

**PENNY SIOPIS
FILMS**

STEVENSON

Penny Siopis combines found 8mm and 16mm home-movie footage with text and sound, to shape stories about people caught up, often traumatically, in larger political and social upheavals. The stories are usually from South African history but, for complex political reasons, they do not figure in the official historiography of the country. While they are of a very particular time and place, their form is emblematic and speaks to questions far beyond their specific historical origins: colonialism and apartheid, madness and modernity, migration and globalisation. Of the most recent films, some are not necessarily historical but offer a meditation on human/non-human relations. The footage seldom connects in any direct way to the empirical facts of the story. In this respect Siopis says: 'What allows me to hook contingency to fact is my selective use of text in combination with the film sequences snatched from my ever expanding archive. What is crucial for me is how the text translates into 'the voice in the head' of the reader/viewer.' Translation as an idea is signalled by the way the text follows the form, but not the function, of subtitles conventionally used to translate 'foreign' language films. This device compounds the double register of her films more generally, where inner and outer narratives are deliberately confused, feeling both true and false, real and imagined at the same time. Accompanied by music, the effect is affective and dreamlike.

My Lovely Day

1997

Single channel digital video

21 min 15 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/87411663>



My Lovely Day combines sequences of 8mm home movies that my mother shot in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa with text and music to tell a story of displacement and migration. While the narrative 'voice' is that of my maternal grandmother speaking of her literal and emotional journeys to Greece, England, and South Africa in the early part of the 20th century, and to some extent overlooking the apartheid context from which she speaks, the film has wider resonance as an allegory of globalisation and exile. The sound comprises traditional Greek music and an old 78 rpm record made in 1955 of my mother singing 'This is my lovely day'. The uneven quality of the footage and the material marks of age and damage on the celluloid dramatise the nature of the film as artefact and resonate with the fragmentary quality of memory.

Obscure White Messenger

2010

Single channel digital video

15 min 07 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/190829849>



In *Obscure White Messenger* I use anonymous home-movie footage to tell the story of Demitrios Tsafendas, who assassinated the South African prime minister and 'architect of apartheid', HF Verwoerd, in 1966. This work takes its title from a reference to Tsafendas from Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. What drove Tsafendas, a man of mixed race, an illegal migrant working as a parliamentary messenger at the time, to commit this act? The work explores the intermingling of madness and political motive evident in the text taken from different sources including transcripts of interviews with Tsafendas. Throughout the film there is the question of who the 'illegitimate' Tsafendas is, and where he belongs – of what it means to be stateless in a world in which citizenship all too often establishes and legitimates what it means to be fully human.

Communion

2011

Single channel digital video

5 min 30 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/94036020>



Communion is about an Irish nun, Sister Aidan, who was also a medical practitioner, Doctor Elsie Quinlan. She was killed in 1952 by an angry, brutalised crowd of people in the Eastern Cape, who were protesting against apartheid laws during the Defiance Campaign in South Africa. Many of the people in the crowd actually knew and loved Sister Aidan, but she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. In newspaper reports and scholarly articles, questions emerged about 'common cause' and culpability – which of the crowd committed the murder? Pathologists could not determine how she died, because parts of her body were missing, allegedly eaten. The work combines sequences of anonymous 8mm home movies of travel in diverse places with text and an African lullaby. None of the sequences connect to the empirical facts of the story. The physical damage to the celluloid, including the literal burning of the film, often renders representation unreadable. The film situates Sister Aidan's 'voice' (read as subtitles) in the first person: she narrates her own death, as if from the grave.

The Master is Drowning

2012

Single channel digital video

10 min 5 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/50357030>



The Master is Drowning extends the use of found film beyond home movies to fragments of historical documentary, combining private and public film sequences to create a story that is both fictive and 'real'. The narrative unfolds chronologically, culminating in the attempted assassination of the South African Prime Minister, HF Verwoerd, by David Beresford Pratt, a white liberal businessman and farmer. The attempt occurred in 1960 on the eve of the inauguration of the apartheid South African Republic, and is depicted through the inclusion of actual news footage from the time. Pratt went to the Rand Show, an annual agricultural show in Johannesburg, and shot Verwoerd twice in the face at point-blank range following his opening address. Miraculously, Verwoerd survived, and in the ensuing court process Pratt, who suffered from epilepsy, was declared unsound of mind. The words in the film are mostly Pratt's, from transcripts of his trial and newspapers of the time.

