

the  
collector's  
room

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition Diane Victor: Smoke Portraits, the second exhibition held in the Collector's Room at Fried Contemporary  
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# smoke portraits

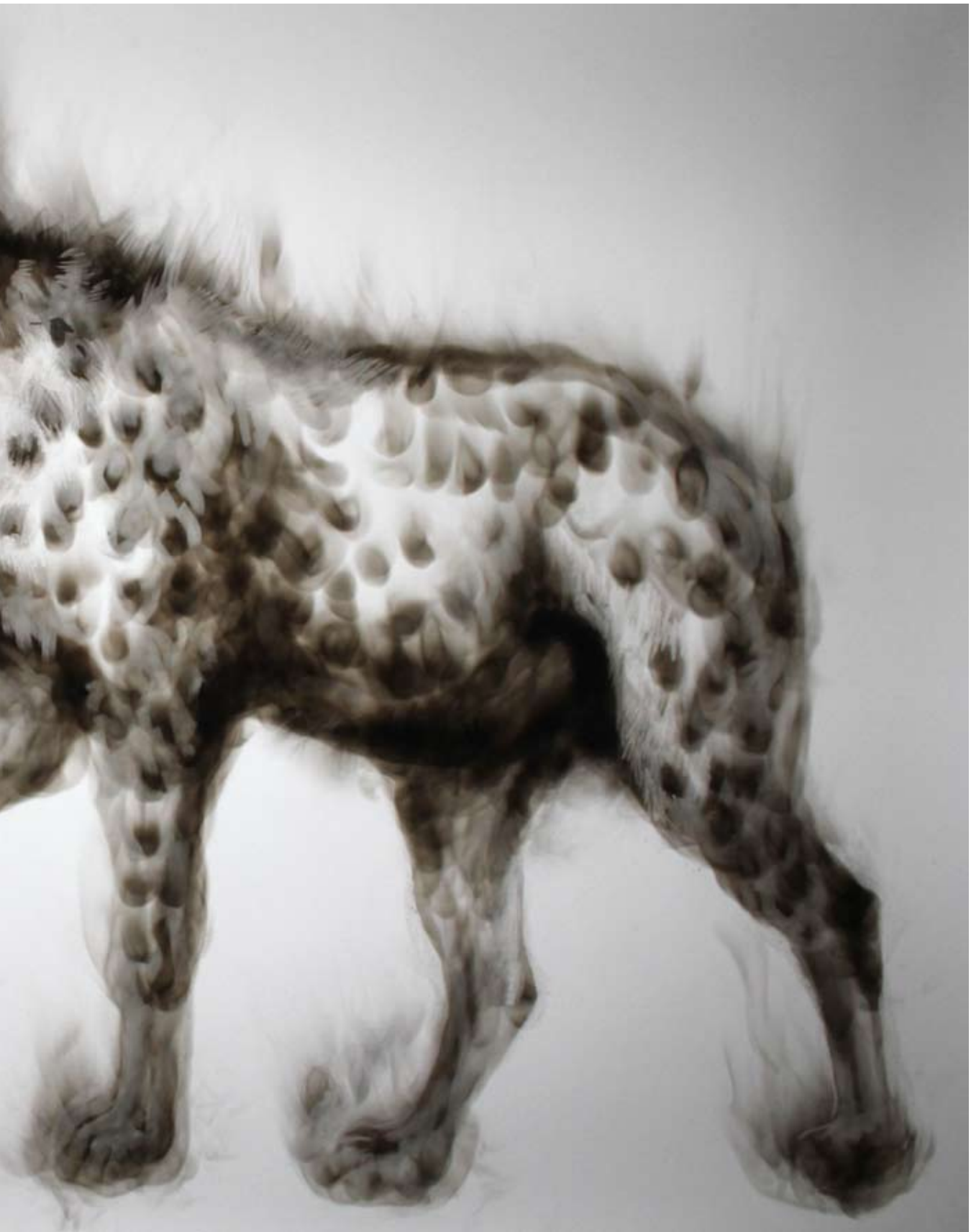
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IN CONVERSATION WITH  
DIANE VICTOR  
BY JOHAN THOM



JT:I wonder if we could begin with a rather straightforward question about the smoke drawings. How did you discover smoke as a mark-making medium?

