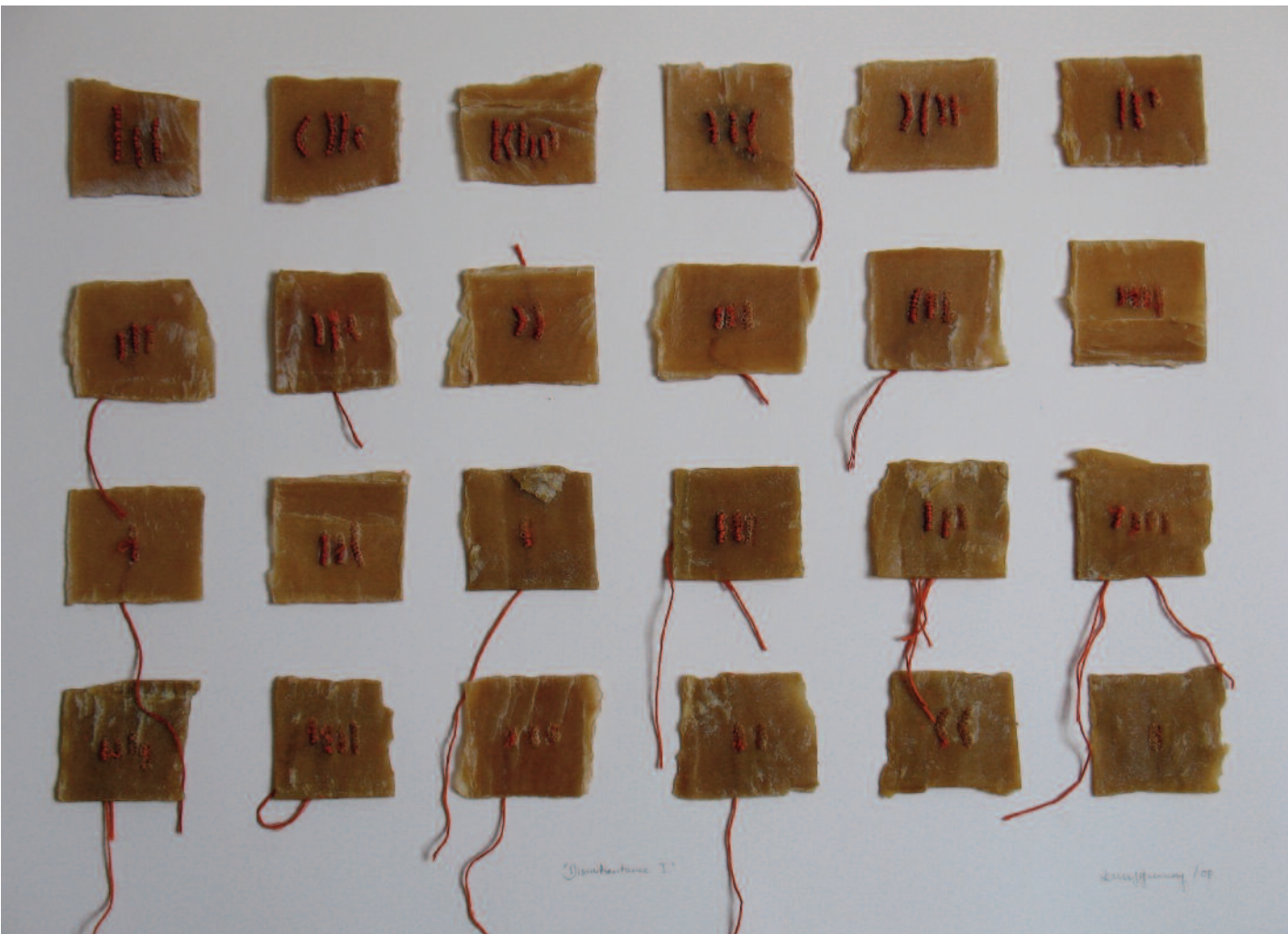
The reference images are sourced from the United Nations Environment Programme, which published them in *Africa: Atlas of Our Changing Environment* (2009).

