

THE  
CHRYSALIS  
CODE

MEGAN ERASMUS



# THE CHRYSALIS CODE

UNFOLDING THE BIODIGITAL FEMININE

MEGAN ERASMUS



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“She saw all things with her lash of wolf, all things true, and all things false, all things turning against life and all things turning toward life, all things seen only through the eyes of that which weighs the heart with heart, and not with mind alone”

Clarissa Pinkola Estés  
The Wolf’s Eyelash 1992

# | CURATORIAL STATEMENT

Welcome to *The Chrysalis Code: Unfolding the BioDigital Feminine*.

This is the online presentation of my PhD in Visual Arts at the University of South Africa. This exhibition unfolds a practice in which biological memory and digital process meet, where images breathe, erode, and return.

Guided by the BioDigital feminine - an ethics of care, vulnerability, and transformation - the artworks explore how art can think through making and unmaking. Here, research becomes encounter, and the image becomes a living threshold.

Rooted in fieldwork within South African ecologies, organic matter and digital systems intertwine. Bodies gather through layering, thin through erosion, and re-emerge in shifting states of becoming. Classical feminine figures are reworked through ecological textures and restrained digital processes, loosening inherited hierarchies between culture and technology, wildness and innovation, nature and code.

The BioDigital feminine appears not as gendered identity, but as vitality itself: cyclical, receptive, held in living flux. The image gathers fragments, breathes them into relation, and releases them again. What dissolves is not lost; it returns. In this space, technology does not replace life. It listens to it.

The invitation is not to master what is seen, but to remain with what is becoming.



# | ENTERING THE CHRYSALIS

This catalogue accompanies the practice-led doctoral project *The Chrysalis Code: Unfolding the BioDigital Feminine*. The exhibition does not present finished objects, but a relational system in which images move between biological trace and digital mediation. It extends the written thesis into spatial and material form, testing conceptual inquiry through embodied encounter.

Developed through sustained fieldwork in South African ecologies and iterative digital construction, the project examines how BioDigital image-making can function as ethical-aesthetic practice. Organic textures - feathers, hides, vegetation, mineral surfaces, water - are photographed and reconstituted through human-led compositing. Form emerges through calibration rather than imposition; accumulation and erosion operate together.

The four artworks function as interdependent studies. Each revisits a mythological feminine figure drawn from European art history, not as citation, but as structural armature. These inherited forms are destabilised and re-materialised, allowing canonical iconography to shift into ecological and BioDigital registers.

Within the exhibition, the material image is extended into duration. Light, surface, and atmosphere test the image's stability rather than illustrating it. The gallery becomes a chamber of reorganisation, where organic and technological processes remain entangled rather than opposed.

To enter the chrysalis is to move from image as representation toward image as process. Transformation is approached not as effect, but as negotiated reconfiguration across fieldwork, digital construction, and spatial encounter. What unfolds is not resolution, but sustained attentiveness: an inquiry into how BioDigital practice might cultivate care within conditions of technological acceleration.

# | RESEARCH FRAMEWORK & ACADEMIC CONTEXT

This section positions The Chrysalis Code: Unfolding the BioDigital Feminine as a practice-led doctoral inquiry. It sets out the research questions, conceptual lenses, methodological logic, and scope that structure the project.

## RESEARCH ORIENTATION

The research is guided by questions tested through practice rather than resolved as propositions. It investigates BioDigital image-making as a site of encounter between biological trace and digital process, positioning aesthetic experience as shaped by responsiveness, instability, and return.

The central research questions are:

### **Aesthetic behaviour**

How does the entanglement of biological trace and computational process behave aesthetically when beauty is approached as vitality rather than surface refinement?

### **Ethical orientation**

How can the feminine principle operate as an ethical orientation within BioDigital practice: structuring decisions through care, receptivity, and cyclical transformation rather than mastery?

### **Posthuman accountability**

How can BioDigital practice acknowledge distributed agency across artist, matter, tools, environment, and viewer, while maintaining ecological responsibility?

These questions are pursued through the project's lifecycle structure (creation, emergence, illumination, reflection and return), enabling inquiry to unfold through calibrated encounters rather than predetermined conclusions.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The project is structured through three interrelated orientations: Feminine Principle, Vital Aesthetics, and Posthuman Ethics of Care. These orientations do not function as interpretive overlays applied after production; they operate as generative conditions that shape how form is approached, withheld, destabilised, and allowed to return. Rather than serving as thematic labels, they act as operative lenses within the practice, informing decisions about material selection, compositional restraint, temporal extension, and spatial relation. In this way, the conceptual framework is not external to the artworks; it is embedded within their structure, guiding transformation as an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome.

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## FEMININE PRINCIPLE

The feminine functions here as methodological orientation rather than identity category. It names a way of organising relation, attention, and transformation within the practice. Rather than representing gender, it describes a mode of intelligence that privileges responsiveness over control and emergence over imposition.

It operates through:

- relational intelligence (interdependence rather than hierarchy)
- receptive attunement (listening before asserting)
- cyclical return (renewal through re-entry rather than linear progression)
- care as discipline (restraint, accountability, and responsibility)

Across the lifecycle, this orientation shapes how images gather, soften, withdraw, and re-emerge without stabilising into dominance. Vulnerability is not framed as weakness, but as permeability: a condition that allows transformation to occur without erasure.

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## VITAL AESTHETICS

Vital Aesthetics reframes beauty as calibration rather than finish. In this project, vitality is sensed as an internal charge within the image: when layers remain responsive, when visibility can hover, and when form can persist without being forced into clarity. Beauty is treated as behaviour, how matter, light, and attention interact, rather than as resolution.

It operates as a compositional compass. Decisions to add, thin, blur, or erase are guided by whether the image sustains a subtle pulse of responsiveness. When form becomes overdetermined, it is reduced. When it loses tension, it is reopened. Vitality, therefore, is not decorative effect but relational equilibrium: a felt coherence between surface, depth, and duration.

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## POSTHUMAN ETHICS OF CARE

The project is situated within posthuman ethics through its commitment to ecological accountability and distributed agency. Materials are approached as active rather than inert, and the image is treated as an outcome of correspondence rather than unilateral control. Vulnerability is understood as structural: a condition shared across material, image, and encounter.

Within this orientation, authorship becomes relational rather than singular. Light, surface, environmental interference, and duration participate in shaping the work's final state. The artist does not withdraw responsibility, but acknowledges that meaning emerges through entanglement rather than command.

Projection is treated conceptually as re-situation: a method for placing the image in conditions where contingency becomes part of its ethical and perceptual stakes.



Figure 1: Moreau, G., 1864. Oedipus and the Sphinx. Oil on canvas. 206.4 x 104.8 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 2: Ingres, J., 1808. Oedipus and the Sphinx. Oil on canvas. 189 x 144 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris

## VISUAL LINEAGES AS OPERATIVE DEVICES

The project engages canonical art-historical images as compositional armatures rather than stylistic authorities. Specific artworks by Moreau, Ingres, Botticelli, Klimt, Collier and Watts are approached as structural frameworks: gesture, posture, orientation, colour, material indication and symbolic tension entered and reorganised through field-derived textures and BioDigital process. Their inherited hierarchies are neither preserved nor rejected, but metabolised.

In this sense, art history is treated as a form of fieldwork: terrain rather than template, inquiry rather than citation. It is not incidental that five of the six works sit within, or are shaped by, the long nineteenth-century aesthetic field, while Botticelli's revival through Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian criticism reinscribed him into that same discourse. This temporal convergence aligns the project with nineteenth-century debates on perception, morality, and vitality, reactivated here within a contemporary BioDigital framework.

### THE SPHINX – GUSTAVE MOREAU AND JEAN-AUGUSTE-DOMINIQUE INGRES



In *Vulnerable Creatures*, the Sphinx is reworked through nineteenth-century interpretations by Gustave Moreau and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, both of whom stage the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx as a charged confrontation between masculine reason and feminised enigma.

In Ingres' composition, Oedipus stands upright, illuminated, and anatomically resolved, while the Sphinx clings to the rock face: elevated yet visually subordinated within the hierarchical structure of the scene. Moreau intensifies the eroticism and symbolic density of the encounter, but the underlying narrative logic remains consistent: knowledge is secured through overcoming the feminine obstacle. The riddle is solved; authority is affirmed.

In *Vulnerable Creatures*, the compositional tension of this encounter is retained - the proximity of bodies, the threshold space, the charged orientation toward an unseen presence. However, the narrative hierarchy is restructured. Oedipus no longer anchors the image as its epistemic centre. His presence is reduced to trace, implication, or absorbed tension.

The Sphinx, by contrast, becomes the initiating force of the cycle. She does not function as an obstacle to knowledge but as its destabilising origin. Vulnerability and hybridity are not weaknesses to be overcome; they are generative conditions through which transformation begins.

The inherited structure is therefore not erased but reoriented. Power shifts from conquest to exposure. Knowledge shifts from resolution to sustained encounter. The riddle is not solved but inhabited.