DV: I have to say it was pretty much by accident and necessity. About ten years ago I was invited to participate in an exhibition around HIV. It was an exchange show that was happening between a German University and the University of Pretoria. I wondered what I could add to a conversation around HIV as it had not really touched my life in a personal way and also, a lot of exciting work dealing with the disease was already in circulation. At the same time it was just coincidence: I taught an experimental drawing class at Rhodes University to the second year group. The students were only allowed to work with alternative materials like shoe polish or candles, for example. One of the students came into class one day with a candle and was trying to smoke a stencil grid. Needless to say, she wasn't doing a very good job of it! So I tried to show her how she could make marks with the flame and its smoke. She was less than impressed but it stuck in my head. The ease and speed with which you could make beautiful - if symbolically loaded - marks seemed to offer

a solution to my problem with participating in the show about HIV. I was also a keen runner at that stage, and ran past this route where an HIV centre and soup kitchen was. I decided to first interview the nuns who worked there. I also asked them if I could perhaps interview the patients coming in that day for medical support and check-ups. They agreed and in this way I ended up photographing their patients and doing a number of smoke portraits of them. I immediately became aware that you cannot fix the medium, it's like trying to catch a ghost. This added a new dimension to the idea of the portrait, especially in relation to persons living with HIV: these images were incredibly fragile, caught somewhere in a state between being and disappearing, living and dying, so to speak.

JT: I wonder if we could perhaps expand on the discussion about the medium. You just said that one of the problems of the medium is that it is inherently fragile. I've also heard you use the phrase 'catching a ghost'. So could we speak about the potential of the medium, or the kind of meaning inherent in the medium, if you like? What meanings are important to you?





DV: As a medium smoke is uncontrollable, volatile and fragile. So you really catch an image in passing.

As a trained printmaker I'm a bit of a control freak, to put it lightly! But with smoke all of a sudden you're working with an image that's quite ephemeral and ghost-like – you're literally chasing the smoke around on paper. The fact that you can't stabilise or fix the image in anyway ties in neatly with the sense of absolute vulnerability inherent in the medium. If you touch the image you destroy it. The medium is vulnerable and transient. For the first series of works (of the HIV patients living in Grahamstown) I made about forty smoke portraits. At the time I felt that these people's bodies and lives are as fragile as the smoke drawings.

JT: I think there is a specific way in which the medium itself is ephemeral, you can't control it and in a way it is fleeting – you struggle with it in the here and now. So would it be fair to say that working with smoke is very much about the process of making the image and less about the image itself?

DV: Yes I think so: it is a performative process because you're drawing through a candle flame. And you generally can't actually see what you're doing. So most of your mark-making has to be learned by repetition, something the body and the mind has to remember: a specific movement of your arm will give you a specific mark. It is like a dance with the candle because you have to keep moving in order to avoid the dripping hot wax! Working with smoke is totally alien to any other process that I have traditionally worked with - including printmaking and drawing on paper. Working with smoke is different than making observation-based work, being in control and dissecting the visual world through sight alone.

JT: Yes, I think people know you predominantly for your attention to detail in your figurative work.

DV: Obsessive detail even!

JT: In this regard there is definitely a kind of expressive quality to these works that sets them apart from the rest of your oeuvre. Certainly it might have something to do with the performative aspect of the work that you mentioned earlier. You said that you have to look through the flame...

DV: Yes - I actually can't see exactly what I am doing when I work with the candle. You're literally looking through it at the surface of the paper.