The New Parthenon

2016

Single channel digital video

15 min 26 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/183985675>



In *The New Parthenon* a man meditates on his past, interwoven as it is with the history of modern Greece: World War II, the Greek Civil War, the Cold War, globalisation, migration, and the ongoing political tensions between Greece and 'the West'. The man could be my father, but like a dream that condenses and displaces experience and information, his life merges with the lives of other Greek men of his milieu. Set within an architecture of ruins, the spectral presences within the film are witnesses to both past traumas of history and present-day horrors unfolding at sea. Shaped from a variety of anonymous 8 mm home movies, some found in flea markets in Athens, the material quality of the celluloid – the effects of its ageing, dust spots and sprocket marks – reflects the film's own history. The music that forms the soundtrack of this film is composed by Mikis Theodorakis from a poem by Iakovos Kambanellis, a survivor of Mauthausen Concentration Camp, about the love between two prisoners of the camp.

Welcome Visitors!

2017

Single channel digital video

10 min 17 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/247138165>



Welcome Visitors! is based on the story of the jazz composition *Skokiaan*, which was composed in 1947 by the Zimbabwean musician August Musarurwa. The tune became an international hit and was famously covered by Louis Armstrong in 1954. Mixing archival material from Armstrong's tour of Southern Africa in 1960 with anonymous home-movie footage of travel, the film associates the migration of the melody with real and imagined imagery connecting Southern Africa and the American South that it uncovers. The particular mix of words and imagery speak to larger questions of origin and source and the nature of syncretism. The piece is structured by three versions of *Skokiaan*: a contemporary jazz cover by South African Kevin Davidson, which opens and closes the film; Musarurwa's original recording, in which he plays the saxophone; and Louis Armstrong's instrumental and vocal cover, nicknamed 'Happy Africa'. The film was commissioned as part of an installation for Prospect.4, the New Orleans triennial, titled *The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*.

She Breathes Water

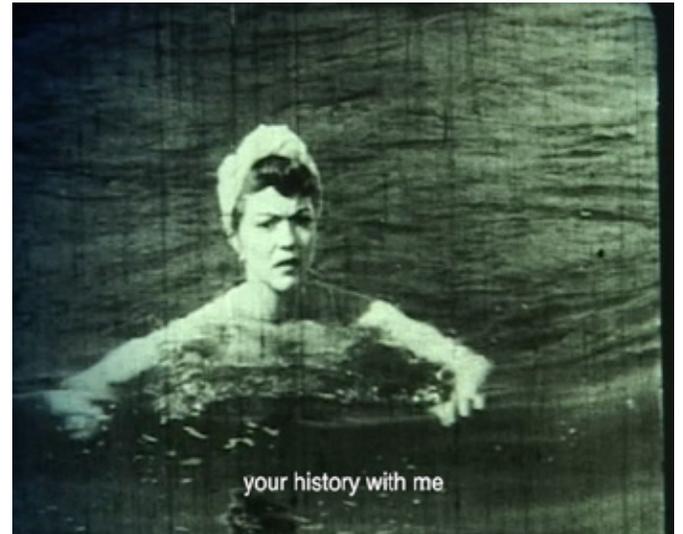
2019

Single channel digital video

5 min 12 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/330027678>



A montage of old 8mm found footage, text and sound, *She Breathes Water* shapes a story, poetic or fabular, about humanity's catastrophic imprint on the planet. It starts with a lunar landscape. A flash as a harpoon passes through water. A splash as a man surfaces. A woman swims. She seems angry with history. There are emissions, explosions, extractions, scenes evoking geo-engineering. There is sacrifice. What's to be done? A creature under the sea offers her ink to help write a history of another kind. 'Man' exits the frame. The sound of ice cracking mixes with refrains of Schubert's *Ave Maria*.