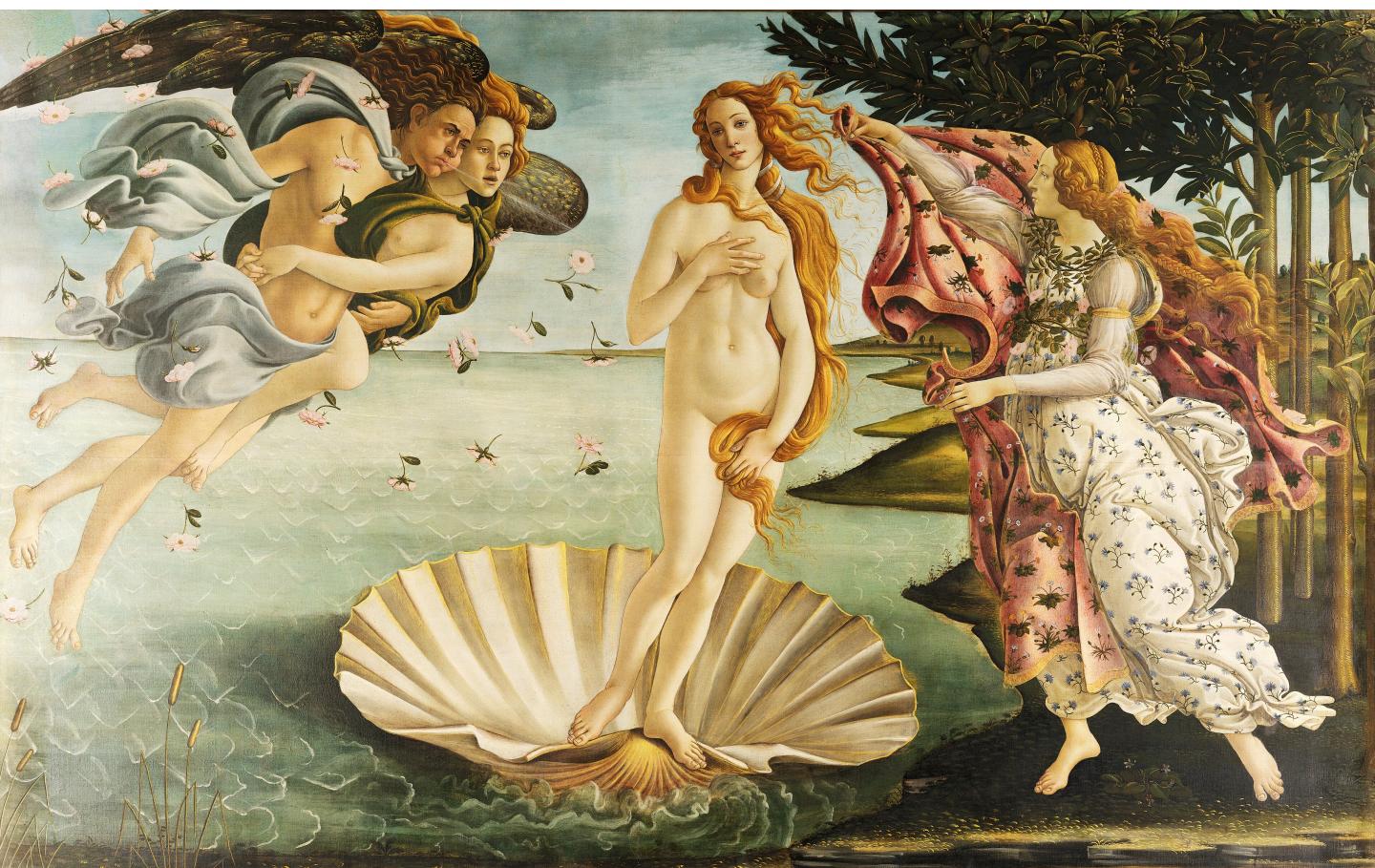


Figure 3: Botticelli, S., c.1484–1486. The Birth of Venus. Tempera on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

## THE BIRTH OF VENUS - SANDRO BOTTICELLI



Sandro Botticelli provides the compositional and mythic point of departure for *Thinly Veiled*. In *The Birth of Venus*, the figure emerges fully formed: luminous, idealised, and immediately legible. Her stance is stable, her body anatomically resolved, her arrival staged as perfected revelation. Wind propels her forward; attendants receive her. Emergence is instantaneous and complete; visibility confirms beauty, and beauty confirms value.

In *Thinly Veiled*, this structural armature remains faintly traceable. The upright posture, the axial verticality, the directional sweep of air, and the receiving gesture persist as compositional memory. Yet their authority is softened. The idealised body dissolves into vegetal membranes, animal hide, silkworm fibres, and atmospheric drift. The clarity of outline gives way to translucency; surface becomes permeable rather than declarative.

Rather than arriving whole, the figure gathers slowly. Visibility flickers. Form hovers at the edge of consolidation, never fully securing itself as spectacle. What appears does so provisionally, as if testing the conditions of its own emergence.

The armature remains.  
Its ideological certainty loosens.

Where Botticelli stages emergence as spectacle, *Thinly Veiled* extends it into duration. Birth is not declared; it unfolds. The winds do not command; they disperse. The veil does not conceal in order to reveal; it functions as membrane: a site of negotiation between exposure and protection, vulnerability and self-containment.

In this way, the inherited structure is not dismantled but re-entered. The classical composition is studied with the same attentiveness as ecological fieldwork: slowed down, metabolised, and reorganised through layering and erosion. The result is not rejection but transformation: emergence recalibrated from perfected arrival to sensuous becoming, where beauty is no longer fixed at the moment of revelation but sustained through ongoing responsiveness.

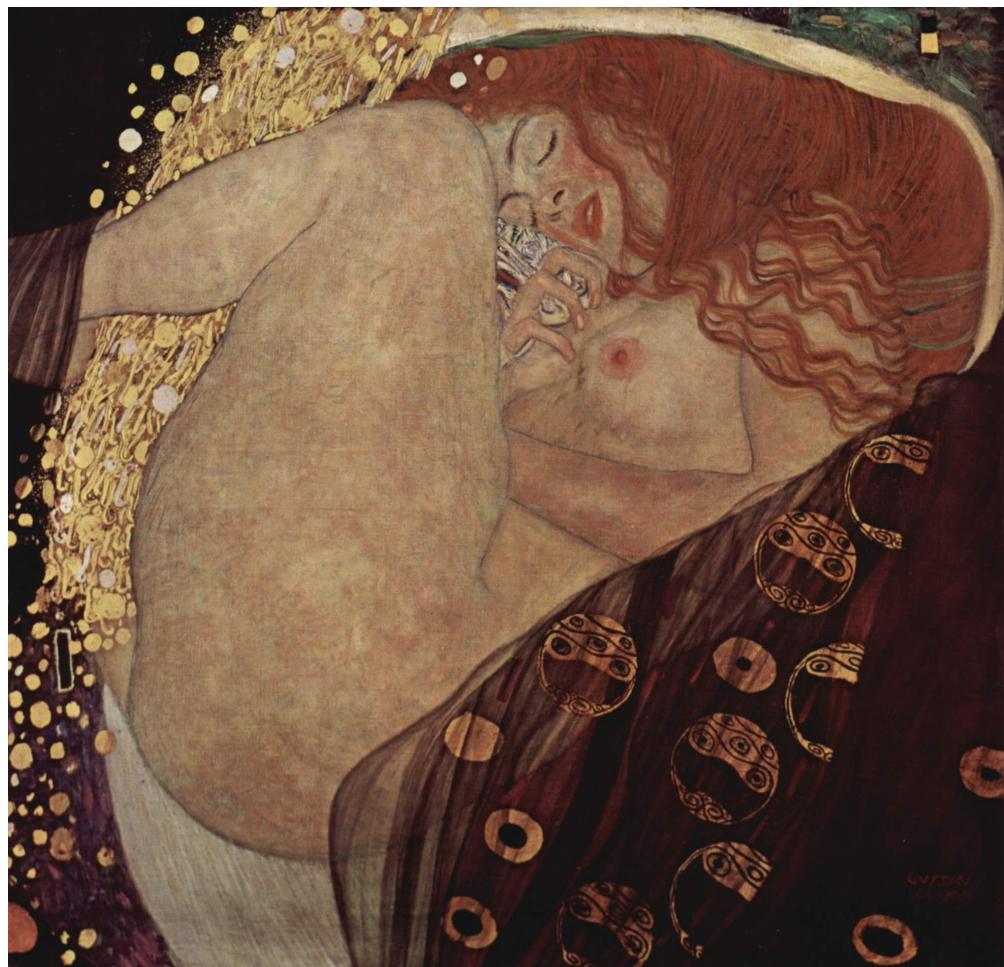


Figure 4: Klimt, G., 1907–1908. Danaë. Oil on canvas. Galerie Würthle, Vienna.

## DANAË – GUSTAV KLIMT



Gustav Klimt's *Danaë* (1907–08) provides the mythic and formal point of departure for *Lumen*. In Klimt's painting, Danaë is rendered in a tightly enclosed, introspective posture: curled inward, suspended within a dark ornamental field, receiving a descending cascade of gold. The composition concentrates attention on interiority, sensual containment, and fertilisation through divine intervention.

Klimt's surface is dense with pattern and symbolic ornament. The golden rain, often interpreted as Zeus in disguise, descends into the enclosed body, activating conception from without. Illumination appears as an external force entering the feminine chamber, its radiance inseparable from erotic charge and transcendental authority.

In *Lumen*, the compositional logic of enclosure is retained. The curved posture, the sense of inward gathering, the chamber-like spatial compression remain legible. However, the direction of illumination shifts.

Gold no longer descends.  
It circulates.

The luminous threads in *Lumen* move beneath the surface of the body like bioelectric current or neural circuitry. Illumination becomes endogenous rather than imposed. The eroticised rain of Klimt's painting is reinterpreted as internal coherence: a pulse that emerges from within the figure rather than penetrating it from above. Light does not conquer the chamber; it coheres inside it.