JT: That's quite interesting, because the flame acts as a barrier between you and the paper, a layer that obscures sight and enables mark-making, it provides light and obscures vision simultaneously. Also, symbolically I think it's quite interesting to look through a flame and create a drawing with smoke.

DV: Exactly, because what is it? It's soot or ash even, a ghost.

JT: Could we very briefly return to the expressive aspect of the smoke works? In comparison to your etchings and drawings the smoke works are definitely looser, almost speculative in appearance.

DV: I absolutely enjoy working this way because it is so opposite from the etching and the drawings. It is a kind of release, that you draw fluidly and these images kind of create themselves without you having to control them. So it's a giving and taking as opposed to an absolute: what I put down on paper is normally set in stone/ etched in copper. With the smoke I do feel freer.

JT: So the work remains almost sketch-like, never completely completed, so to speak?

DV: Absolutely! As an artistic medium smoke is fluid and malleable.

JT: Whilst I appreciate the somewhat laborious process of making an etching, I think this loose way of working forces you into a different conceptual space? Put differently, if you are dealing with a medium that is this fragile and this quick, you really have to consider the ideas that inform your work much more carefully.

DV: Yes of course, and you cannot rely purely on your technical skill like you would with a drawing or an etching for example.







JT: I was thinking along those lines. For me there is a strong conceptual underpinning to this whole process of working with smoke. I don't want to say that it's not present in your other work, but I think that the smoke drawings highlight your conceptual concerns in a different, perhaps even more self-evident way.

DV: Yes, the medium and the ideas behind the works do seem to collude in a more self-evident way – the fragility of life, the fragility of the medium and so on. But these are different, if related matters to the issues at stake in my etchings and drawings.

JT: That said, may we now consider the subject matter of your smoke drawings? Would you say that the subject matter of your smoke drawings is different than your etches or drawings in charcoal?

DV: Initially I think this was the case yes. Because when I started using smoke I dealt with these transient, fragile lives that had been touched by the HIV pandemic. And then just after that, for the body of work that I did for a show at the University of Johannesburg I went to abattoirs and collected severed animal's heads and photographed them to make smoke portraits. For another project I did an installation at an abattoir in Nelspruit on glass. The glass further highlighted the ephemeral nature of the medium - again they are ghosts, presences captured only momentarily. Of course the images on glass were difficult to see and one had to move your body to avoid glare, reflections and so on. This often left the viewer feeling

intrigued, pleased and frustrated in equal measure. So initially the meaning was really tied to working with loss and the remains, as kind of very transient ghost remains that we leave in the world.

The animals that are slaughtered, the people who die - all that is left is a carbon trace.

JT: Ah yes – the material thing - the physical traces of our lives left in this world...

DV: Yes! Also I suppose working like this just gave me too much pleasure. It is very enjoyable, light almost.

JT: Pleasure is important. We forget about it too easily if we just think about the issues we address in our work. The joy of making, or of looking and experiencing the artwork. Without taking account of the important role of pleasure in art-making and art appreciation I do feel that we are being a tad self-righteous and impoverishing the entire enterprise. People love your work and you love making it!

DV: Pleasure is very important, taking pleasure from the work that you make and how it gives you something back, instead of it being a one-way Calvinistic slog! Anyway since first discovering the medium my working method has changed and I would say that it is now closer to the concerns of my drawings and etches – in fact, all of these mediums bring something of value to my work as an artist, changing and informing the whole. But I would say that the smoke works are still not marked by the same overworked symbolic layering that I tend to indulge...



JT: You are being very critical of your etchings and drawings now! I actually think that pleasure is very much present in your etchings and drawings. But, these are very different working processes and forms of pleasure. As an artist one's work also provides you with a sense of belonging, purpose and agency – all things that give our lives meaning and tacitly allow for the experience of pleasure!

DV: Yes, exactly. Despite or even because of the subject matter of my work I always love making all the works. In this way the smoke works allow for other kinds of experiences to enter into and flesh out my life.

