



**NIGEL MULLINS**

*Artefacts from the Anthropocene*





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## ARTEFACTS FROM THE ANTHROPOCENE

The image is not born in innocence and Nigel Mullins recognises its tyranny. The image has the possibility to order our world around the coordinates of desire, making the belief in the magical possible. Like the fetish, it fills the anxious abyss between the known and the unknown with a fantasmic *surplus* of value and meaning – The ‘fetishistic resides in the illusory excess, an ideological agency, and not in any intrinsic value of the “thing”’ (Baudrillard, 1981, p94). It is in this excess of inscription and tangle of signification that the wire, wood, paint and frame of Nigel’s work is infused with the magical power of fascination, a power that Walter Benjamin called the Auratic. It animates the inanimate and imbues it with a cultural power beyond its essential capacities. In *This Painting Cured a Woman Who Could Not Walk*, 2017, oil on superwood and frame, Nigel focuses our attention on the ubiquitous power of what we would like to dismiss as mere superstition; the preternatural power and agency of the object, image and word.

*[It is] a power that transfers to beings, objects and agencies, it is universal and diffuse but it crystallizes at strategic points so that its flux can be regulated and diverted by certain groups or individuals for their own benefit. – Baudrillard, 1981, p 88*

His subject matter is cast from the spectacle of our global order, drawing attention to the interfaces through which its power is shaped and reiterated. It is only right, then, that the imagery frequently comes from the World Wide Web, the oracle of our age. They are the crystallisations of the ideological edifice: past, present and undoubtedly, future. The paintings of monuments and busts, *Chairman Mao* and the papier-mâché *Goddess of Democracy*, *Queen Nefertiti* and the *Venus de Milo* denote these crystallisations as specific historical points. However, more importantly in Nigel’s work they represent vestiges of the perpetual dialectic forces that enact history through its human constituents as if possessed. Their thematic

COVER (DETAIL)  
*Artefacts from the Age of Conquest*, 2017  
oil on superwood and frame  
136 x 107 cm

TITLE PAGE (DETAIL)  
*Women’s March*, 2017  
oil on canvas  
160 x 220 cm

LEFT (DETAIL)  
*This painting cured a woman who could not walk*, 2017  
oil on superwood and frame  
137 x 180 cm

PAGE 4 (DETAIL)  
*Lennon Wall*, 1988, 2014, 2017  
oil on canvas  
150 x 210 cm





linkages are, at times, frail but like the fetish they communicate not through the specificity or consistency of content but through their existence as synecdoche and metaphor, a language of implicated meaning and readymade intention. Nigel's painterly treatment of his subject matter further reinforces this; turgid libations of paint anoint the canvas and frame alike and implicate both in the method by which ideology is conveyed in imagographic terms. The ritualistic libations activate the objects and mark them 'magical' – potent beyond the specific potentate it images.

The large paintings such as *Antecedents to the Heroic Global Order*, 2017 are a further condensation of the metaphoric emblems of power and lay bare the process of inscription. Their subject is the very adornments that mark the body with the volatile value of the fetishistic. The objects and insignia communicate and propagate power and control through a basic mimetic strategy of creating and condensing meaning by way of anxious repetition. It is a process whereby the unknowable is made instantly recognisable and familiar whilst maintaining and even accentuating difference, eliciting unquestioning reverence, respect and devotion. They are the talismans and totems that distinguish the one from the other. But finally, they give way and expose the painting as one of the primary subjects of Mullins' work, in *Lenin Wall*, a quilt-like surface of interlacing marks of colour shows the canvas, paint and delineations of the border itself as a charm or a fetish object. It is one that is laden with subtext, value and power that is accentuated and inflated by the sacralised gallery space. A space not unlike the shrine where artefacts of power are kept secret and sacred. They are undoubtedly '*Artefacts from the Age of Conquest*', and, the conquest is far from over.

*'An ointment'* sits somewhere within these evasive coordinates of desire and control. Between that which is said and that which is withheld, it is exactly here that fantasy and ideology come into play. Nigel's subjects occupy a space between the known and the unknown, the self and the other, between memory and forgetfulness. Yes, he employs distinct sites of global recognition, of cultural reverence and commonality but he also moves to evade memory and fixity through frantic ritualised repetition, in both painterly mark and in theme. From *Queen Victoria II* to Chairman Mao's bust in *Famous Painting, Tahir Square* and the spring revolution to the *Women's March on the White House* in 2017. It is a kind of dissonance that links this ever-expanding catalogue of the heroic and the villainous. The complex conceptual web of continuous conflict and contradiction evokes an acute melancholia that reaches past the specificity of occasion, personality or article, and yet conserves it.