Klimt's ornamental density becomes a biodigital chamber: layered membranes of hide, fibre, feathers, the lash of a giraffe, and attenuated gold. Decorative pattern is translated into structural organisation. Gold no longer functions as transcendent symbol; it registers as circulation, signal, and distributed vitality. Illumination does not decorate the body; it gathers within it.

The compositional armature remains. The vector of agency changes. Where Klimt stages divine activation, *Lumen* stages self-generated luminosity. Where conception is bestowed, illumination is metabolised. Enclosure shifts from confinement to chosen interiority: a space of coherence rather than containment.

The inherited image is neither rejected nor revered. It is entered, slowed down, and reorganised through material correspondence, allowing gold to move from transcendence into embodied intelligence, and mythic fertilisation to become an ethic of interior alignment.



Figure 5: Collier, J., 1887. *Lilith*. Oil on canvas. Atkinson Art Gallery Collection  
Figure 6: Watts, G.F., 1896. *Eve Tempted*. Oil on canvas. Tate, London.

LILITH AND EVE  
JOHN COLLIER AND GEORGE FREDERIC WATTS



In Eden's Dialogue, the diptych draws from John Collier's Lilith and George Frederic Watts's Eve Tempted. Both paintings position feminine knowledge within moralised narrative frameworks shaped by seduction, transgression, and consequence.

Collier's Lilith is rendered as autonomous yet dangerous: entwined with the serpent, suspended in erotic self-possession. Watts's Eve is contemplative yet burdened, poised at the moment before disobedience. Together, these works encode a binary structure - rebellion and fall, autonomy and guilt - through which feminine agency is divided and disciplined.

In the BioDigital reinterpretation, this opposition is not preserved but reorganised. Lilith and Eve are no longer staged as archetypal opposites. The compositional separation remains legible in the form of a diptych: each figure occupies a distinct panel, framed apart. Yet this separation is not absolute. Through projection, light, and surface overlay, their forms are drawn into partial convergence. They remain divided, but not divisible.

The diptych structure acknowledges historical difference while refusing ideological isolation. The serpent no longer functions as instigator of rupture, but as connective filament: a circulating line of relation rather than a vector of blame. Eden is no longer staged as the site of a singular fall, but as a shared threshold where knowledge coils. Its inherited moral charge loosens. What was once structured as fall becomes exchange. What was divided becomes dialogue.

This reconfiguration also alters the position of the viewer. The diptych does not invite judgement between figures, nor alignment with one over the other. Instead, it stages a suspended interval in which meaning circulates across the space between bodies. Knowledge is not possessed; it moves. The space separating the panels becomes as charged as the figures themselves: a site of transfer, hesitation, and return.

In this sense, Eden's Dialogue does not resolve the myth; it redistributes it. The narrative no longer culminates in exile or moral verdict, but in sustained relational tension. Eden becomes less a lost origin than an ongoing condition: a field in which awareness forms through proximity rather than prohibition. What coils between Lilith and Eve is not temptation, but continuity of a shared intelligence that refuses final division.



Figure 7: Biersteker, T., 2020. Econtinuum. Interactive installation.

Figure 8: Oxman, N., 2013. Silk Pavilion. Installation view, Neri Oxman: Material Ecology, Museum of Modern Art, New York

## CONTEMPORARY RESONANCES

This project is situated within an expanding field of contemporary BioDigital practice in which biological processes, computational systems, and ethical responsibility are increasingly entangled. The Chrysalis Code shares key concerns with artists who translate living systems into aesthetic experience: revealing invisible networks, staging interspecies collaboration, and materialising care as a lived condition rather than an abstract value.

However, the project's emphasis remains distinct. Where many BioDigital works foreground biotechnology, sensing systems, or engineered life as primary media, The Chrysalis Code develops a non-extractive visual methodology rooted in field observation, compositing, projection feedback, and uncreation. It approaches the BioDigital not as technological spectacle, but as a sensuous ethics of relation: an image practice that metabolises ecological matter, art-historical structures, and environmental interference into a sustained cycle of becoming.

### DATA, SENSING, AND THE VISIBILITY OF THE INVISIBLE



Works such as Thijs Biersteker's *Econtinuum* (2020) demonstrate how ecological systems, such as tree communication, symbiosis, electrical and chemical exchange, can be rendered perceptible through responsive light and sound. This resonates with The Chrysalis Code's investment in relational visibility: what becomes legible through attention, duration, and interdependence. However, where Biersteker externalises invisible networks through data-driven installation, this project internalises a comparable logic within the image itself. Through layered matter, veiling, and projection drift, relation is staged as felt presence rather than informational display.

### INTERSPECIES MAKING AND THE ETHICS OF COLLABORATION



Neri Oxman's *Silk Pavilion* (2020) is a crucial contemporary precedent for interspecies fabrication: silkworms, robotic systems, and human design entwined as co-producers of form. *The Chrysalis Code* aligns with this ethos of collaboration (especially in its sustained engagement with silkworm fibres and lifecycle logics), but relocates material ecology into a compositional and symbolic register: not building architecture, but building biodigital bodies through fieldwork textures, restraint, and accumulated trace.



Figure 9: Beesley, P., 2013. Epiphyte Chamber. Installation, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul.

Figure 10: Sun, Y. and Peng, Y., 2016. Can't Help Myself. Installation, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Figure 11: High, K., 2006. Embracing Animal. Video installation.

In this context, the chrysalis code advances a distinct methodological and aesthetic proposition: that BioDigital practice can operate as sensuous research, where meaning emerges through correspondence, restraint, and environmental exchange. Images do not dominate matter but learn from it, and where the *contemporary* is not only technological, but ethical.

## CARE AS CONTESTED PRACTICE



BioDigital discourse also includes works that sharpen the ethical stakes of making with life: Eduardo Kac's *GFP Bunny* (2000) foregrounds responsibility and intimacy while provoking questions of instrumentalisation; Catts & Zurr's *Semi-Living Worry Dolls* (2001) stage care as an ongoing condition of tending fragile semi-living forms; Kathy High's *Embracing Animal* (2006) reframes laboratory life through custodial encounter. These works situate care as action, obligation, and risk. *The Chrysalis Code* enters this debate through a different kind of care: a refusal of extractive image-making, a commitment to human-led compositing, and an insistence that environmental forces may alter the work: erosion, distortion and death functioning as ethical feedback rather than failure.

## RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND BREATHING SYSTEMS



Installations such as Philip Beesley's *Epiphyte Chamber* (2013) propose environments that behave like organisms: breathing, sensing, responding to presence, and inviting viewers into reciprocal entanglement. The Chrysalis Code shares this focus on the viewer as participant within a living system, but translates it through projection-as-ecology. The image is not merely shown in space; it is tested by space, returned to bark, water, grass, and stone, and then reconstituted into the symbolic grammar of the final work.

## VULNERABILITY AND THE AESTHETICS OF FRAGILITY



Contemporary BioDigital art frequently frames vulnerability as structural rather than sentimental: from cellular-scale meditations on isolation and intimacy, for ex. de Menezes & Graça's *Immortality for Two* (2014), to the feedback loop of maintenance and failure of Yuan and Yu's *Can't Help Myself* (2016). This project extends that position into image practice by treating fragility as a formal condition: visibility that gathers and withdraws, surfaces that resist stabilisation, and symbols that migrate from canonical authority into ecological intelligence.

## | ETHICAL POSITION ON USING AI

No generative AI systems were used in the production of the final imagery. Digital technologies function within this project strictly as compositing instruments, animation platforms, and projection mediators. They operate as tools of mediation rather than autonomous image generators.

The project explicitly privileges Artistic Intelligence over algorithmic authorship. While computational systems enable layering, animation, and projection, all compositional decisions remain human-led and perceptually grounded. Form emerges through embodied judgement, sustained material correspondence, and iterative calibration, not through automated optimisation or synthetic generation.

This position does not reject technology. Rather, it clarifies authorship and responsibility. Digital systems operate as collaborators within a structured methodology, but they do not originate meaning.

For more information, please see [Research Transparency Statement](#).

## METHODOLOGY AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

This project adopts a practice-led methodology in which making functions as inquiry. Knowledge does not precede the work; it emerges through iterative correspondence between observation, digital construction, and deliberate destabilisation. The research operates through a cyclical logic of re-entry rather than linear progression.

### ARTISTIC INTELLIGENCE

Artistic Intelligence names the project's epistemic position: human-led compositional judgement grounded in embodied decision-making, iterative calibration, and ethical attentiveness. Digital tools operate as instruments of mediation rather than autonomous generators.

### PROCESS MODEL

The methodology unfolds through four interrelated operations:

- Observation: sustained attention to ecological material and behaviour
- Layering: compositing as correspondence rather than illustration
- Re-situation: placing the image under conditions that test its stability
- Uncreation: erosion and reversal as knowledge-generating acts

### METHODOLOGICAL CONDITIONS OF PRACTICE

While the process model describes movement, the following conditions establish the structural boundaries within which that movement occurs. The research was structured through five interdependent methodological conditions:

#### **Ecological Situatedness**

All image material originates in documented fieldwork within South African environments. Ecological specificity functions as a boundary condition for the research, preventing abstraction.

#### **Material Traceability**

Every digital layer corresponds to photographed matter. No generative or synthetic imagery was introduced. This establishes accountability between source and output.