JT: I wonder if I would be right to suggest that the smoke drawings are mostly portraits still? If so, why?

DV: For the most part the smoke drawings are portraits.

The medium itself has stringent limitations. For example you really can work only with one form - you can't have any environment, any context (such as a background). It is the medium, and perhaps I just don't have the skills yet! But in another way I'm quite grateful that the medium doesn't allow for that kind of layering.

When I make smoke drawings I always work with single forms. For example, the glass altarpiece I made at Klein Karoo National Art Festival dealt with loss and violence against women in South Africa. The piece was called 'No country for old women'. It was a work made after the rather brutal murder of my aunt. So again we see how the medium is appropriate

to the subject matter: victims of violence become ghosts, traces captured in layers of glass. The fact that people's lives are taken so easily, so superficially – they are no more than a fleck of dirt that can be wiped off the slate, disappeared.

JT: I know that this doesn't necessarily fall into the strict confines of a discussion about an artwork, but let's just talk about this and get it over with. I know I am not religious and I don't think you are.

DV: No! Not at all!

JT: So it's interesting this kind of focus on the 'ghostly'. I have this idea that when you say 'ghostly' you don't mean it in a religious, metaphysical sense, i.e. a spirit that haunts the world of the living. I read it more like a memory, a material trace that refuses to disappear – a smudge of blood, a fingerprint, almost something forensic.

DV: Like a stamp in stone, that's what it is: a physical remainder.

JT: Also a reminder. In this way the very materiality of the work is the ghostly presence that refuses to let go, to just disappear. And it's concrete proof of someone that once lived or a past event. Like the memory of your aunt - the artwork is that trace, or memory made real?

DV: Exactly! It's soot in a chimney: something's happened, the fire has perhaps long since burned and now we are confronted with what's left behind. We have to make sense of the event, its history, our memory of it and the world we live in now through the trace.





JT: The soot is very much of this world and yet what it speaks about is the lightness of our presence here.

DV: It's light because once we move on it's all we leave, a memory. This is always fragile.

JT: I want to ask a more personal question about your current state of health and its possible relationship to your work now. Please tell me if you don't want this in print?

DV: No, I don't have a problem with it being public.

JT: Your health is precarious to say the very least - you may in fact go in for a kidney transplant this very week! I wonder if the fragility of your body (and the concomitant awareness of your own mortality) has lent some urgency to your recent work?

DV: I think it's affected all the works I've made in the past few years. When I initially started working with smoke I wasn't aware of the latent time bomb in my body. But much of the other drawings, the ash drawing, going and looking at the remainders of animals, people and the ghost drawings - with everything becoming lighter and lighter - the growing awareness of my own mortality features large. But it's not a forced, conscious decision: I think a lot of image-making happens on a subconscious level. You battle with things because you feel you need to (I often don't know exactly why I am making a particular work, I just make it. In hindsight things are clear, straightforward even). In that sense

I work very intuitively. Things touch me and I respond in the way I best can - by making artworks. So yes, there is a sense of 'nothing is here forever, it's all just passing through'.

JT: I don't think of you as someone who's ever been aloof - as an artist who maintains some sort of personal distance, a virtual disconnect from the world. I think you are implicated, you are aware of your own role and place in relation to your work. Basically I'm not going to make the argument that the recent works are too personal (in terms of your illness): I think this has always been the case. I was watching you the day you were working in the Collector's Room, and I had a sense of that transience - people sat there quietly, they were just happy to see the image materialise in that very particular moment.

DV: That's the thing: the image literally materialises on paper in a split second. With the audience present they could share in that moment...

JT: Blink and you might miss it! I think it is amazing for an art audience to know it, to feel part of that moment of materialisation. I didn't listen to everything you said that day but it was very interesting for me that you could communicate immediately to your audience both verbally and through your drawings.

