



THE ISLE OF TOVAH

Suzette le Roux

2023



G O R

B E G O L E B E R G

D E V O N I D E R

Katberg

Elm

Dr Heep

Dr Bla

W. S. H. W. G.

Dr. P. H. M.

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2023



Cover: Suzette le Roux, *Three 5* (2023).

IFC: Suzette le Roux, *Three 5* (2023). Detail.

Fig 1. Suzette le Roux, *The Isle of Tovah, bird's eye view* (2023).

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INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on our troubled world, I inadvertently came upon the work of South African artist, Walter Battiss. I was intrigued by his concept of the imaginary Fook Island, a place with its own language, alphabet, stamps and currency, functioning as a critique of Apartheid. Battiss travelled internationally using his Fook Island passport, even presenting his Fook Island driving licence in the USA (<https://www.walterbattissart.co.za/fook-island>). Conceptually different, yet it inspired me to embark on my own utopian project.

Fig 2. Suzette le Roux, *Five 1* (2023). Triptych, panel 1.



BACKGROUND

Inspired by the penguins of the isolated Dyer Island (<https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/2384>), I began visualising a perfect place for family and friends, referring to it as the Isle of Tovah. The word tovah originates from ancient Hebrew, meaning 'good' or 'pleasant'. It also refers to the goodness of God, and is associated with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is the holiest, most solemn of all Jewish religious holidays. Atonement references penance and forgiveness, reaching across a divide towards reconciliation (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yom-Kippur>).

Penguins remind us of humans. They walk upright and have human characteristics. They are also curious, friendly, gregarious - and irritable (Prevost & Gill 2023). The penguins of Dyer Island have faced a perilous journey and many hardships to get there. I propose that they function as a metaphor for those who have persevered through life's hardships, eventually finding peace and harmony.

Fig 3. Suzette le Roux, *Five 2* (2023). Triptych, panel 2.



THEME

I invited friends and family to become citizens of the Isle of Tovah as a way to include them in my creative process and works. I requested handwritten letters from each person, inviting them to share their life stories and their visions of a utopian space. These newly-minted citizens inspire the culture of the Isle of Tovah. Its official currency is the Tollar, a combination of the words 'tolerance' and 'dollar'. Like other independent states, it has its own flag and anthem. Access to the Isle of Tovah is limited to Tovah passport holders who have to travel by sea to reach the island.

Fig 4. Suzette le Roux, *Five 3* (2023). Triptych, panel 3.

INFLUENCES

I am inspired by the work of Hannelore Baron, a German-American artist. Without any formal art training, Baron's abstract paintings are combined with drawings and sculptural elements in boxed collages. These enclose hidden objects, secrets and memories. Baron conveys the ephemerality of life, the mysticism of human experience and the injustice of war in these intricate mixed-media works (<http://hannelorebaron.net/about.html>).



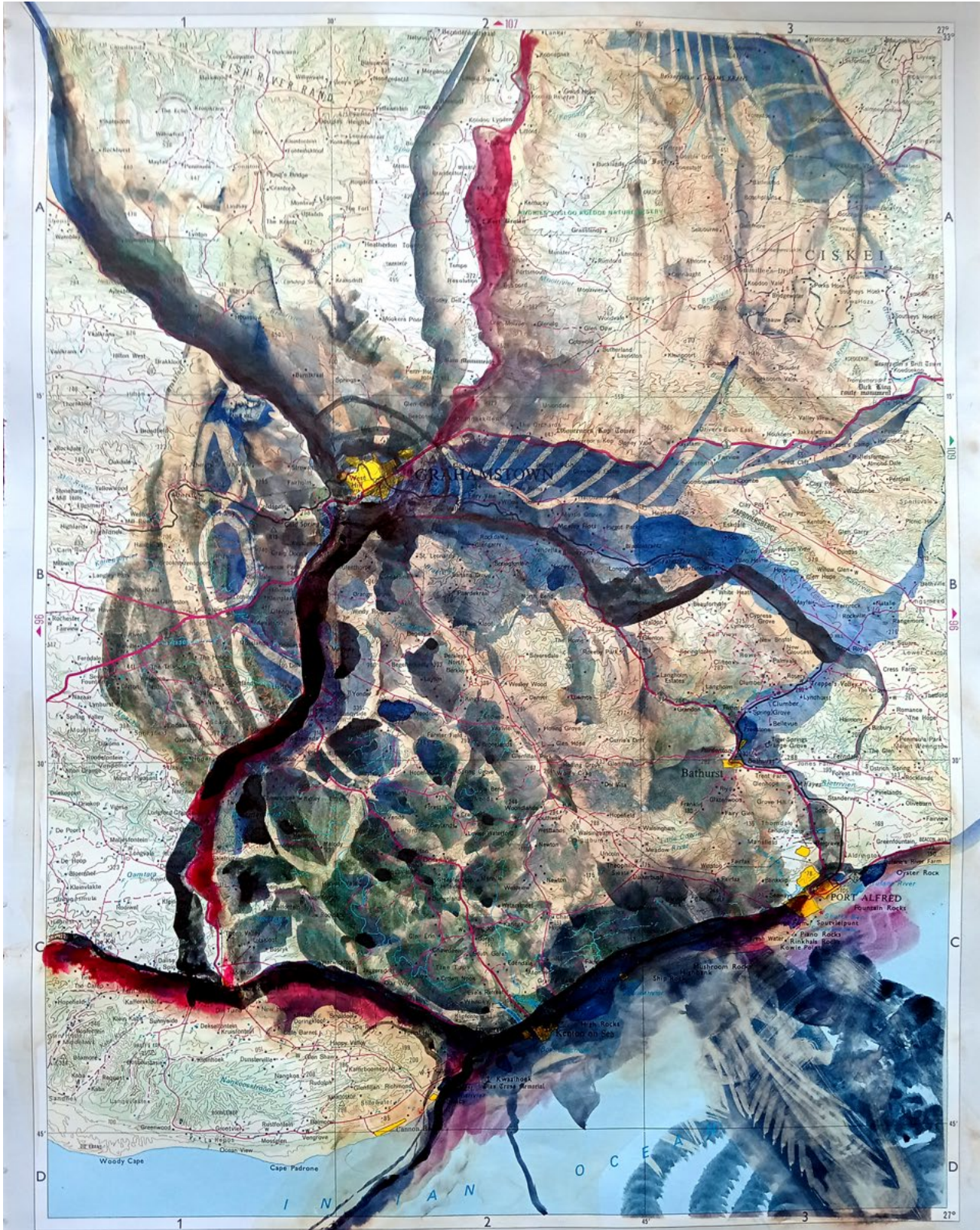
Fig 5. Hannelore Baron, *Untitled* (1982).