#### **Iterative Calibration**

Compositions evolved through recursive testing, reduction, and re-entry rather than additive accumulation. Knowledge emerged through adjustment.

#### **Environmental Feedback**

Projection was used not to display images, but to test their stability under conditions of scale, surface irregularity, and atmospheric interference.

#### **Reflexive Documentation**

Process journaling, version archiving, and critique cycles were integrated into the workflow to ensure examinability.

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## WHY THE LIFECYCLE MATTERS IN DOCTORAL CONTEXT

The lifecycle model contributes methodologically as well as aesthetically. It functions as a structural mechanism that integrates theory, practice, and exhibition design into a coherent research system.

Importantly, the lifecycle was not imposed as a curatorial device after the works were completed. A related cyclical structure had already emerged within the written thesis through the analysis of contemporary BioDigital practices (creation, nurturing, self-awareness, vulnerability). While the terminology shifts slightly in the practical component (creation, emergence, illumination, reflection/return), the underlying structural rhythm remains consistent.

This convergence between writing and making is not coincidental. It indicates that the cyclical model unearthed through sustained engagement with both conceptual inquiry and material experimentation. The structure appears less as a design choice and more as an operative pattern that became visible through the research process itself.

In this way, the practical component does not merely illustrate the theoretical lifecycle; it enacts and reorganises it. The exhibition structure, therefore, mirrors the epistemic structure of the thesis, demonstrating reciprocity between conceptual reflection and material production.

The lifecycle thus operates as the organising logic of the research. It provides structural cohesion across media, methodology, and curatorial presentation, ensuring that transformation is not only depicted but enacted at every level of the project. Importantly, this logic is not evidentiary in the scientific sense; it is operative rather than demonstrative, shaping how the work thinks through form rather than proving a fixed conclusion.

## LIFECYCLE AS CURATORIAL & CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE

The Chrysalis Code is organised around four interrelated movements: creation, emergence, illumination, and reflection/return. These were not imposed as symbolic stages after the works were completed. They became visible through sustained practice and later provided structural coherence. The lifecycle operates at two levels: As a conceptual model through which transformation is interpreted; and as a curatorial framework shaping exhibition sequencing. It does not function as a narrative arc. Rather, each movement remains internally connected to the others.

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### CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE

Conceptually, the lifecycle translates the methodological process into experiential form:

**Creation** (*Vulnerable Creatures*) introduces destabilisation and threshold.

**Emergence** (*Thinly Veiled*) sustains protective unfolding and partial visibility.

**Illumination** (*Lumen*) consolidates internal coherence and generative interiority.

**Reflection & Return** (*Eden's Dialogue*) repositions knowledge as relational circulation rather than resolution.

These phases mirror biological processes of metamorphosis and digital processes of iteration and feedback. Transformation is understood as recursive, not progressive. The chrysalis becomes a governing metaphor: a site of internal reorganisation rather than a passage toward fixed completion.

Importantly, the lifecycle does not culminate in mastery or closure. Reflection returns the work to openness, ensuring that each phase remains active within the others.

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### CURATORIAL STRUCTURE

Within the exhibition, the lifecycle operates spatially:

The sequencing of the works follows the conceptual order, yet the space does not enforce linear movement. Visitors may enter the cycle at any point. What matters is circulation rather than direction.

*Vulnerable Creatures* establishes a charged threshold.

*Thinly Veiled* introduces atmospheric suspension.

*Lumen* compresses space inward, creating contemplative density.

*Eden's Dialogue* opens outward into relational exchange.

Projection, sound, and spatial bleed reinforce the cyclical logic, functioning as ecological re-situation, exposing the image to surface, light, and environmental contingency. Visual and sonic elements reverberate across works, allowing phases to overlap rather than remain spatially discrete..

The exhibition therefore becomes an embodied lifecycle: movement through space mirrors movement through conceptual transformation.



## DEMARCATION & SCOPE

This catalogue forms part of a practice-led doctoral submission and must be read in relation to the written thesis, though it does not duplicate it. The thesis develops the extended theoretical framework, literature review, and scholarly positioning of the research; the catalogue documents and spatially articulates the practical component as a research outcome. Together, they form a reciprocal but distinct body of work, each necessary to the integrity of the doctoral inquiry.

The written thesis primarily investigates the BioDigital feminine as a conceptual and ethical orientation within contemporary art. It situates the project within posthuman theory, feminist discourse, vital materialism, and practice-led research methodology. Through critical analysis of historical and contemporary case studies, the thesis establishes the theoretical ground from which the practical component emerges. It articulates how vitality, care, distributed agency, and relational intelligence can operate as structuring principles within BioDigital practice.

The practical component does not attempt to illustrate these theories directly. Instead, it tests them materially. Through fieldwork-based compositing, projection-as-ecology, and uncreation as method, the artworks function as epistemic sites in which the research questions are enacted rather than described. The exhibition becomes the space where conceptual propositions are subjected to environmental feedback, perceptual calibration, and material negotiation.

The scope of this project is defined by:

- BioDigital image-based practice
- Human-led compositing and non-generative digital processes
- Place-responsive fieldwork within South African ecologies
- Mythological reinterpretation through contemporary digital methodology
- Projection and sound as durational extensions rather than primary media

The research is deliberately bounded. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of BioDigital art, nor does it engage in biotechnology, live systems engineering, or AI-generated image production. Its focus remains on image-based practice as a site of ethical and perceptual calibration. The project advances a situated methodology rather than a universal model, grounded in the specific ecological, aesthetic, and conceptual conditions under which the work was produced.

The contribution therefore lies not in technological innovation or disciplinary breadth, but in methodological clarity. The Chrysalis Code proposes a focused practice-led framework in which Artistic Intelligence, projection-as-ecology, and uncreation operate as interdependent strategies for ethical BioDigital making.



Figure 13: Erasmus, M., 2025. Vulnerable Creatures. Digitally layered photographic composition with projection extension | 24

# | BODY OF WORK

## VULNERABLE CREATURES

She gathers the gaze without resolving it.  
Seduction and warning share the same pulse.  
The riddle does not guard the passage -  
it invites the fall into becoming.  
Curiosity is the first surrender.

Vulnerable Creatures reworks the ancient myth of the Sphinx - the lioness-bodied guardian who posed a riddle to Oedipus and devoured those who failed to answer. Traditionally cast as an obstacle to masculine reason, she is here repositioned as an invitation to destabilise intelligence rather than a figure or riddle to be overcome. The composition is constructed through digitally layered photographic textures drawn from South African fieldwork: feathers, mineral traces, water surfaces, and fragments of lioness hide. These materials are not arbitrarily selected; they respond directly to the hybrid anatomy staged in classical painting, where the Sphinx appears as lioness and winged creature, adorned with pearls signifying beauty and wisdom. In this reinterpretation, pearls are replaced with bone and mineral residue; wing becomes feather; lioness emerges as touches of pelt. Ornament shifts into organic trace, preserving material specificity while dissolving narrative hierarchy. Ambiguity prepares for confrontation; yet the encounter remains suspended in heightened alertness.

Material fragments remain intentionally unresolved within the layered body, yet they embody crucial moments and destabilising intrusions drawn from the classical myth: a skeletal finger arched in dangerous invitation - echoing Oedipus's gesture - reappears as an ambiguous protruding (phallic) limb within the creature's own form. The gesture is neither fully absorbed nor entirely external; it lingers as tension. Skeletal traces of wing stretch faintly across the ribs, suspending the figure between grounded lioness and aerial consciousness.

The bones here do not signify death. They signal re-awakening: a memory of being gathered and sung back into form. What appears skeletal becomes interior alertness surfacing. The creature inhabits a heightened mindplace - a sustained tension without closure, held for both creature and viewer: an invitation not to solve, but to enter.

Beneath her, the reflection deepens the duality. Though mirroring the figure above, it carries more pronounced animal elements: the leg more distinctly creature than human, the instinct more visible in its submerged form. The reflection does not merely duplicate; it intensifies. If the upper body suggests aerial consciousness, the lower mirrored form anchors memory in instinct. Awareness floats above; animal knowing waits below. Together they suspend the figure between cognition and appetite, thought and sinew.

She does not guard the threshold.  
She lies across it, luminous and unblinking.  
She lets you cross, knowing that in surrender you may not return.  
Unchanged.



Figure 14: Erasmus, M., 2025. *Thinly Veiled*. Digitally layered photographic composition with projection extension

# | BODY OF WORK

## THINLY VEILED

She grows in enclosure.  
Membrane is not barrier but protection.  
Light touches her gently,  
and withdraws.  
Becoming must remain partially hidden.

Thinly Veiled reinterprets Botticelli's Birth of Venus by suspending emergence rather than declaring arrival. In the Renaissance painting, Venus appears fully formed: luminous, idealised, propelled by Zephyrus and Aura, and received by the Hora. Visibility confirms beauty; beauty confirms value. Emergence is delivered, framed, and contained. This work refuses that choreography.

In Botticelli's composition, wind functions as masculine propulsion. Venus is carried forward; Aura clings in dependent suspension. In Thinly Veiled, this dynamic loosens. Zephyrus recedes into atmospheric layering; Aura no longer fuses with his force. Wind diffuses rather than commands. Emergence stirs from within rather than being imposed from without.

The ideological certainty of perfected arrival is therefore unsettled. Exposure is no longer staged as proof of worth. Visibility becomes conditional, fluctuating, and negotiated. What appears does so provisionally; what withdraws remains active within the field.