Nigel's work renders mass protest as ritual madness and philosophical frenzy in our state of perpetual crisis. He projects our global iconography, a variable pantheon of the 'universally' deified, as 'real', or, at least as real as the fetishistic artefact of the painting itself. The power of the object and image lies in its capacity to coagulate, coalesce and manifest ideology. History is, after all, little more than a miasma of graft, of word, of phrase and of image that together coerces memory to glory.

*Wayne Matthews*

References:

Baudrillard, J. 1981. For a critique of the political economy of the sign. USA: Telos Press Ltd.



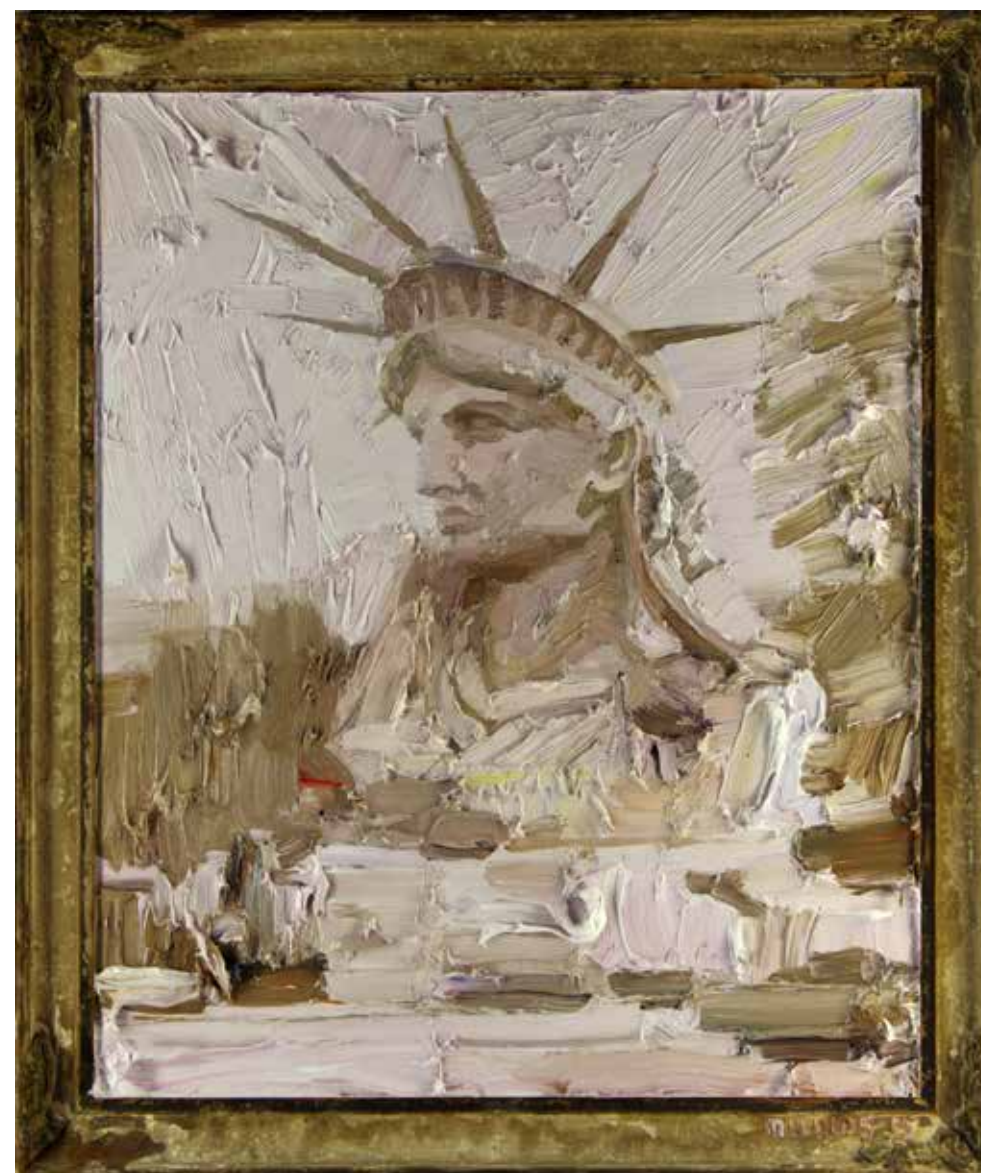


*Liberty in Paris, 2017*  
oil on canvas  
220 x 120 cm



*Pale Liberty, 2017*  
oil on canvas  
220 x 120 cm





*For Unconstrained Prosperity*, 2015  
oil on superwood and frame  
62 x 52 cm





*Fidel Castro*, 2017  
oil on superwood, frames and copper wire  
124 x 52 cm





*Queen Nefertiti*, 2017  
oil on superwood, frame, wire and badge  
125 x 57 cm







*Queen Elizabeth II, 2017*  
oil on superwood, frame and wire  
115 x 57 cm



*Lenin In Norilsk, 2017*  
oil on superwood and copper wire  
84 x 34 cm





*Portrait of Chairman Mao, 2017*  
oil on superwood, found objects, steel and copper wire  
90 x 45 cm



*Chairman Mao, 2017*  
oil on superwood, chinese medal, glass and frames  
81 x 50 cm





*Goddess of Democracy*. 1989, 2017  
oil on superwood and frame with copper medals  
147 x 76 cm



ABOVE AND PAGE 20-21 (DETAIL)  
*Bust of Queen Victoria*, 2017  
oil on superwood and frame  
88 x 69 cm









*Women's March, 2017*  
oil on canvas  
160 x 220 cm



ABOVE AND PAGE 24-25 (DETAIL)  
*Woman Suffrage Procession 1913, 2017*  
oil on canvas  
180 x 220 cm



WOMAN  
SUFFRAGE  
Procession  
Washington  
D.C. 1913







*This painting cured a woman who could not walk, 2017*  
oil on superwood and frame  
137 x 180 cm



*For a reasonable expectation of unconstrained well being & certainty, 2015*  
oil on canvas and wire  
138 x 160 cm





*Akiko Kojima, Miss Universe, 1959, 2016*  
oil on superwood and frame  
59 x 38 cm



*Venus De Milo, 1939, 2015*  
oil on superwood and frame  
60 x 40 cm





*United Nations 4th World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, 2017*  
oil on superwood and frame  
48 x 56 cm



*Towards a Technocratic World State & Civilizational Co-Dependence, 2016*  
oil on superwood and frame  
75 x 90 cm









ABOVE AND PAGE 32–33 (DETAIL)

*Artefacts from the Age of Conquest, 2017*