They were taken on the following dates:

--Lake Faguibine, Mali: 03 jan 1974 & 26 Dec 1978 [composite]; & 30 Oct 2006

--Ouargla province, Algeria: 16 January 1976; & 08 March 2006.





***Disinheritance I***

## ***Disinheritance I***

## ***Disinheritance II***

2008

beeswax, embroidery thread on fabiano

87 x 67 x 4cm (framed)

This artwork engages with the idea of personal agency versus fate.

It replicates a full series of chromosomes representing an inherited human biological disease. The chromosomes (22 plus an X and Y) are stitched into flat squares of beeswax mounted in a grid-like pattern on paper.

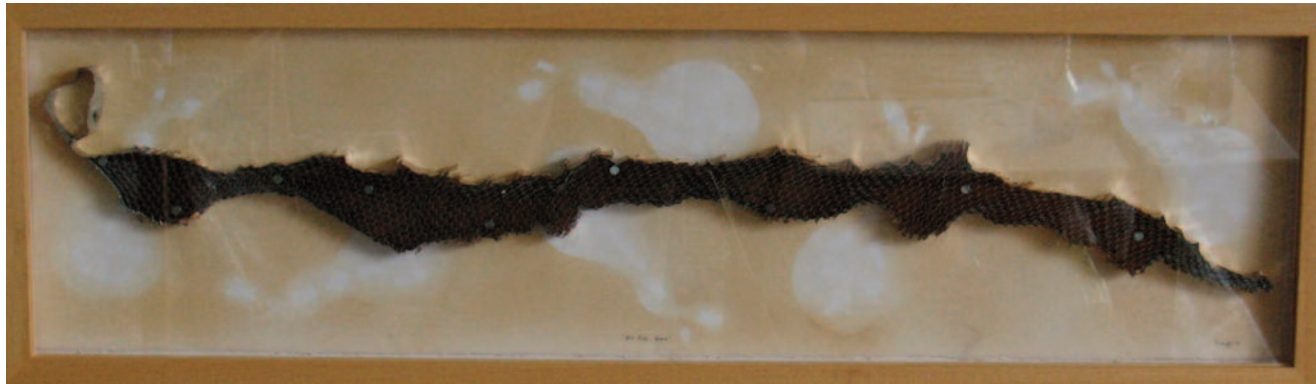
As the set progresses, the thread is incrementally unravelled until the final beeswax chromosome block is bare -- except for the needle punctures that reveal a wounded shadow of biological inheritance.

In this way, the artwork offers the view that despite inheriting a collective legacy, the individual might have the power to unwind the thread and manifest a different reality.

In the context of '*frugi bonae*', this work aims to interject the idea of individual responsibility for collective experience. It also celebrates personal agency and individual choice and the redemptive power of action.

The artwork is metaphorical and not meant to be understood in a literal sense as any kind of endorsement of eugenics. This does touch, however, on a growing ethical dilemma of our times as advances in genetic testing have made more likely the possibility of controlling genetic heredity.





***Still Life: pears; Still Life: peaches; Still Life: apples***

***Still Life: pears***

***Still Life: peaches***

***Still Life: apples***

2009

aluminium honeycomb panel, nuts & bolts, fabriano, bee-smoker stencils

100 x 26 x 4cm (unframed)

This artwork references the impact of consumption patterns upon the natural world, in particular the insistence by many first-world shoppers upon fruit with a 'perfect' appearance. This pendant requires strong insecticides to achieve that have a negative knock-on effect on other life forms, including bees.

'Perfect fruit' stencils have in this *Still Life* series been smoked onto fabriano using a bee smoker. This contraption is used by beekeepers as protection when entering a hive to divert the bees. The smoke is interpreted by the bees as a veld fire; they therefore focus on returning to the hive to consume honey in preparation for a long flight rather than on the human disturbance to the colony.