Venus does not arrive complete. Her body gathers through membrane-like layering: peony translucency, vegetal drift, water distortion, softened animal trace. Edges blur; visibility fluctuates. Form accumulates slowly. Membrane becomes protection rather than barrier. Becoming remains partially hidden.

The Hora's silk is reconstituted as silkworm fibre itself: not textile but process. Ornament shifts into cocooned transformation. Reception becomes shelter rather than display.

Beauty here is not perfected surface but vital calibration: porous, relational, responsive. Movement circulates rather than thrusts. Emergence is negotiated, not delivered.

Constructed from field-derived photographic textures: petals, silkworm bodies, animal pelt, water and grassland traces, the image preserves material specificity while dissolving bodily certainty. Wing disperses into feather and petal; shoreline becomes ecological trace. Ornament becomes process.

Visibility flickers rather than stabilises. Veiling operates as membrane: a porous threshold through which form gathers and withdraws. Projection sustains this condition through subtle drift and restrained light modulation. Duration replaces arrival.

Emergence lingers before illumination.  
Form gathers quietly beneath the veil.  
What glows later  
must first learn to remain unseen.



Figure 15: Erasmus, M., 2025. *Lumen*. Digitally layered photographic composition with projection extension

# | BODY OF WORK

## LUMEN

Light does not descend.

It gathers.

Gold circulates beneath the skin,

Learning the architecture of pulse.

Illumination begins in enclosure.

Lumen reinterprets the myth of Danaë by internalising what has historically been staged as divine intrusion. In canonical depictions, most notably in Gustav Klimt's Danaë, illumination arrives from above as golden descent: a charged shower that penetrates enclosure and eroticises the body through external force. Radiance is delivered.

Here, illumination does not arrive from elsewhere. The myth of impregnation by celestial force is internalised. Gold does not penetrate; it circulates. Filaments thread through shadowed membranes like bioelectric pathways. What once signified external power becomes endogenous coherence.

In this shift, the feminine principle is no longer staged as gendered receptivity or passive containment, nor does the masculine remain positioned as authorial force. It operates instead as an integrated mode of interior organisation: a relational intelligence that gathers, aligns, and circulates energy without hierarchy. The binaries of active and passive, giver and receiver, masculine and feminine begin to dissolve.

Illumination no longer arises through encounter between opposing sides, but through internal attunement. The principle becomes universal rather than categorical: not a body, not an identity, but a condition of coherence available across embodied systems, technologies, and forms of life.

In Lumen, this condition takes form as a BioDigital chamber: layered animal hide; attenuated gold traces registering as electrical pulse; shadow gradients holding luminosity in tension; and the foundational yet partially concealed presence of a giraffe eye, embedded within the veiled zone. This nonhuman perception does not dominate the image; it deepens it. Awareness is distributed. Illumination becomes more-than-human interiority. Pattern transforms into circulation. Decoration becomes structure.

The projection extension intensifies this interiority. A slow, almost imperceptible pulse moves beneath the surface, as if light were breathing inside the chamber. Drift occurs without rupture. The glow expands and contracts in restrained cycles, reinforcing illumination as durational coherence rather than climax. Nothing explodes. Nothing resolves. Illumination here is not exposure. It is integration.

If Vulnerable Creatures destabilises and Thinly Veiled shelters emergence, Lumen marks the moment where coherence gathers inwardly. Not triumph. Not transcendence. But alignment.

Light does not arrive.

It remembers itself.

Gold no longer falls -

value listens beneath the surface.

What coheres within

will not need to conquer without.



Figures 16 &17: Erasmus, M., 2025. *Eden's Dialogue* (diptych). Digitally layered photographic compositions with projection extension.

# | BODY OF WORK

## EDEN'S DIALOGUE

She does not tempt.  
She turns.  
The garden listens  
to what passes between them.

As explored in Lumen, if something coheres internally, then when it enters dialogue, it does not dominate. It relates. Eden's Dialogue stages Lilith and Eve within a relational field rather than moral opposition. The diptych becomes a BioDigital threshold in which knowledge circulates rather than divides.

Drawing from nineteenth-century depictions of Lilith and Eve, the work departs from narratives of transgression, exile, and blame. Historically separated - Lilith demonised for refusal, Eve burdened for curiosity - the two figures are repositioned as expressions of a shared mythic continuum. Eden is no longer staged as the site of a singular fall, but as an ecological field in which dialogue circulates.

The garden itself is not backdrop but participant. A resting leopard and the coiled presence of a python move through the composition as embodied memory. Their spotted skins, leopard rosette and python scale, become visually interchangeable, woven across the surface so that pattern migrates between species, between bodies, between canvases. Instinct is not external to the feminine figures; it is folded into them. At moments, soft scales surface along shoulder, hip, rib: not as costume, but as emergence. The bodies are not merely accompanied by the serpent. They are partially serpentine.

The serpent, traditionally cast as deceiver, is reconfigured as connective filament. Through digital projection, it moves across both canvases as luminous thread: neural pathway, data stream, umbilical current. What was once a linear chain of temptation becomes a cyclical exchange. Knowledge does not pass hierarchically from one body to another; it coils, returns, and re-enters. The bending of the figures echoes this movement: their spines curved in subtle serpentine arcs, their proximity shaped by the same coiling logic that traverses the projection. Desire and thought share a spine.

The erotic charge of the work resides not in spectacle, but in attention. The question lingers: are we drawn toward knowledge itself, or toward the one who appears to carry it? Eve leans not in submission, but in yearning. Her body inclines toward embodied truth: toward touch, toward earth, toward sensation as epistemic force. Her desire is not naïve; it is sensuous and deliberate. Lilith turns - not withdrawn, but self-possessed. Her body curves away while her presence remains available, echoing classical depictions in which she both acknowledges and withdraws. The tension is not resolved through fusion. It is sustained through proximity.

Materially, the two canvases retain distinction while resisting isolation. Lilith's surface registers luminous density: light functioning as exposure rather than moralised shadow. Eve's surface remains more porous and earth-bound. Her form gathers slowly through vegetal textures and diffused light, as though emerging from the garden itself rather than standing apart from it. She rises from shadow not as fallen, but as awareness forming within what has not yet been illuminated.



## EDEN'S DIALOGUE CONTINUED

Dialogue is enacted through layering. Figures move between foreground and recession; opacity thickens and thins; elements are erased and returned. Like a serpent shedding skin, translucent layers pass over one another without cancelling what came before. The embrace remains suspended between touch and withdrawal. Intimacy is differentiated but not dominant. This is a fragile eroticism of becoming - holding without possession.

Projection activates the seam between the canvases rather than illustrating narrative. Slow pulses of light and serpentine circulation traverse the interval, loosening the boundary without dissolving it. The animation does not introduce a second image; it introduces duration. The diptych behaves as a breathing exchange: separation and relation held in oscillation. It is an ongoing movement between distance and nearness, autonomy and contact, selfhood and shared field.

The garden is also an archive of looking. Leopard, serpent, vegetal forms and bodily gestures echo art-historical precedents while interweaving contemporary ecological observation. The work studies nature through the eyes of earlier painters, even as it reworks their inherited hierarchies. In this sense, Eden becomes not only mythic origin but art-historical terrain: a layered site where images converse across time.

All imagery remains human-composed through field photography, observation, and digital layering. No generative AI was used in the production of the work. Digital tools function as instruments of compositing, animation, and projection, not as autonomous image generators. The connective logic of the serpent is thus both mythic and methodological: circulation enacted through Artistic Intelligence rather than algorithmic authorship.

Reflection does not restore innocence. It re-enters the garden with awareness.

If Vulnerable Creatures destabilises, Thinly Veiled shelters emergence, and Lumen gathers illumination inward, Eden's Dialogue opens outward: not to conquer, not to conclude, but to remain in relation.

Nothing falls.  
Nothing is expelled.  
What coils between them  
keeps beginning again.

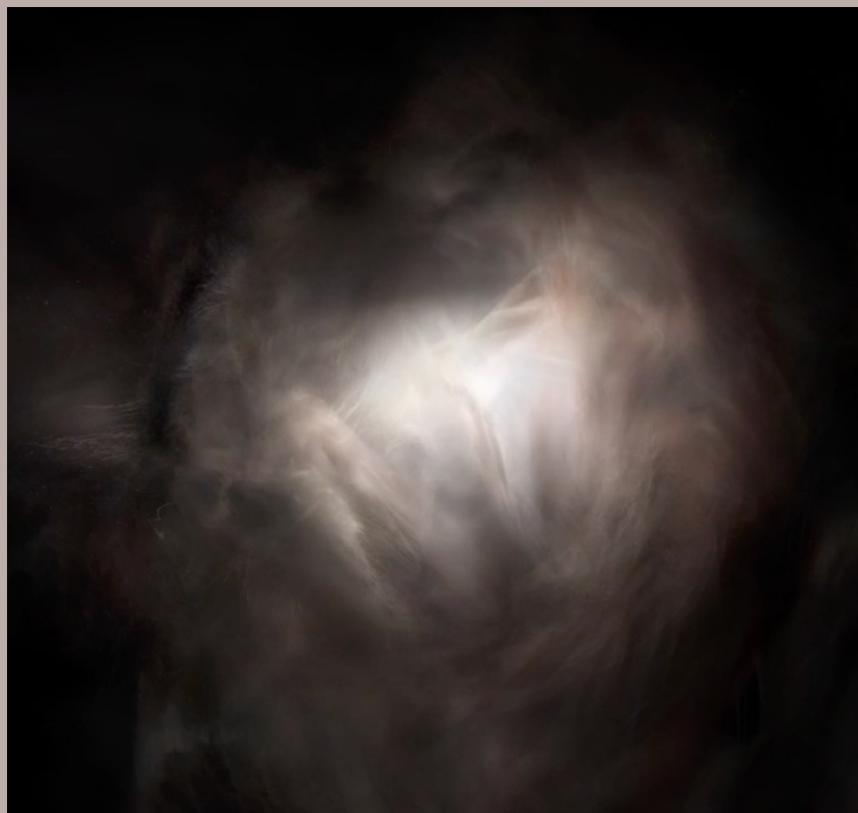


Figure 18: Erasmus, M., 2025. *Lumen* (animation still). Projection extension detail.  
Figure 19: Erasmus, M., 2025. *Thinly Veiled* (animation still). Projection extension detail.