oil on superwood and frame  
136 x 107 cm



*Antecedents to the Heroic Global Order, 2017*

oil on canvas  
160 x 220 cm





## HEROIC GLOBAL ORDER

At first glance, the imagery of the paintings in the exhibition *Artefacts from the Anthropocene* appears so diverse that it seems difficult to see an underlying coherence in the works. How is it possible to view this body of work in a way which opens up the possibilities for connections and allows for meaning to be construed?

One possibility is to approach the exhibition in the same way that the artist approaches his subject matter and that is with the ability or desire to make lateral connections in order for meaning to emerge. Mullins says of this body of work:

*The exhibition is not a sober minded history lesson or critique of specific events. Each painting is a vehicle for contemplation, with its own references, and each work sits within a complex web of links; historical, ideological, conceptual or even just geographical. There are strong thematic threads and multiple interlinking sub-themes.*

In terms of these 'strong thematic threads', and to make a broad sweep, this body of work could be loosely categorised into three main areas of focus: leaders, mass gatherings and medals. What connections can be made between these?

Leaders or figureheads are representations (for us, looking back in time) of certain global eras or ages, for example Queen Victoria symbolising the Age of British Imperial Expansion, or political ideologies such as Communism as embodied by Chairman Mao, or perhaps liberation

as exemplified by Fidel Castro (Cuban Revolution in 1959) and I Gusti Ngurah Rai (Indonesian War of Independence, 1945 – 49). These are eras and ideologies that detail the movements of the human march forward, along a timeline which stretches from Queen Nefertiti in 1370 BC to our present and which hold intimations of our future.

Mass gatherings can be seen as an expression of a populace's relationship to their leader, whether this expression is one of support or of dissent - and the artist sees these gatherings as emblems of contemporary global existential states. The triumphal crowd at President Barack Obama's inauguration, for example is in contrast with the Women's March on Washington in 2017 which was part of a worldwide protest, mainly aimed at President Donald Trump for his views which were seen as an infringement on human and women's rights. Mass gatherings and social media have provided us as citizens with a certain kind of global agency.

