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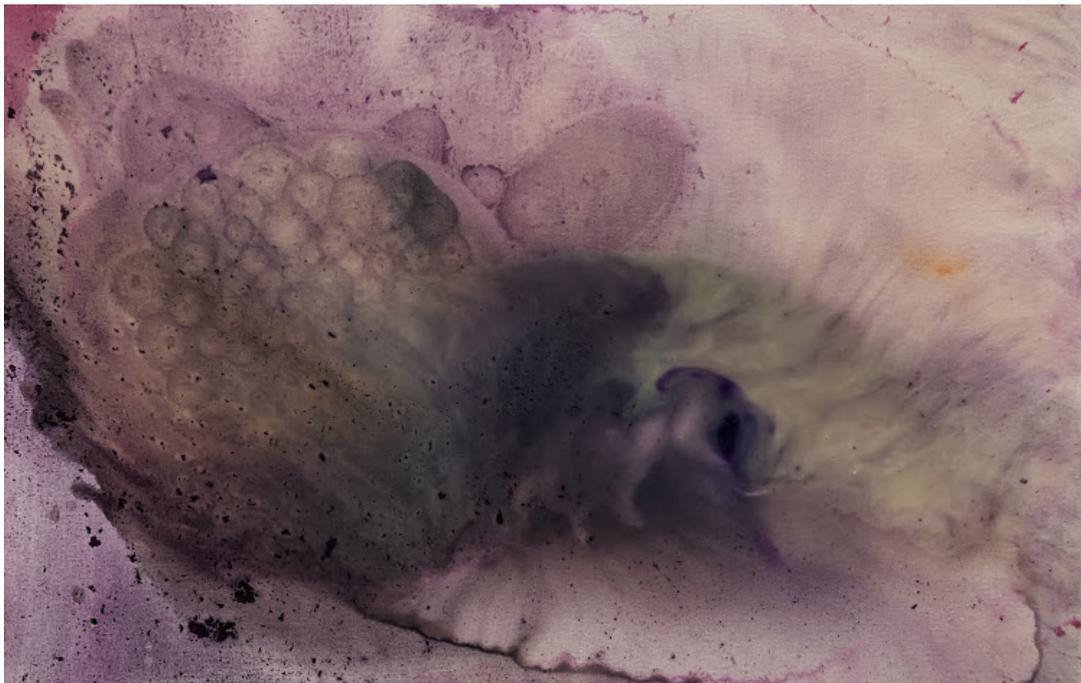
HALF ART

CHRIS THURMAN: The very human art of noninterference

In Penny Siopis's latest exhibition 'Warm Water Imaginaries', the materials used by the artist generally take on a life of their own

🔒 BL PREMIUM

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Penny Siopis, "The Deep" (2017). Picture: SUPPLIED

There is broad consensus about the arts in education at the primary and secondary level: not even STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) hardliners would contest the value of a healthy dose — just a little — when it comes to visual art, theatre, music or other creative forms in the school curriculum.

It's at the tertiary level, where (for better or worse) areas of study become more specialised, that people start to get twitchy.

“The arts in education” is all very well, but “an education in art”? That's a waste of state resources, goes the complaint, and it does a disservice to the student who graduates without any marketable skills or knowledge.

Even Barack Obama, in what now seems like those halcyon pre-Trump years, questioned the utility of an art history degree compared with a qualification that could lead to a job in “skilled manufacturing” or a trade such as being a plumber or an electrician. Obama subsequently apologised for his glib off-the-cuff remark, but it reflected the general wisdom about how one can contribute to the economy and enjoy some level of job security.

Such traditional views are increasingly under question. The robots are coming for all those jobs, and there are only so many people who can design and produce new tech. An arts education, so its proponents argue, prepares students for a longer-term future in which most of the career options that will be available to them don't exist yet – and in which the crises to come, both sociopolitical and ecological, will have to be met with new solutions.

Earlier this week I had the privilege of joining a group of fine art students on a walkabout with Penny Siopis, whose *Warm Water Imaginaries* is at Stevenson, Johannesburg until May 3 (it is the final exhibition at Stevenson's site in Braamfontein before the gallery moves to new premises).

Siopis, whose credentials as an academic and lecturer at various universities are complemented by the intellectual rigour of her approach to creative practice, led the students in a rich discussion of her work. The conversation required of its participants both cognitive flexibility – moving between conceptual categories – and a willingness to interweave personal reflection with the technicalities of artistic production, marine geography and Indian Ocean histories.

First, there is process. Siopis makes her paintings by pouring glue and ink onto a horizontal canvas, and allowing them to mix, swirl and settle into patterns and shapes; the artist responds to the unpredictable image that starts to take shape, sometimes identifying figures that emerge on the scene and “encouraging” their development, and sometimes choosing not to intervene at all.

At a certain – often indeterminate – point, process becomes image: the glue, exposed to air, dries and a fixed “picture” is established (intriguingly, Siopis sees a similarity here with film photography, where exposure to light captures a moment in time). Of course, the works thus produced are anything but static. Hanging in the gallery space, they still carry a dynamic quality; colours appear to move,

surfaces glimmer or hint at hidden depth, textures shift under the gaze of the viewer.

Process is also, Siopis notes, inseparable from concept. Her noninterference is a deliberate act that seeks to recognise the agency of her materials, which have a “life” of their own. While glue is an artificial agent, and dries to become a form of plastic, as non-human matter it is comparable to natural elements and beings.

Reducing human interference in the painting process thus becomes analogous to “treading lightly” upon the earth – whether that means (to extend the metaphor) minimising one’s carbon footprint, or making other choices that acknowledge the urgency of responding to climate change.

Warm Water Imaginaries was inspired by an invitation Siopis received to participate in a group show next year titled *Rising Waters*. The focus is on the Indian Ocean; Siopis has a particular interest in Mauritius, where she previously employed seaweed as a medium that facilitates the blurring of borders between land and sea. Likewise, she affirms, the boundaries between “human” and “non-human” are especially unclear in the Anthropocene era.

The art students grappling with these complexities in Siopis’s work – indeed, all visitors to the exhibition – have an excellent opportunity to prepare, mindfully and imaginatively, for an unknown future.

Warm Water Imaginaries is at Stevenson Johannesburg until May 3.

