

POISONED FUTURES?

Exploring the complex global entanglements
of climate change, environmental justice
and human survival

WORKS ON DISPLAY IN OUTDOOR SPACES

Lisl Ponger interrogates the entangled legacies of extraction, imperialism and global capital. Her work examines how historical and contemporary systems of power continue to shape uneven geographies of suffering and privilege. We are compelled to consider how such structures not only poison the present, but foreclose the possibility of equitable and liveable futures. We are compelled to ask questions.

WILD PLACES, 2021 @ LISL PONGER

A critique of the commodification of Indigenous cultures through an image-based taxonomy of 'exotic' consumption.

EL TÍO, 2025 @ LISL PONGER

A symbolic exploration of colonial extractivism through the figure of the Bolivian mining deity - protector and destroyer - who presides over poisoned earth.

PANG'ONO PANG'ONO, 2022 @ LAURA EL-TANTAWY

The work explores the emotional and physical toll on women in Malawi in their quest to access clean water. The title — Pang'Ono Pang'Ono or little by little — is borrowed from a colloquial Chichewa expression referencing time and urging patience — used here to metaphorically reflect on the sentiment around water. With a population of nearly 21 million people, Malawi is one of the smallest and least-developed countries in Africa. Although the country has an abundance of water — with around 24,404 square kilometres flowing through its fertile land, including Lake Malawi, the third-largest freshwater lake on the continent — providing clean water to every single citizen is a national problem. One in three people live without it. Considered a domestic chore, the responsibility of securing water falls predominantly on the shoulders of women.

This work was originally commissioned by WaterAid.

LIFE IN PLASTIC, 2023 © GULSHAN KHAN

While Plastic pollution has become a dangerous global problem, for some, recycling means the difference between a meal or going hungry every day.

Poverty, unemployment seeking better opportunities far from their homes and often drug dependence has caused many people to turn to the urban informal economy for survival; a life that, especially for waste pickers, means living on the fringes of society.

While South Africa slowly moves toward formalising the recycling sector, working in the informal waste economy results in waste pickers facing numerous challenges every day from exposure to unhealthy working conditions, stigmatisation, volatile changes to the market and even turf fighting.

A study by the University of the Western Cape shows that South Africa generates about 54,425 tonnes a day of waste and that there is about R17-billion (£703m) worth of waste that goes to landfill every year, which remains uncollected for reuse or recycling.

The informal waste sector employs an estimated 60-90k people, who are self-employed waste pickers, collecting a high percentage of South Africa's recyclables. On average, they work between 8 and 14 hours a day, for a meagre daily wage between R50 (£2) and R100 (£4) a day.

This short story is about the waste pickers / reclaimers in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2018.

WE CAN'T BREATHE, 2023 © GULSHAN KHAN

The concentration of mining and energy production has positioned Emalahleni as a critical hub in South Africa's energy infrastructure, but the intensive operations have led to severe environmental degradation including air and water pollution, land degradation and the presence of unrehabilitated mine dumps. Communities have reported health problems attributed to the pollution from mining activities. Children are particularly affected, with increased incidences of asthma and other health complications.

While mining has brought economic opportunities, it has also introduced challenges. The "Deadly Air" case was initiated in June 2019 to compel the South African government to address the severe air pollution in the Highveld Priority Area (HPA). The case, which argued that the government's inaction constituted a violation of the right to an environment not detrimental to health, was heard in 2021 and resulted in a ruling in favor of the plaintiffs.

There is a growing movement advocating for the rehabilitation of mining sites, investment in renewable energy, and the implementation of policies that prioritize community health and environmental protection.

This work tells the personal stories of those affected.

We can't breathe was originally commissioned by Climate Visuals, A Climate Outreach Project (climatevisuals.org)

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

GULSHAN KHAN

Gulshan Khan is a contemporary South African photographer whose work focuses on themes related to human rights, social justice, identity, culture and the dignity of people. Her visual reflections of the human condition and the world around her continue to be driven by these themes, offering poignant insights into the complexities of contemporary life.

Born in South Africa, Gulshan's early life was shaped by the dynamics of her community, particularly the experiences of marginalised groups and the historical impact of colonisation and apartheid. This upbringing played a significant role in influencing her later work, particularly in addressing underrepresented communities and the importance of visual representation.

Over time, Gulshan's work has become increasingly focused on social justice and identity, using her lens to challenge traditional narratives and to bring attention to issues often overlooked in mainstream media.

Gulshan was the first woman in South Africa to be appointed as a Canon Ambassador.

LAURA EL-TANTAWY

Laura El-Tantawy is an award winning British/Egyptian documentary photographer, book maker & educator. Born in Ronkswood in Worcestershire, UK, to Egyptian parents, she studied in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the US & UK. Living between East and West throughout her life has deeply influenced her artistic journey, providing a rich cultural tapestry for her work.

Investigating notions of home and belonging, Laura routinely approaches her work from a social and environmental sensibility drawing on her transatlantic background. Her visual explorations often intertwine moving images, sound, and personal narratives, marked by the artist's lyrical eye on reality.

Laura embraces her identity as an independent visual creative, valuing the freedom to explore and challenge traditional boundaries. Through her work, she aims to create socially engaged, thought-provoking visual narratives that challenge perceptions and inspire transformative change. She often collaborates with like-minded individuals, institutions, and organisations committed to responsible storytelling and positive social change.

Since 2020, Laura has been a Canon Global Ambassador.

LISL PONGER

Lisl Ponger is a Vienna-based visual artist whose multidisciplinary practice explores stereotypes, racism, and the construction of the gaze. Working at the intersection of art, art history, and ethnography, she utilises photography, film, installation, and text to challenge cultural narratives and highlight issues of identity, memory and power dynamics.

Lisl is well known for her staged photography, described as akin to "making a Hollywood movie in one day". This approach blends cinematic grandeur with intricate symbolism, as seen in the images in this exhibition. Drawing inspiration from figures like Indiana Jones and André Malraux, her project MuKulMuseum: The Museum for Foreign and Familiar Cultures critiques Western museums' history of housing plundered works.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, she collaborated with Hundred Heroines to curate an online film festival spotlighting women-centred narratives. Lisl continues to live and work in Vienna, creating art that probes cultural hierarchies and reimagines historical narratives.