

A LAND I NAME YESTERDAY

By Robyn Sassen

Picture a thicket you have to meander through. But the barbs and snags in this thicket are not comprised of thorns or twigs. It's a metaphysical thicket of ideas and line work, of recorded brainwaves and German woodcuts cut up and put together again. It's a thicket from which you might not emerge the same, as it skirts from clear answers and embroils the audience in its concerns. This is the work of Jenna Burchell, Wayne Matthews and Jaco van Schalkwyk, titled *A Land I Name Yesterday*, which opens at Barnard, Cape Town in October.

Burchell explains that in their collaborative work, they're searching for "a vulnerability... which you can't dictate or control or define or answer." Educated at Pretoria University in the 2000s, she topped off her degree with an anti-disciplinarian focus that didn't leave her popular. "I wanted to disregard established categories and reinvestigate them for myself." Today she works with sound and three-dimensions. Her work on the show is meshed into the innards of Matthews' and van Schalkwyk's work – while it is not as visual as theirs, it offers cohesion.

Self-educated in many ways, Matthews dropped out of school as a teenager and swapped time spent as an artist's model for art lessons. He studied at UNISA and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. But chance, in the opinion of this artist who is an Ampersand fellow in 2019, is what makes magic happen.

So, what is this project? Is it a solo? Is it a three (wo)men show? Is it a traditional collaboration? The three laugh. "The

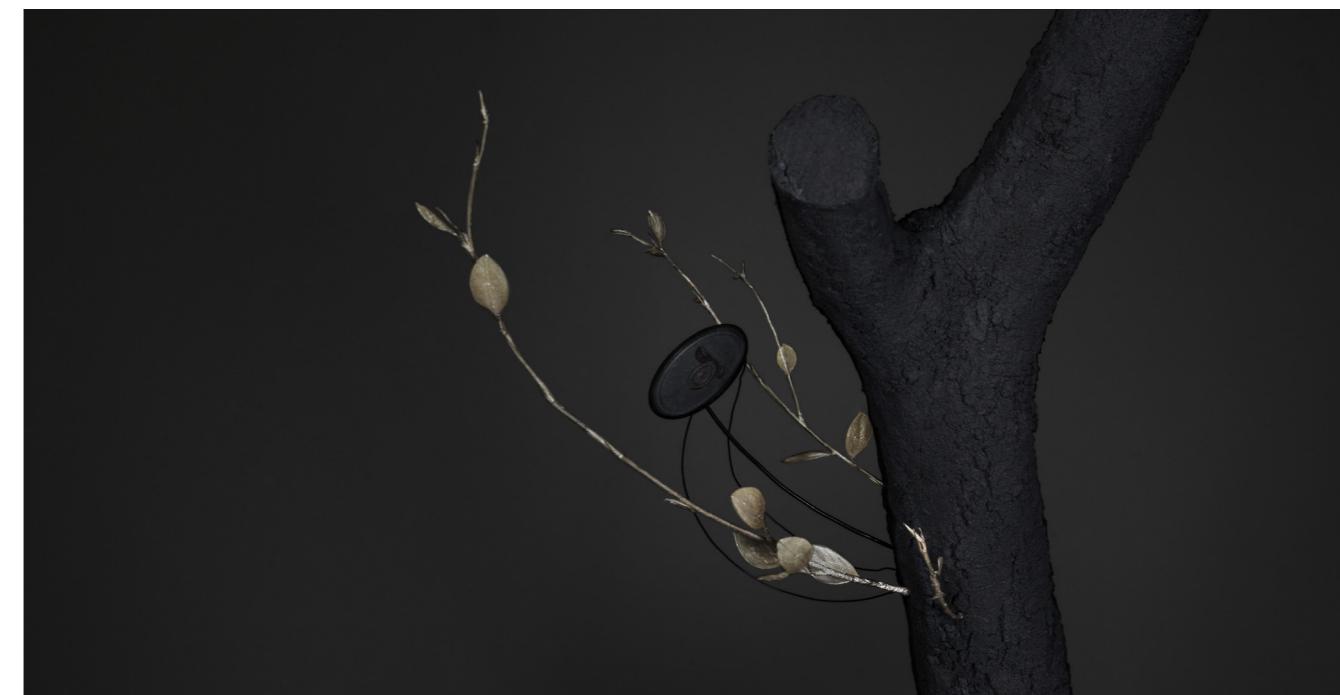
more uncomfortable it is, the better," adds Matthews. But looking at the work in process in Van Schalkwyk's studio, it's clear that this is *a pas de trois*. Burchell adds, "We're becoming more entangled as we explore the show." The artists have not known each other long, but there's a syncing of thoughts and trust which allows them to speak for one another.

Burchell says the whole gallery experience is of as much concern to Van Schalkwyk as the works. "This is where we connected in our thinking: as you step into the gallery, everything matters." Van Schalkwyk has been represented by Barnard for almost 10 years. Based in Johannesburg, he read for a degree in the histories – Art history, Anthropology and Archaeology at UNISA, and then was apprenticed by artist Marie Breedt. "I fell in love with Wayne's work when first I encountered it," he says. "And then, I met Jenna; she became the suture that mends everything."

In 2013, Van Schalkwyk won a residency at the German island of Sylt. It was part of his merit award on the Absa L'Atelier competition. Travelling to an island to make art seems Edenic, but it showed him how paradise flaws. "When I arrived, it was winter, it was grey. My landscape painting became monochromatic from that experience."

Matthews works with three volumes of woodcuts published in Germany in the 1890s. These books comprised woodcuts

of paintings that the publishers of the time deemed important. But by and large, they were wrong. Burchell describes Matthews' approach as: "dismantling and rebuilding. Those books are a finite resource; I love that they are slowly wearing thinner and his collages often have an absence. I really connect with their liminality."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jaco van Schalkwyk painting while his brainwaves are being recorded via a EEG recording device. Wayne Matthews, *Simon, Sisyphus and the sin of Simony - A Veiling Trope*, 2018-2019. Collage, 45 x 42.5cm. Jenna Burchell, *That Which Now Only Lives In Memory*, 2019. Sound Sculpture, Carbon, bronze, speakers, circuitry, 160 x 62 x 62cm. All images courtesy of the artist & Barnard.

Deeming himself a techno philistine, Matthews is invested in shifting images by literally cutting them up and remaking them. Similarly, much of Burchell's work deals with wounding and repair – when she's not playing with Van Schalkwyk and Matthews' brainwaves, she works with compressed carbon, also a product of trees. The three think of forestry; of German Romanticism and how the landscape mutates but stays the

same. They discuss how their work teeters around conservation and where human presence could or should fit.

"We're creating a new land, a new world," says Van Schalkwyk.

'A Land I Name Yesterday' will be at Barnard, South Africa, from 29 October until 26 November 2019.

Robyn Sassen is an independent arts critic, who has degrees from the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of South Africa. She has extensive media experience at both online and print publications and runs a blog focused on the arts.