Mullins is fascinated by fetish objects as objects or ideas which provoke unquestioning reverence or as having magical potency and he regards paintings as potential fetish objects. We can equally see medals as fetish objects and as a hierarchical interface

between leaders and the masses. The medals that the artist paints are army medals from all over the world and in this way not only speak about power and globalisation but also about military forces – the physical might that a leader may use to exert control. In visual similarity, but in ideological opposition to these military medals are the Lennon Walls of 1988 and 2014. The original Lennon Wall in Prague (literally a wall where young Czechs would write or draw out their frustrations in the 1980s) was the canvas of dissidents and students opposing the Communist regime and it was this wall which inspired the Lennon Wall of Post-it notes in Hong Kong during the Umbrella Uprising in 2014 with its messages of peace and hope for democracy and freedom.

To try to describe the scope of *Artefacts from the Anthropocene* by identifying the three interlinking areas of leaders, masses and medals is reductive, but it could be a starting point for the process of making lateral connections between these richly layered paintings through which we can make our own associations and look again at what we know of our past. This exhibition offers us particular details along the evolution of recent humanity: of how we got to be us, now.

*Tanya Poole, 2017*





*I Gusti Ngurah Rai, 2016*  
oil on plywood, balinese frame, copper wire and curio  
100 x 50 cm





*Highly Decorated Painting from the Imperial Age, 2017*  
oil on canvas  
150 x 210 cm







*Lennon Wall, 1988, 2014, 2017*  
oil on canvas  
150 x 210 cm



ABOVE AND PAGE 44–45 (DETAIL)  
*Inauguration, 2017*  
oil on canvas  
160 x 220 cm









*For Multiple Idea Societies, 2017*  
oil on superwood and frame  
80 x 90 cm





*Imperial Wisdom for Bright Future*, 2017  
oil on canvas and copper wire  
220 x 160 cm



*For Satisfaction, Fulfilment & Meaning*, 2017  
oil on superwood and frame  
78 x 62 cm





## NIGEL MULLINS

(b. 1969, Grahamstown, South Africa)

### WORK

Nigel Mullins' work, from the *Chaotic Region* (2013) – *Artefacts from the Anthropocene* (2017), continues the aim to demystify the tropes and icons that have sustained the myths used to justify or validate Western Culture for the last several hundred years. Famous figures that have been up for ironic denigration include Elvis Presley, Lenin, Queen Elizabeth I and Yuri Gagarin (the first human in space). His attitude is often reflected in the titles as much as the images themselves: for example, Queen Elizabeth becomes *An Obsolete Remnant of the Industrial Age* and Yuri Gagarin's image is entitled *Your Bright Future Guarantee*.

He applies the paint in thick slabs, drawing attention to itself and drawing our attention to the painting as an object – an artifact. Often the paint seems to climb out of the frame and melds with wire – breaking the division between the work or art and the world around it. Borders are overcome. Nothing is sacred or sacrosanct. It is only when we have reduced these often overwhelming and mythologized figure to their human scale and their proper place can we see ourselves – past, present and future – clearly.

### BIOGRAPHY

Nigel Mullins was born in 1969 in Grahamstown, South Africa. Mullins completed his Master of Fine Art degree with distinction at Rhodes University in 1993. Since graduating, he has had 16 solo exhibitions in South Africa, Scotland, England, and Germany and has taken part in almost 45 group shows. His work has been represented on the Johannesburg, Frankfurt and London art fairs and on the Mumia International Underground Animation Festival.

Mullins is the winner of the first prize at the Royal Over Seas League 14th Annual Open Exhibition in London in 1997, Mullins was a nominee for the Daimler Chrysler Award for Contemporary South African Art in 2000 and recipient of a merit prize at the ABSA Atelier in the same year. His work is included in such public and corporate collections as: Rhodes University, ABSA, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, South African Association, SASOL, TELKOM, Rand Merchant Bank, Hollard, Westminster and Chelsea Hospital Collection, Pretoria Art Museum, Sanlam, Nandos UK, Spier and KPMG.

Nigel Mullins lives and works in Grahamstown with his wife Tanya Poole and daughter Sophie.



## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2017** *Artefacts From The Anthropocene*, Circa Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2016** *Retrogressive Propaganda*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa  
*21st Century Talismans*, Circa Gallery, London, UK
- 2015** *The Obsolete Remnants of the Industrial age*. Fried Contemporary, Pretoria, South Africa
- 2014** *Buy You Time*, Equus Gallery, Western Cape, South Africa  
*Chaotic Region*, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa
- 2013** *Chaotic Region*, curated by Tanya Poole, Rhodes University Alumni Gallery and Standard Bank Gallery, South Africa  
*Chaotic Region*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2008** *Caveman Spaceman*, Bell-Roberts Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2006** *Earthlings*, Bell-Roberts Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2005** *Ends and Escapes*, Bell-Roberts Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2004** *Pacifier*, ABSA Bank Gallery, Johannesburg. South Africa
- 2003** *Fix*, Rhodes University Alumni Gallery, Albany Museum, Grahamstown Arts Festival, South Africa

- 2001** *Hopeful Monsters*, Hanel Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa  
*Superhuman*, ROSL, London and Edinburgh, UK  
*Hopeful Monsters*, Hanel Gallery, Wiesbaden, Germany  
*Hopeful Monsters*, Lithographs in Collaboration with Fine Line Press
- 2000** *New Work*, Dorp street Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa
- 1999** *Superhuman*, Hanel Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 1998** ROSL Prizewinner Exhibition, *Continuum*, Landings Gallery, Edinburgh, UK  
*Continuum*, Lamont Gallery, London, UK  
*Momentum*, Grahamstown Arts Festival and Association of Arts, Pretoria, South Africa
- 1994** *Window into the South African Landscape*, Grosvenor St, Mayfair, London, UK

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2016** *Reality Check*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa  
*Summer Show*, Circa Gallery, London, UK
- 2015** *1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair*, CIRCA Gallery Booth, London, UK  
*FNB Jo burg Art Fair*, Everard Read Gallery Booth, Johannesburg, South Africa  
*Cape Town Art Fair 2015*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa  
*Empire*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa  
*Winter show*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

## SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- 2014** *Cape Town Art Fair 2014*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa  
*Johannesburg Art Fair 2014*, Johans Borman Fine Art, Johannesburg, South Africa  
*Everard Read Winter Exhibition*, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2013** *Tom Waits For No Man*, curated by Gordon Froud, Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees, Oudtshoorn, South Africa  
*Weerberg*, Curated by Luan Nel, Aardklop, South Africa  
Kunstefees, Potchefstroom, South Africa  
*Johannesburg Art Fair*, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2011** *MullinsPoole*, The Bettendorffsche Gallery, Germany
- 2010** *View From The South*, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa  
*On Colour, Colour a Colloquium*. Albany Museum, Grahamstown, South Africa  
*8th MUMIA – Underground World Animation Festival 2010*. Brazil  
*Juncture. Painting from South Africa*. Nigel Mullins, Tanya Poole, Luan Nel. artSPACE, Berlin, Germany  
*International Festival of Animated Film of Fortaleza*, Brazil
- 2009** *Johannesburg Art Fair*, Johannesburg, South Africa X2, Albany Museum, Grahamstown National Arts Festival, South Africa  
*Hang in There*, Dorp Street Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa
- 2008** *Johannesburg Art Fair*, Johannesburg, South Africa  
*Between Meaning and Matter*, Bell-Roberts, Cape Town, South Africa
- ABSA, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum  
Ann Bryant Art Museum  
Deloites and Touche  
Ernst and Young  
Hollard Insurance  
Ken Logan Art Collection, USA  
KPMG  
Nandos UK  
Oliewenhuis Art Museum  
Old Mutual Bank  
Pretoria Art Museum, Sanlam  
Rhodes University Collection  
South African Association  
Spier Art Collection  
SAB  
SASOL  
Telkom, Rand Merchant Bank  
Westminster and Chelsea Hospital Collection, London, UK  
ZENECA

## SELECTED AWARDS

- 1997** First Prize, Royal Overseas League 14th Annual Exhibition. London.
- 1999** Nominee for the Daimler Chrysler Award for Contemporary South African Art
- 2000** Merit Prize, ABSA Atelier





LEFT (DETAIL)

*Towards a Technocratic World State & Civilizational Co-Dependence*, 2016

oil on superwood and frame

75 x 90 cm

BACK COVER (DETAIL)

*Goddess of Democracy*, 1989, 2017

oil on superwood and frame with copper medals

147 x 76 cm

This exhibition catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition *Artefacts from the Anthropocene* at Everard Read and CIRCA, Johannesburg 1 – 25 November 2017

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