# | EXHIBITION AS LIVING SYSTEM

## INSTALLATION DETAILS

The exhibition is conceived as a living system rather than a sequence of isolated works. The four pieces are arranged according to the lifecycle structure, yet the spatial layout does not enforce linear progression. Viewers may enter the cycle at any point. What matters is circulation rather than direction, return rather than arrival.

Transitions between works are intentionally permeable. Sound, reflected light, and peripheral glow allow each piece to remain subtly present within the others. The space operates as an interconnected field rather than a series of discrete viewing stations. Movement through the gallery becomes part of the work's temporal logic.

Each work is presented at human scale, allowing the body of the viewer to encounter the image at near-correspondence rather than spectacle. The installation resists monumentality and theatrical display. Instead, it privileges proximity, duration, and attentiveness. Viewing requires slowing down; meaning accrues through sustained looking rather than immediate impact.

The installation does not position the artworks as fixed objects to be consumed. It structures an environment in which images, light, sound, surface, and viewer remain in dynamic relation. Perception becomes participatory: the encounter shifts subtly depending on position, distance, and duration of stay.

The online presentation translates this structure into a screen-based encounter without attempting to replicate physical immersion. The works retain their durational logic and restrained animation. They are designed to be entered at any moment, without climax or narrative resolution. In both physical and digital formats, the exhibition operates as a relational field activated through attention rather than a sequence of resolved artefacts.



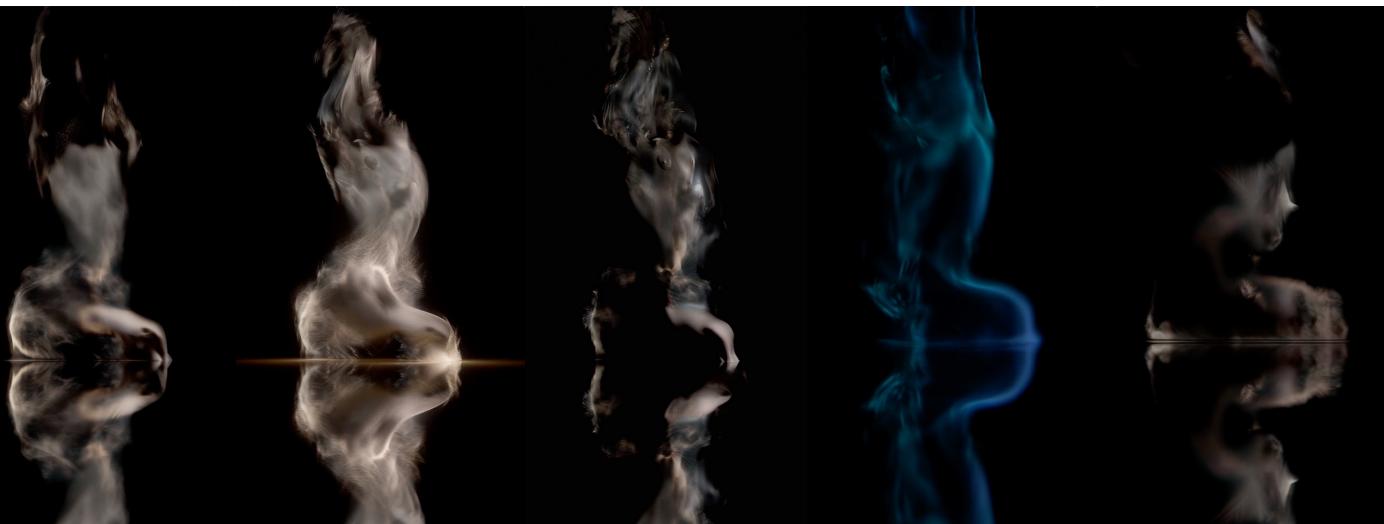


Figure 20: Erasmus, M., 2025. Vulnerable Creatures (animation still). Projection extension detail  
Figure 21: Erasmus, M., 2025. Eden's Dialogue (animation still frames). Projection extension detail

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## TEMPORAL EXTENSION

Projection functions as duration rather than display. It extends the still image into time without converting it into narrative animation. The projected layer does not illustrate, dramatise, or resolve the work; it introduces a subtle temporal drift that allows the image to breathe. Time is not added as event but as modulation - a gradual shifting of intensity that alters how the surface is perceived.

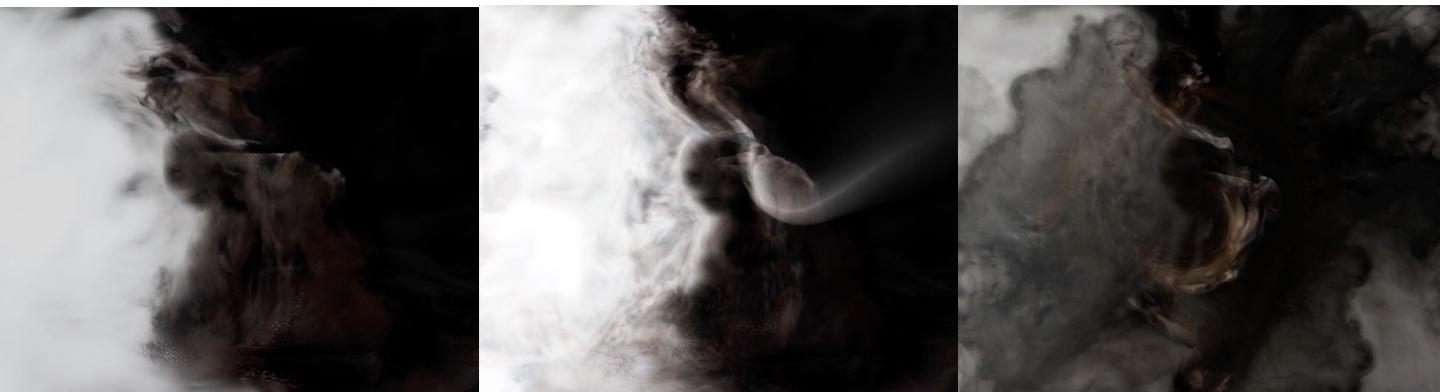
Each projection operates as a seamless loop. The absence of visible beginning or end prevents climax and discourages teleological reading. Time circulates rather than progresses. Viewers may enter the work at any moment without encountering a peak or conclusion. This looping structure reinforces the lifecycle logic of the exhibition: return replaces forward drive.

Movement remains deliberately restrained. Opacity shifts, gradual density changes, internal pulses, and serpentine drift unfold slowly, often at the threshold of perception. The animation is calibrated to avoid spectacle. Nothing accelerates. Nothing declares itself. Subtle displacement and diffusion alter edges and interior structures without destabilising the compositional integrity of the base image. The still image remains structurally primary; the animated layer never exceeds it.

Projection also re-situates the image materially. Light encounters wall texture, absorbs ambient fluctuation, and responds to minor environmental interference. Slight variations in surface tone, architectural contour, or atmospheric condition alter how the projection registers. These shifts are not treated as technical flaws but as perceptual variables within the work's ecology. The image remains open to contingency.

The projected light does not overpower the material surface. It passes across it, thickening and thinning in calibrated cycles. In doing so, the image becomes durational: not transformed into cinema, but held in a state of extended becoming. The viewer perceives not action, but persistence.

Projection therefore operates as temporal extension and environmental negotiation: a quiet condition of circulation that sustains attentiveness without demanding it, allowing the image to remain active without resolving into event.



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## SOUND AS SPATIAL FIELD

Sound operates as atmosphere rather than composition. It does not function as score, accompaniment, or emotional cue. Instead, it thickens space.

A low-frequency drone forms the base layer of the auditory field. This sustained tone does not direct attention; it holds it. Subtle ecological textures - wind movement, distant animal presence, faint environmental traces - circulate within the soundscape without resolving into rhythm or melody.

The structure remains non-musical. There is no harmonic progression, no thematic motif, no cinematic build. Intermittent pulses interrupt the drone irregularly, preventing predictability while avoiding spectacle. The effect is durational rather than dramatic.

Sound does not narrate the images.  
It sustains their atmosphere.

As with projection, the auditory field extends the work without overpowering it. It creates a condition of presence: a spatial envelope within which perception slows and the image remains in quiet relation to its environment.

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## MATERIAL & LIGHTING CONDITIONS

The installation is calibrated through controlled ambient lighting. Illumination is reduced to prevent glare and to allow projection to register as subtle modulation rather than dominant beam. Light does not flood the space; it holds it in suspension.