Smoke and fire has another association: American Foul Brood disease currently affecting some Western Cape hives is being treated by most beekeepers through burning to destroy the contagious bacteria.

Because smoke is linked for bees with potential crisis, it is used to create the fruit stencils.

The smoke stencils in turn provide the canvas for aluminium honeycomb panel. It stretches from end to end, devoid of bees, as it takes on an organic life of its own.



***Requiem I***  
***Requiem II***  
***Requiem III***  
***Requiem IV***

2009

found beehive panels, engraved perspex, acrylic rods, rubber washers  
43 x 18,5 x 5cm (each)

This *memento mori* of four panels commemorates bees. It gives a thematic nod to phenomena like colony collapse disorder (CCD), which is reportedly negatively affecting bee populations worldwide, as well as American Foul Brood disease, which is a contagious bacterial infection that at the time of publication was targeting Western Cape bee populations.

The perspex façades are engraved with line sketches derived from philosopher Rudolf Steiner's 1920s lectures, entitled *Bees*. The images hover as wisdom distilled for posterity over a graveyard of bees plastered to dismembered boards of a hive in painterly tribute to their former industry.

There is some dispute as to the cause of 'vanishing bees' – and even whether CCD exists. There are as many theories as there are reports about the phenomena: they range from pesticides to cellphone towers to artificial insemination of queen bees to the effects of monoculture.

The *Requiem* series comments also on the human penchant for theorising about phenomena that remain unexplained and not yet understood.



***Requiem I-IV***





## Artist's Biography

Kim Janette Gurney (35) graduated in 2006 with a BA Fine Art from Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, with a Distinction in Discourse of Art. She moved to Johannesburg in 2007 and held her first solo exhibition at Gordart gallery the following year. Kim has participated in various group exhibitions since graduation, most recently *Absa L'Atelier 2009* and *Sex, Power, Money* at Everard Read in Cape Town. She works from an inner-city studio in Johannesburg.

Kim also runs a small business called Lodestar Fine Art that assembles private collections for clients, focusing on SA emerging artists ([www.lodestartfineart.co.za](http://www.lodestartfineart.co.za)).

She is also a freelance journalist, with over a decade's experience writing for local and international media. Kim holds an MA in International Journalism from City University in London and a BJourn from Rhodes University in South Africa.

## Curriculum Vitae

### Academic qualifications

2003-2006	BA Fine Art, Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town (UCT), RSA (with Distinction in Discourse of Art)
1997-1998	MA International Journalism, City University, London, UK
1993-1996	B Journalism with Distinction, Rhodes University, RSA (Economics major)

### Solo exhibitions

2008	<i>'Disjecta Membra'</i> : Gordart gallery, 3rd Avenue, Melville, Johannesburg (March 15 – April 7). Catalogue published.
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### Group exhibitions

2009	<i>Sex, Power, Money</i> : Everard Read, 3 Portswood Road, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town (October 8-21)
2009	<i>ABSA L'Atelier Art Awards</i> : 100 Finalist 2009 (July 24 – Aug 21). Curator: Cecile Loedolff. Catalogue published.
2009	<i>Thami Mnyele Fine Arts Award</i> : Coen Scholtz Recreation Centre, Kempton Park, Gauteng (June 27 – July 9). Curator: Hanolet Uys.



2008-09	‘ <i>Twenty Artists Twenty Portraits</i> ’: UCA Gallery, 48 Lower Main Rd, Observatory, Cape Town (Dec 17 – Jan 24, 2009)
2008	‘ <i>Ekurhuleni National Fine Arts Award</i> ’: Coen Scholtz Recreation Centre: Kempton Park, Gauteng (June 21 – July 16)
2007	‘ <i>Exhibition of Drawing &amp; Painting</i> ’: Spencer Street Studios, Woodstock, Cape Town
2006	‘ <i>Graduate Show</i> ’: Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT. Catalogue published.

