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Mandy Coppes-Martin *Tragedy of the Commons* 2016 Madagascar Silk, meranti wood and paper thread.
140x100x100 cm

The Threads That Blind Us

Mandy Coppes-Martin

I am interested in exploring the contradictions, paradoxes and the fragility of our relationship with the natural world.

I am interested in material and how it exists within the natural world, but also how it relates and interacts with society—what its uses are and how it has changed or shaped the past. Together with my interest in the natural world and our relationship with it, the “Material” I work with then becomes all-encompassing. The thin ethereal nature of my work represents the delicate space that we, as humans, find ourselves in: the space that exists between denial and the inability to react, and that of acceptance and the ability to take responsibility. The transparency of my work, and the shadows that fall from the images complete and solidify the relationship that exists between the work, its environment and the viewer.



Mandy Coppes-Martin *In Search of a Narrative*, Paper Thread, and rawdyed silk. 63.5-x 125 cm

I have always been interested in the natural world and when the opportunity arose to major in hand papermaking as part of a master's qualification in Fine Art I jumped at the chance. A Masters in Hand Papermaking had never been undertaken in South Africa as part of the visual arts curriculum, and I was pushed to explore new ground guided by ancient techniques established in China and Japan.

I began investigating the long fibres found in some of the invasive plants and weeds growing in South Africa in order to establish their efficiency as papermaking fibres. It was important to me that the fibre had relevance in terms of its history and use. It was also important that these fibres could be processed by hand, using very little or no electricity.

This was the beginning of a love for all fibres and natural materials. I travelled to Japan, Germany and Belgium to learn about Eastern and Western hand papermaking techniques. I conducted research in all of the provinces of Southern Africa and ended up with five key invasive plant fibres and noxious weeds.



Mandy Coppes-Martin *Rudderless*, Paper thread, and raw dyed silk. 119 x 52 cm

In my current work I also incorporate two different types of silk namely; common silk from the Bombyx Mori moth and [wild silk from CPALI \(Conservation through Poverty Alleviation International in Madagascar\)](#). CPALI farmer's hand rear *Antherina suraka* – a native silkworm that feeds off the rainforest tree *Polycias bakeriana* – aiding in habitat recovery. The wild silk immediately had a connection because by cultivating these moths these farmers are contributing to the long-term sustainability of the rain forests and habitat in Madagascar.

The act of unraveling the silk cocoons to draw with felt to me like a connection of the past and present through the re-spinning of a story.

I am fascinated by the incongruence between this strong, luxurious fibre that was only affordable to the affluent, a fibre that entire civilisations went to war over, and its maker, a fragile and insignificant worm. The history of silk symbolises cultural and economic growth. However, Silk trade routes also brought destructive forces, such as the bubonic plague, and the trading of ivory and rhino horn.



Mandy Coppes-Martin *Soft Currency* 2016, Paper thread and sisal, cotton and kozo handmade paper. 208x210 cm

Additionally I use paper and paper thread to portray the natural world such as the tree rings that are becoming an obsession of mine. I began working with tree rings several years ago and find them to be the most beautiful arrangements of natural life. Tree rings tell a story of events through mark making. They offer glimpses into the lost or forgotten stories of our natural environment. Tree rings are bits of history that are physically present, yet ethereal and without narrative. They also depict this contradiction that is so often present in my work. The depiction lies in the fact that with the beauty of the tree ring comes a negative connotation in that if the tree ring can be seen it would mean that the tree has in fact been cut down.

The tree rings are made by crocheting with paper thread. Trees leave behind a record of past activities in their trunks, which deserve our respect, yet are often destroyed without thought and to our detriment. The age and the history of the world shown to us by their stems provide us with an almost nostalgic lament to the life of the tree and, therefore our own narrative. Crocheting tree rings is a whimsical and ironic attempt to heal the cycle. I have de-fleshed the living specimen and physically re-made it by hand, to force myself to look beyond what meets the eye. In the natural world, life evolves and new layers are developed - new layers that cover the old layers. The questions posed here are; will we resolve the contradiction of destroying what we depend upon for our survival and as a result of our actions, what stories will the tree rings in the future tell?

There are certain realities in my work and in the world around us, and that is that nothing lasts, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect.



Mandy Coppes-Martin is a visual artist, working primarily with paper and pulp using fibres such as hemp, sisal, cotton rag and silk.

Matriculating at the Johannesburg Art, Ballet and Drama School, Mandy went on to study Photography at the Vaal Triangle Technikon and then began a diploma in Fine Art in 1993 at the former Technikon Witwatersrand (now the University of Johannesburg). She then completed her Masters Degree in Fine Art (cum laude) in 2004. Mandy concentrated on the development of local and invasive plant fibres for the production of specialist papers for her research project. A study visit to Japan provided a framework for an alternative method of making paper using long fibres found in South Africa.

In 2012 Mandy became a full time artist producing work in paper and silk. Her works *Trembling Giant* and *Virgin Pulp* were awarded the runner-up prize in the Sasol New Signatures 2012 Art Awards. These 2 works are currently housed in the Sasol collection. Mandy's first commercial solo exhibition was opened at Lizamore and

Associates on the 2nd November 2013. Her new body of work incorporates crocheting with Shifu; paper thread and drawings in raw silk and paper pulp. She has exhibited in numerous group shows in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town, as well as in Belgium and the Philippines. Her work will be featured September 9th through 11th at the [2016 FNB Joburg ArtFair](#) by [Lizamore & Associates](#).

Mandy Coppes–Martin lives in Johannesburg with her husband and 2 daughters and currently works from Nugget Square in Johannesburg, South Africa.

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