Projection surfaces are treated as responsive rather than neutral. Wall tone, texture, and depth influence how the image behaves: absorbing, diffusing, or intensifying its presence. Slight irregularities in surface and architecture are not concealed; they contribute to the perceptual field.

Spatial bleed is intentional. Projection glow, reflected light, and low-frequency sound move beyond the physical edge of each work. Boundaries remain visible, yet porous. No single image is acoustically or visually isolated. It functions as an environment of calibrated relation, where light, surface, duration, and sound co-produce the encounter.

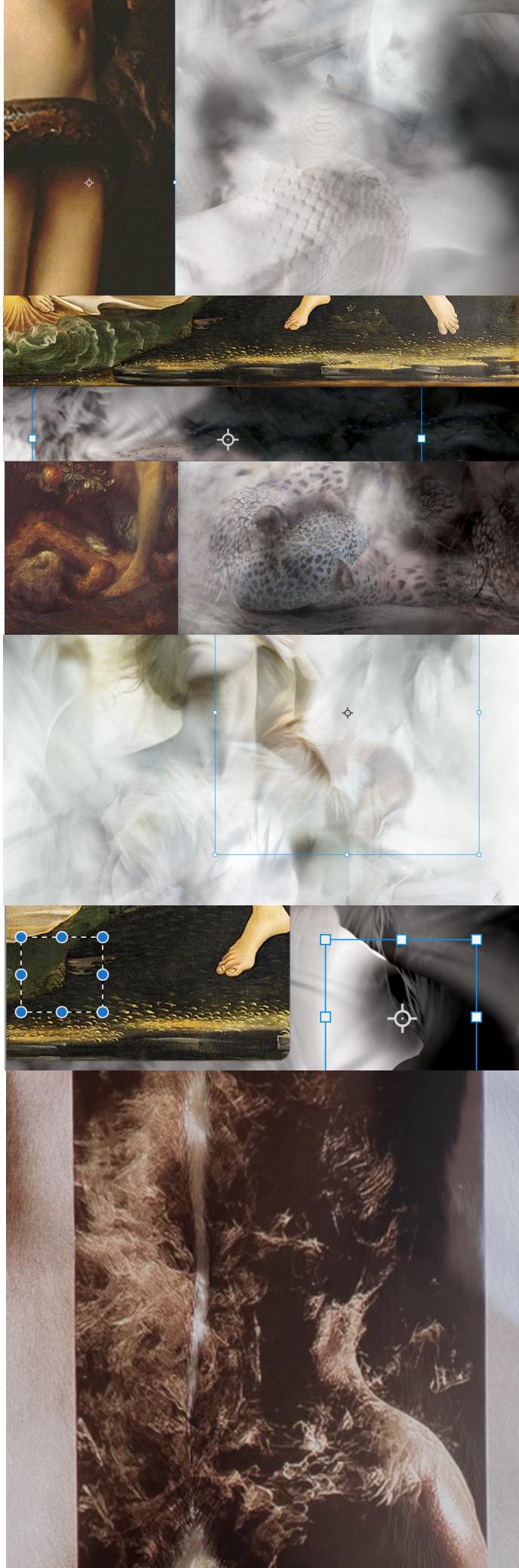


Figure 22: Erasmus, M., 2023–2025. Fieldwork documentation. Photographic studies of South African ecologies.

# PROCESS EVIDENCE

This section documents the research trace of the project. It demonstrates that the artworks emerge through structured, accountable procedures rather than spontaneous aesthetic decision-making. Fieldwork, compositional calibration, projection testing, and reflexive documentation form an evidentiary chain linking concept to material outcome. Process is not supplementary to the work. It substantiates it. in the accompanying Making Of video documentation.

## FIELDWORK DOCUMENTATION

Photographic capture of South African flora, fauna, and terrain  
Logged by location, time, season, and material behaviour  
Non-extractive observational ethics

Fieldwork establishes ecological specificity and prevents the abstraction of nature into symbolic resource. Each source image is catalogued with environmental metadata, ensuring traceability between biological origin and digital transformation.

Process journals record perceptual observations, selection criteria, and contextual conditions. These records demonstrate that material choices emerge through sustained observation rather than thematic substitution.

## IMAGING WORKFLOW

Digitisation of analogue photographic material  
Layer-based compositing in Adobe Photoshop  
No digital drawing or generative AI  
Opacity modulation, duplication, masking, and controlled erosion  
Colour derived exclusively from source material  
Version archiving for iterative traceability

Each composition develops through incremental calibration. Layers are adjusted, thinned, or removed until relational balance is achieved. Version archives preserve compositional evolution, allowing decisions to remain examinable.

Density arises through translucency and subtraction rather than additive illustration. Form is recognised through correspondence, not imposed through design.

## ANIMATION DEVELOPMENT

Constructed in Adobe After Effects  
Base still image retained beneath animated strata  
Animation limited to restrained opacity thresholds  
Subtle displacement, blur, and gradient drift applied conservatively  
Seamless loop testing to avoid narrative climax

Animation introduces duration without superseding the material image. Movement is minimal and cyclical, ensuring continuity rather than spectacle. Loop integrity is tested to prevent teleological progression.

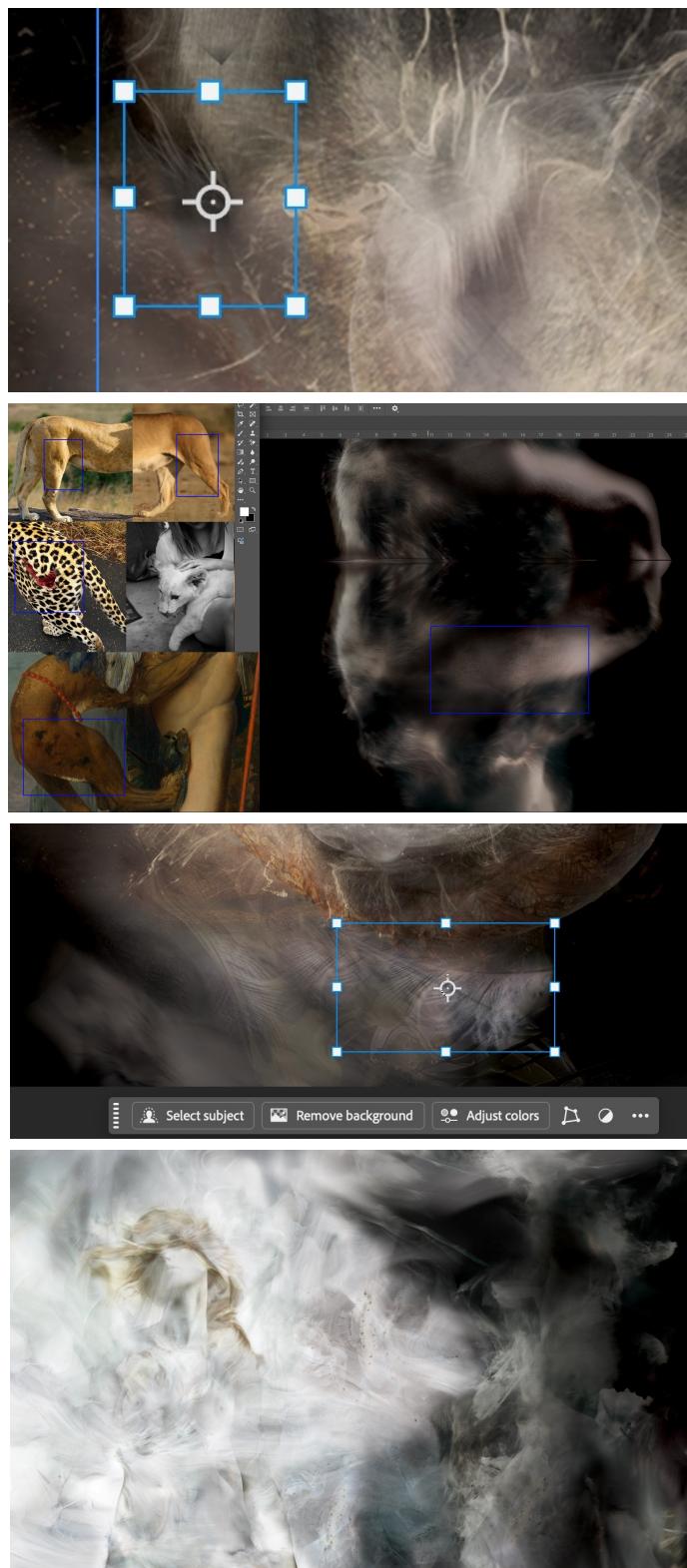


Figure 23: Erasmus, M., 2023–2025. Fieldwork documentation. Photographic studies of South African ecologies.

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## PROJECTION TESTING & ITERATIVE RE-ENTRY

Multi-scale projection trials

Surface comparison across varied substrates

Viewing-distance calibration

Documentation of distortion, disappearance, and atmospheric interference

Projection functions as empirical testing. Surface irregularity, light bleed, and environmental contingency are recorded and analysed. Altered projections are reintroduced into digital reworking where relevant, forming a feedback loop between site and studio.

Distortion is treated as research data.

The surface participates in authorship.

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## REFLEXIVE DOCUMENTATION & VERIFICATION

Iterative critique cycles within academic supervision

Written reflections integrated into Thesis Chapter 4

Mid-process notes retained as research artefacts

Technical and conceptual decisions logged

Reflexivity operates structurally. Decisions are recorded, evaluated, and revised in dialogue with theoretical framing. The catalogue functions as part of this archive, demonstrating methodological transparency and scholarly accountability.