Publications

Arts Journalism	
2005-07	News Editor of <i>Art South Africa</i> quarterly magazine & regular contributor of numerous articles, reviews, profiles, etc.
2004-06	Cape Editor of <i>ArtThrob</i> online visual arts publication & regular contributor of numerous articles, reviews, profiles, etc. (www.artthrob.co.za)
2003-04, 06	Fortnightly arts & culture talk show host, Fine Music Radio, Western Cape

Fine Art Catalogues

Arnott, B.M. 2008. A Catalogue of Sculptures 1961-2004 with an introductory essay by Kim Gurney [in production].

Unite, J. 2008. Earthscars: A Visual Mining Journey with an introductory essay Visual Prospects: the art of Jeannette Unite by Kim Gurney [in production].

McInnes, J. (curator) 2007. A Legacy of Men at Johannesburg Art Gallery 25 November 2007 – 18 January 2008, with an introductory essay *Engendering Debate* by Kim Gurney.

Graham’s Fine Art Gallery, 2007. Birth of the Modernist Body (with editorial contributions by Kim Gurney & others). Graham’s Fine Art Gallery: Johannesburg

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Conferences

2003 (27-30 August): The 3rd Impact International Printmaking Conference, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town, RSA

2005 (Dec 5-7): Sessions eKapa, Cape Africa Platform, Cape Town International Convention Centre

Achievements & awards

2003-06:	Dean’s Merit List, UCT Humanities Department
2004:	Golden Key International Honour Society membership for outstanding academic achievement and excellence
2004:	Humanities Faculty Scholarship: UCT
2003:	Class Medal: Foundation Course, Michaelis, UCT
2003:	Class Medal: Discourse of Art, Michaelis, UCT
1998:	Young Financial Journalist of the Year runner-up (Scottish Widows & Money Marketing), UK
1996:	Full academic colours & Masters scholarship: Rhodes University
1996:	Victor Norton Award for Excellence in Writing and Editing, Rhodes University
1996:	Achievement Award (News Team), RMR: Rhodes University
1991:	Jim Coupland Prize for Art: Pinelands High School, Cape Town
1991:	Whitford Griffiths Award for Character & Service to Fellow Pupils; Full academic colours, Half & Team colours for numerous sport & cultural activities: Pinelands High School

Abbreviated work experience (Other)

2001-09:	Freelance Journalist: London, UK (2001-03); & RSA (2003-present) for various publications including stringer for <u>Newsweek</u> Africa bureau
1998-2001:	Various editorial roles within <u>Financial Times Business</u> : London (UK), including News Editor of weekly newspaper <u>Investment Adviser</u>
1998:	Work experience: <u>The Times</u> and <u>Line One</u> ( <u>News International</u> online): London (vacation work while reading towards MA Intl Journ)
1997:	Weekend Reporter: <u>KFM</u> regional radio station: Cape, RSA
1996:	News Manager, Reporter & Presenter: <u>RMR</u> (community radio station): Rhodes University, Grahamstown, RSA
	Journalism Tutor: Rhodes University
1995:	Deputy News Editor, Reporter & News Compiler: <u>RMR</u>
1993-94:	News Presenter & Compiler: <u>RMR</u> & <u>Festival FM</u>



## Acknowledgements

With special thanks to the following people, who helped make this exhibition a reality:

Teresa Lizamore & the Artspace staff  
Edgar Pieterse, for his opening words

For their special support during the creation of this body of work:

Kobus Brümmer  
Jacki McInnes  
Gordon Froud  
The Gurney family

And for assistance during research and sourcing:

Hennie Prinsloo  
Greg Duggan & Dominique Marchand of the Honeybee Foundation in Maitland  
James Sleigh

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Published by Kim Gurney, Johannesburg, November 2009  
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