Shadow Shame Again

2021

Single channel digital video

6 min 16 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/513325021>



Shadow Shame Again speaks to 'the other pandemic' - the way many South Africans describe the spike in gender-based violence and femicide during lockdown. Using footage from her collection of found 8mm and 16mm home movies, Siopis sets fragments of image sequences to words - their brevity acknowledging the failure of language in response to this 'shadow shame' - and emotive sound. The film is dedicated to Tshogofatso Pule who, eight months pregnant, was murdered and found hanging in a tree during lockdown in South Africa; 'the mental image became a rallying cry in protest, and a locus of national shame'.

Celluloid Body

2021

Single channel digital video

6 min 18 sec

View here:

<https://vimeo.com/573865867>



Celluloid Body offers a scratched, burned and ruptured film reel as its own medium, the damaged celluloid appearing as an autonomous animating force - a character - that vies with the subjects depicted. This 'creature' flares through the found home-movie footage, sparking tension and playing with sound. At the end a poem appears that casts things in a viral light. This is the first in a new series of five short films.

Further reading

[Penny Siopis, 'The Hooks of History: Three Films', in *Shoe Shop*, edited by Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Cara Snyman \(Johannesburg: Fanele, 2012\)](#)

[TJ Demos, 'Penny Siopis's Film Fables', in *Penny Siopis: Time and Again*, edited by Gerrit Olivier \(Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014\)](#)

Penny Siopis was born in 1953 in Vryburg, South Africa, and lives in Cape Town. She has an MFA and an Honorary Doctorate from Rhodes University, and is currently an Honorary Professor at Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. Her work since the early 1980s has encompassed painting, film/video, photography and installation. All of her explorations, whether with body politics, memory, migration, or the relations between the human and non-human, are characterised by her interest in what she calls the 'poetics of vulnerability' - embodied in the dynamic play between materiality and reference, chance and contingency, form and formlessness, personal and collective history.

Solo exhibitions include *Moving Stories and Travelling Rhythms: Penny Siopis and the many journeys of Skokiaan*, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo (2019); *'This is a True Story': Six Films (1997-2017)*, a survey of Siopis' film works, Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town (2018); *Penny Siopis: Films*, Erg Gallery, Brussels (2016); *Incarnations*, ICA Indian Ocean, Mauritius (2016); *Time and Again: A Retrospective Exhibition*, South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2014), and Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg (2015); *Red: The iconography of colour in the work of Penny Siopis*, KZNSA Gallery, Durban (2009), and *Three Essays on Shame*, Freud Museum, London (2005). Siopis has held nine solo exhibitions at Stevenson in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Amsterdam (2007-21).

Notable group shows include *Plural Possibilities and the Female Body*, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington (2021); *Witness: Afro Perspectives from the Jorge M Pérez Collection*, El Espacio 23, Miami (2020); *Global(e) Resistance*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2020); *Indian Ocean Current: Six Artistic Narratives*, McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, USA (2020); *I Am ... Contemporary Women Artists of Africa*, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, USA (2019); *Hacer Noche (Crossing Night)*, Cultural Centre of Oaxaca, Mexico (2018); *The World's Game: Fútbol and Contemporary Art*, Pérez Art Museum Miami (2018); *The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*, Prospect.4, New Orleans (2017); *All Things Being Equal*, Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town (2017); *South Africa: The art of a nation*, British Museum, London (2016); *Boundary Objects*, Kunsthaus Dresden (2015); *Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (2014); *Prism: Drawing from 1990-2011*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo (2012); *Appropriated Landscapes*, Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm/Burlafingen, Germany (2011); *Peekaboo - Current South Africa*, Tennis Palace Art Museum, Helsinki (2010); *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons and Ideologies of the African Body*, Hood Museum, New Hampshire; Davis Museum, Wellesley, Massachusetts, and San Diego Museum of Art, California (2008); and the biennales of Taipei (2016), Venice (2003, South African Pavilion 2013), Sydney (2010), Guangzhou (2008), Johannesburg (1995 and 1997), Gwangju (1997) and Havana (1994 and 1997).

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