How do you feel about that now? Any thoughts?



DV: Having taught for a number of years I must admit that initially it was not too difficult for me. But then, it is quite difficult to talk and draw at the same time! Smoke drawing is incredibly time focused, the movement of your body absolutely dictates the response or result you get from the smoke on paper. So to talk to an audience whilst drawing is tantamount to publically performing some kind of schizophrenic double act! For that very reason I came back to the gallery later to work on the drawings and complete them: the works require undivided attention. I think it's probably easier to work on a charcoal drawing because it's also a lot more forgiving. You erase things if you're talking and explaining. But working with smoke! It really is a performative action: as you move that's how your drawing appears. Lose focus for a second and everyone can see it.

JT: Yes, the smoke drawings require immense focus – you and the paper only. A largely private affair now made public!

DV: Yes, being in the moment totally. But I still think the audience gained something from being present as I made the works. Personally I was very stressed, like I just ran a street marathon: I was literally working and thinking in front of an audience. And then you are also under pressure from an aesthetic perspective – the work can't end up looking like hell! Or catching fire for that matter! (Which is a very realistic problem

actually. It does happen – the paper gets too hot and burst into flames). But, in hindsight all of this is actually good: I think one becomes far too comfortable in your own artistic process. In everything you do actually.

JT: The comfort zone problem! You spoke about pleasure earlier - I saw that you enjoyed it but I also intuitively understood that working in public was a challenge, that it literally and figuratively tired you.

DV: Normally when I work I disappear into my own personal space. Somebody walks into the room and I jump half a meter in the air - because I'm in my world and they are intruding. So by working in the Collector's Room and simultaneously dealing with an audience was a bit of a schizophrenic undertaking!

JT: I want to finish with a last question about teaching.

You have spent a lot of your time in academia, teaching students, exhibiting and so on. How do you feel about it now? For example, a lot of artists feel that they would rather not teach as it may distract from their main area of focus, which at the end of the day is to be an artist. But then again, if it had not been for your involvement in academia, you might not have developed your smoke drawing technique?



DV: The interaction with the students is something I really enjoy, a privilege even. You learn so much from them, from listening to their ideas even if their ideas are ghastly! After all, they bring these ideas from a world that you are not part of. As an artist teaching is wonderful research, it is a kind of give and take. I teach them skill and give them support, but they tell me about their world and share experiences with me.

JT: Perhaps this is a nice way of rounding up our conversation, on the topic of education and research. Today we consider research a vital part of teaching. But to think of the act of teaching itself, that process of communication as research is something very interesting, a touch unexplored even. Of course the 'language' that we as artists speak is in some ways a technical one – for example, it has to do with mark-making, with all those things generating meaningful connections to the world through our work and the very particular forms of mark-making at stake therein. In this sense being an artist is about having a conversation with the world through your medium.

Having said that, do you think that there are places where you would still like to go with the medium of smoke-drawing, conversations you must still have?

DV: With smoke drawing you can't get textures. But the smoke drawing I made on glass panels really interest me, because

it allows you to work on different levels: You can work on two or three glass panels and place them in front or on top of one another to make an image. There are two directions I would still like to explore more.

Firstly I would like to work on multiple sheets of glass where I can try and get different images that appear through and by each other. Then stamping texture onto the smoke, which works brilliantly on the glass. So it becomes something like a monoprint where you start printing onto the surface of the glass.

Secondly I would love to explore stop frame animation – to animate my smoke drawings. These animations might appear to burn selectively. Sometimes you might have people just spark and burn out. For others they might smoulder and never make it, always just linger halfway between appearing and disappearing. I would absolutely love to make a whole series of burning figures projected as video. So I have lots of ideas that evolve with everything I do, I just need time!

JT: To misquote a famous song: 'Time is not on our side'. And so we must conclude our interview. Thank you so much for talking to me about your smoke drawings.

DV: It's a pleasure!







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