The second significant influence is South African artist, Nomthunzi Mashalaba who creates intriguing, ambiguous works that evade explicit meaning. Mashalaba conceals text beneath fragile, jewel coloured layers to convey the fallibility of memory and perception (Everard Read London 2023).



Fig 6. Nomthunzi Mashalaba, *Shadow beings in all the empty spaces* (2014-2018).





1:250 000 Kilometres 0 5 10 15 20 25 Kilometres

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fireworks Airfield Main road Secondary road Track Walking trails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Railways Power lines Telecommunication towers International boundaries Shore, banks and places of worship Post offices, police stations and schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Urban areas Small centres Perennial water Non-perennial water Contours and spot heights Lighthouses
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Fig 9. Suzette le Roux, *Three 4* (2023).

METHODOLOGY

This project documents my life's journey and those of the people who are dearest to me. Inspired by my 90-year-old mother, the Isle of Tovah is the culmination of a journey to personal liberation and a heightened sense of self-awareness. I wish to share this utopian position with those who have experienced hardship, disappointment and loss – and yet have had the tenacity to endure. Fragments of fabric, paper and the letters from loved ones are embedded in the works, revealed and concealed beneath pen and ink sketches or transformed by Adobe Illustrator.

TRENCH WARFARE IS BORN

It was going to be a walkover. Three thousand five hundred men of Britain's Highland Brigade marched across the dark plains of the north eastern Cape Colony. Their mission: to rout the Boers up on Magerfontein Ridge. Major-General Andrew Wauchope thought the battle would be a more formal one. But the Boers, as usual, had a trick up their sleeve. Instead of waiting for the British on top of Magerfontein Ridge, Boer commander General Koops de la Rey had positioned his men in trenches at the base of the ridge.

The Highlanders halted 400 metres from the invisible Boers. A shot rang out from the ridge above and was followed instantly by the deafening roar of 6,000 Mausers. The British fanned out in confusion, some stumbling heroically to the trenches where they were either shot by the enemy or blown up by their own artillery. For nine hours the Highland Brigade was pinned down by the devastating fire from the trenches. At the end of the day 902 of their own men and 236 Boers were dead.

The fury of trench warfare was first unleashed at Middel River on 28 November 1899, when the Commanding Officer of Britain's First Infantry Division, Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen led 8,000 men north toward the confluence of the Modder and Riet rivers. Three thousand Boers, hidden behind the river banks, unleashed a fusillade that cut down 500 British soldiers. The Boers lost 80 men.

Trench warfare again proved its worth at the battle of Colenso when General Sir Redvers Buller, the British Commander-in-Chief, saw his infantry collapse in the face of Boer fire power. Ignoring General Buller's orders, the commander of the artillery, Colonel C. Long, took his batteries dangerously close to Boer positions along the Tugela River. Again the roar of Mausers broke out, critically wounding Long and isolating his artillery from General Buller's main force. To the west, the Fifth Brigade, led by Major-General Arthur Hart, marched into the middle of a network of Boer trenches at a loop in the Tugela River and was caught by Boer rifle fire from three directions. Wounded men lay writhing on the ground under the blazing African sun. Heroic, but suicidal attempts were made to rescue the stranded guns in front of the Tugela and men rose together and fell under a constant hail of bullets. Eventually, General Buller pulled his troops out of the field and ordered the guns to be abandoned.

