

Dissolution – City of Gold

A critical text by Andrew Meldrum and Ralph Borland

The gritty east side of Johannesburg is studded with towering mounds of earth, sandy tailings; leftovers from the extraction of ore. A distinctive yellow ochre, the heaps stand beside the city's highways and disrupt the grid of commercial streets. Some are pristine while others are collapsed and overgrown with vegetation. When these dull dunes, several stories high, are hit by late afternoon sun, they gleam. Seen from above, the city appears surrounded by a labyrinth of these man-made landmarks, the residue of rich veins dug up in the 1880s gold rush that created Johannesburg.

Now the wastelands are being mined anew, re-processed by mining companies using modern technology to squeeze out their last wealth. On the other end of the economic scale, informal miners, often illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe, tunnel and dig around the outskirts, searching for more of the gold left behind along with any other valuable metals they can find to eke out an existence. Nature, too, is working its way into these sights with grasses, plants and crooked trees trying to reclaim and restore the veld to what it was before mining dug it up.

This is the urban, historic, grindingly poor yet lively area from which Michele Mathison has drawn inspiration for his new body of work, *Dissolution*. The work explores the geographical marks and continued tensions of Johannesburg's mineral wealth that created astounding fortunes by sending thousands deep beneath the ground into lives of sweat, toil and exploitation. The world's largest ever gold rush facilitated the racial injustice of apartheid and even today South Africa and its neighbouring states still struggle with an unsettling disparity of wealth.

From his studio in the East Rand, situated on Main Reef Road, once the major artery to the gold mines stretching East to West, Mathison has been investigating these histories by collecting material from the mine dumps and their environs. Around his workplace, there is evidence of both the mining of the past and the continuing quest for minerals.

The mining companies use heavy machinery and powerful jets of water to erode the hillsides. Nearby, illegal small-scale miners, the *Zama Zamas* (Zulu slang for chance-takers), are the modern-day prospectors. They burrow beneath the ground in precarious hand-dug tunnels, or construct temporary waterways to wash out the remaining fragments of gold from the soil, barely scratching a living from the waste.

Dissolution features a range of works that use the remnants of this human activity. Wall-mounted relief panels of roughly a metre-square that reconstruct the ground from these landscapes combine with steel sculptures that echo the surrounding vegetation and broken infrastructure. Like Borges' map that grew to the size of the territory itself, these extractions from the landscape can be seen at once as one-to-one depictions or aerial views of the same ground. Laying a grid on the landscape in this way echoes archaeological or forensic approaches, recording and focusing in on a square at a time to see what each reveals.

Looking up close at the ochre, red and black panels – aggregates of soil, gravel, slag and steel excavated from these wastelands – smaller details emerge. Caught in the surface of some are fine wires or hairs, like plant fibres. These are the remnants of cables left from vagrants burning car tyres on the mine dumps to extract their scrap metal. In one

panel is a fragment of a tin plate, which could be up to 100 years old. Tattered seams of plastic appear in others; chips of waste coal and steel become the palette for these painting-like works.

These are the historical traces of the economic spectrum on which the mines sit: from the tailings of large-scale global industry to the scraps left behind by itinerant workers. This economic disparity contains many of the tensions that persist in southern Africa, between capital and labour, between the haves and the have-nots, pointing to continued contestation over who owns the mineral wealth beneath the soil and who should benefit from it.

Mathison works his reliefs by recycling the discarded aggregate, eroding away lighter material in a manner that mimics both the manufactured processes of extraction and the natural weathering of the landscape. In addition to the human activities that rapidly shape rock and soil are the forces of nature, of wind and water, playing out over longer periods of time. He plays on this ambiguity in both the panels and in the sculptures that accompany them: tree branches, grasses and Futurist compositions made from industrial metal bar and tube.

The plants are based on the species which grow on the mine dumps: a combination of intentional plantings by the mine companies to reduce dangerous wind-blown dust, and the hardy survivors of natural selection. Together they create an alluring view of the natural bushveld. In *Rest and Remainder*, a fallen tree branch is reaching out its limbs, seemingly at rest on its granite pedestal while at the same time summoning the labyrinth of arteries where miners dig. It is constructed from steel and zinc – metals which occupy another point on their continuum from rock, via ore, to usable commercial material.

The sculptures grow from cut sections of road tarmac and gravel or rest on plinths of sliced stone like that used for pavements, intermingling with the materials of the built environment as urban plants do. They are constructed through the multiplication of simple repeated elements to create branching forms, the way a tree builds itself following its own genetic code or the internal lattice-work structure of reinforced concrete. This representation echoes and amplifies the ambiguity between natural and fabricated elements that plays across this body of work.

Dissolution erodes and exposes, revealing materials and stories from beneath the surface. Taken together, the evocative panels and bent sculptures arouse a vision of the continuing quest that is mining. Carried within fragments of these unique materials is a narrative of Johannesburg's riches and impoverishment and the lives that have been caught up in that for more than 100 years.

-