Boer commandos strike back

By December 1900, British General Lord Roberts could tell a cheery urban anecdote that the war was practically over. Pretoria was in British hands. President Kruger had fled to Europe, and the remaining Boer forces were a holly mixture of British troops. The war was over. But the war of guerrillas was over, for money and more later war had the Boers the very best of both worlds: lightning raids, the use of barbed wire, burning farms and concentration camps.



Spioenkop The furious battle for Spioenkop took a heavy toll on both sides. The Boer commander of the Orange commandos, General Koops de la Rey, had shot his leg before he went into action against the British. He died of his wounds during the battle of Spioenkop.



Colenso The British attack on Colenso collapsed. A Boer sniper shot General Buller's horse, and the British were forced to retreat. Buller's army was severely weakened by the battle.

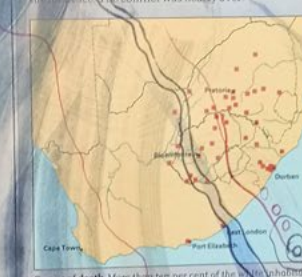
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THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

British General Lord Roberts ordered the construction of concentration camps for the families of the Boers – the only humane alternative, said Roberts, to leaving women and children alone and unprotected in the bare veld. As the war progressed, the camps became overcrowded, disease-ridden concentration camps. By the end of the war, 27,927 Boers, most of them children, were in the camps. The concentration camps were not built to house the guerrilla war by rounding up the families of commandos in the fields, and then to use the camps as a base to devastate their crops and to lay down their arms. Commandos were the best of thousands of blacks, most of whom were on Boer farms, were herded into camps. More than ten per cent of the white population of the Boer states died in the concentration camps. In all, 10,000 blacks died in the camps – half of them between November 1901 and January 1902. As the war dragged on, Lord Kitchener's tactics started paying off. The Boers began to end the grief and suffering of their families in the camps, went to the negotiating table to end the conflict. The conflict was nearly over.



Camps of death More than ten per cent of the white population of the Boer states died in the concentration camps.

Guerrilla warfare Mounted riflemen, spurred on by the Boer commandos, struck deep into enemy territory, destroying railway depots, bridges and supply columns. But Kitchener's scorched earth policy eventually broke the effectiveness of these raids.

MY WORK

My work maps this imaginary place as a geographical location. It is based on a place with personal significance, Dyer Island, close to Franskraal in the Western Cape. The Isle of Tovah is a utopian place, reflecting what is inherent within us all, namely the capacity for goodness, morality and resilience. A place where the human spirit can flourish and bloom in genuine interaction with nature. It is more important than ever to be utopian, especially in the 21st century, to believe in, advocate for and work towards a better world (Sargent 2021:454).

The Isle of Tovah and its narratives emerge as a tapestry interwoven with threads of community, interconnection, kindness and hope. Barbara Kingsolver's 1998 novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, serves as a perennial caution. It may be compared to what is happening in the world today: the powerful impose their will on the powerless using culture, religion or politics. Kingsolver subtly reveals the interconnectedness of human lives and the consequences of the choices we make.

My artworks include banknotes, artist's books and various mixed media artworks. Drawing inspiration from the design of banknotes from various countries and international banknote designers, the banknotes are embedded with secure patterns created in Adobe Illustrator.



CONCLUSION

Battiss's Fook Island concept inspired me to consider my own interpretation of a utopian place. Although Fook Island and the Isle of Tovah have different political and social underpinnings, there are similarities in the creation of a currency. My artworks, inspired by the notion of a fictional place, reflect the yearning for a utopian space where humans can flourish in peace within the natural world. A place that encourages personal growth and liberation inspired by utopian principles. The penguins are a metaphor for human tenacity while the island symbolises our interconnected existence. The final artworks are a manifestation of an imagined hope.

Fig 11. Suzette le Roux, *Three 5* (2023).

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Fig 14. Suzette le Roux, *Untitled* (2023).



Fig 15. Suzette le Roux, *Tollar* (2023).



Fig 16. Suzette le Roux, *Tollar reverse* (2023).

BIOGRAPHY

Suzette Le Roux is inspired by the natural beauty of God's creation. Entranced by the sounds and colours of the mountains and rivers of Waterval Boven where she spent her childhood, her love of art was ignited.

After matriculating, she studied teaching and taught school for several years. She currently works as a designer of secure documents, including the South African passport.

Suzette studied design and painting at the Ernst de Jongh Academy of Fine Art, where her work gradually turned towards abstraction. In 2018, she joined Unisa, studying for a degree in Visual Arts.

Her media of choice for *The Isle of Tovah* (2023) includes ink, bleach and mixed media. Guided by chance, the effects are aligned with the notion of change and transformation.

EXHIBITIONS

June 2011	Group Exhibition of Ernst de Jongh Art Academy, Alice Gallery, Roodepoort.
March 2021	<i>Rocket Man and Stargazers</i> , Johan van Heerden Art Gallery.
February 2022	<i>Postcards from the Edge</i> , Johan van Heerden Art Gallery.

Fig 17. Suzette le Roux, *Drawing on old map* (2023).

IBC: Suzette le Roux, *Three 4 detail* (2023).

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