# | DOCTORAL CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to test whether BioDigital practice could operate as ethical inquiry rather than technological spectacle. Through sustained practice, one central insight emerged: meaning did not intensify through accumulation, but through calibration. Slowness, erosion, and restraint generated greater perceptual and ethical depth than optimisation or visual excess. The work confirmed that vitality becomes perceptible not when the image is perfected, but when it remains responsive — held in a state of tension between appearing and withdrawing.

Across the four lifecycle phases, the work clarified that relational intelligence can be structured materially. Care was not thematic; it shaped sourcing, layering, projection, and exhibition design. Vulnerability was not depicted; it was enacted through exposure to distortion, surface interference, and partial disappearance. The feminine principle therefore became legible not as representation, but as organisational behaviour within the system of making itself — a structuring logic that governed how the work gathered, withheld, and re-entered.

The project further demonstrated that projection can function as environmental negotiation. When the image was subjected to surface irregularity and atmospheric variation, authorship became distributed. Light, wall, air, and duration participated in the formation of the work. Rather than diminishing control, this condition expanded responsibility. The work did not collapse under exposure; it became more responsive. In this sense, BioDigital practice need not simulate life in order to appear vital. It can enter into material relation with living systems and accept contingency as part of its structure.

Perhaps most significantly, the research revealed that subtraction can generate knowledge. Allowing forms to thin, dissolve, and return disrupted the assumption that digital practice must culminate in clarity or completion. Uncreation exposed the image to uncertainty and prevented premature resolution. Transformation emerged as cyclical reorganisation rather than forward progression — as return rather than conquest.

What this project contributes is not a new technology, but a reorientation of attention. It proposes that BioDigital art can cultivate responsiveness instead of spectacle, accountability instead of acceleration, and vitality instead of dominance. It suggests that digital mediation need not sever relation to the organic; it can deepen it when approached through restraint and ethical calibration.

The chrysalis remains an open metaphor. It is not a promise of emergence, but a condition of holding: a suspended interval in which reorganisation becomes possible. What emerges depends on how carefully the process is sustained, and how willing we are to remain within transformation without forcing its outcome.

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## FINDINGS

The findings of this research emerged through sustained practice rather than hypothesis testing in the conventional scientific sense. Insight was generated through iterative making, projection-based testing, and reflexive recalibration. What follows distils the core understandings that became visible through the lifecycle structure and material process of the work. These findings articulate how BioDigital practice, when structured through restraint, care, and accountable mediation, can function as a site of ethical-aesthetic knowledge production.

### BIODIGITAL WORK CAN GENERATE MEANING THROUGH RESTRAINT RATHER THAN SPECTACLE.

Slowness, attenuation, and near-still movement produced depth without reliance on immersion, virtuosity, or sensory overwhelm. Vital Aesthetics functioned as a compositional calibration: images were adjusted until they felt alive rather than resolved. Meaning emerged not through amplification, but through careful modulation: through knowing when to withhold rather than intensify.

### THE FEMININE PRINCIPLE BECAME LEGIBLE AS A STRUCTURING LOGIC IN THE WORK ITSELF.

Rather than operating as representational identity, it organised the practice through receptivity, cyclical return, and care: how materials were gathered, how images were layered, how visibility was withheld, and how the installation invited encounter without mastery. The feminine principle therefore functioned as behaviour within the system of making, shaping process rather than appearing as theme.

### PROJECTION BEHAVED AS A METHODOLOGICAL TEST OF THE IMAGE, NOT A DECORATIVE OVERLAY.

When projected onto responsive surfaces and held in duration, the image became vulnerable to distortion, disappearance, and environmental interference. These shifts were treated as feedback, extending authorship into a distributed field of surface, light, atmosphere, and viewer. Projection thus operated as a condition of exposure, testing resilience rather than enhancing effect.

### UNCREATION PRODUCED KNOWLEDGE BY INTERRUPTING CLOSURE.

Erosion, opacity reduction, and reversal were not corrections but epistemic actions. Allowing the image to thin, dissolve, and return clarified transformation as cyclical and negotiated rather than cumulative or optimised toward a final state. Loss functioned as recalibration, making space for re-entry rather than completion.

### HUMAN-LED COMPOSITIONAL INTELLIGENCE REMAINED DISTINCT AND EXAMINABLE WITHIN DIGITAL MEDIATION.

Through traceable processes, the research demonstrated an accountable form of making grounded in embodied judgement and material correspondence, rather than automated generation. Digital tools remained instrumental, while authorship stayed perceptually and ethically situated.

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## ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE PROJECT

This project contributed to BioDigital discourse by articulating a practice-led methodological framework in which aesthetic production operated as ethical inquiry. Rather than positioning digital technologies as tools for simulation, optimisation, or spectacle, the research reframed BioDigital practice as a site of relational intelligence grounded in vulnerability, ecological accountability, and material correspondence. Its contribution lay not in technological innovation, but in methodological reorientation.

Four key contributions emerged:

### CONTRIBUTION 1 | ARTISTIC INTELLIGENCE (IN DISTINCTION FROM ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

The project introduced Artistic Intelligence as a conceptual and methodological alternative to algorithmic authorship. While Artificial Intelligence operates through pattern extraction, optimisation, and predictive modelling, Artistic Intelligence was defined as:

- embodied decision-making
- ethical attentiveness to material
- sustained perceptual engagement
- iterative feedback between sensing and making

The term reframed digital practice as a site of situated cognition rather than automated generation. This distinction contributed to debates in digital art and AI ethics by demonstrating that technological mediation did not necessitate the displacement of human agency. Instead, digital systems functioned within a responsive, accountable structure of human-led compositional intelligence.

Artistic Intelligence therefore operated as both epistemic stance and methodological model.

### CONTRIBUTION 2 | PROJECTION-AS-ECOLOGY

The project advanced a model of projection as ecological inquiry rather than presentation technology. Projection was repositioned as:

- environmental exposure
- material testing
- feedback mechanism
- site of distributed agency

By re-situating digital images onto ecological surfaces and allowing environmental forces (wind, light, distortion, erosion) to alter them, projection became a site of material negotiation rather than visual display.

This reframing contributed to BioDigital discourse by positioning projection as an ecological encounter in which digital forms remained vulnerable to nonhuman forces.

The image, in all its stages, was treated not as a final object but as an active participant.

## CONTRIBUTION 3 | UNCREATION AS METHOD

The project formalised uncreation as a methodological strategy within BioDigital practice. Dominant digital paradigms privilege accumulation, clarity, optimisation, and resolution. In contrast, this research integrated erasure, attenuation, destabilisation, and subtraction as epistemic tools. Uncreation functioned as:

- resistance to optimisation
- acknowledgement of impermanence
- ethical restraint
- alignment with biological cycles of decay and renewal

By structurally embedding subtraction into the workflow, the project expanded BioDigital methodology beyond additive production models. Loss operated not as failure, but as generative condition.

Unlike dominant scientific methodologies, which often prioritise optimisation, replication, and cumulative precision, this artistic methodology did not pursue perfected or finalised outcomes. It did not aim at resolution, proof, or progressive refinement toward an ideal state. Instead, knowledge emerged through contingency, partiality, and recalibration.

The process was therefore not fact-accumulative but relational. Insight arose through adjustment rather than confirmation, and through material negotiation rather than conclusive verification.

## CONTRIBUTION 4 | THE BIODIGITAL FEMININE AS NON-GENDERED VITALITY

The project advanced the concept of the BioDigital feminine as a mode of vitality rather than gender identity. The feminine principle was repositioned as:

- relational intelligence
- cyclical transformation
- receptivity without passivity
- care as structural condition

This reframing contributed to feminist and posthuman discourse by decoupling femininity from biological sex and repositioning it as an ethical-aesthetic orientation operative across biological and technological systems.

The BioDigital feminine functioned as a conceptual lens through which vitality was understood as distributed, responsive, and more-than-human. While articulated within a contemporary technological framework, the phenomenon itself was not newly invented. Rather, the research reactivated an enduring archetypal orientation - historically associated with cycles, receptivity, relationality, and transformation - and re-situated it within the conditions of digital culture.

In this sense, the contribution did not propose a novel feminine principle, but re-situated an ancient archetype within a contemporary BioDigital framework. What appeared ancient in symbolic structure did not become 'new' under technological acceleration; instead, it re-entered circulation under altered material conditions. This reactivation operated cyclically rather than progressively: a return through different material conditions rather than a departure from origin.

“I’d like to invite every human being – living and not yet born, on Earth and elsewhere – to ask one simple question of every technological change that enters your life: does this extend my humanity?”

Koert van Mensvoort  
Next Nature 2020

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## E P I L O G U E

The most significant insight to emerge was relational: inquiry itself became an encounter. Working with landscape, inherited images, and digital systems revealed that knowledge can form through correspondence rather than control. The project did not resolve the tension between organic and technological systems; it remained within it. That tension became the site where ethical and aesthetic thinking could unfold.

Beauty, in this framework, ceased to mean resolution and came to mean vitality: the heightened presence that arises when responsiveness replaces mastery. Transformation was not treated as progress toward refinement, but as return and reorganisation. Meaning did not accumulate through excess; it clarified through calibration, exposure, and restraint.

BioDigital practice, as tested here, need not simulate life or compete with it. It can participate in vitality without diminishing it, provided it is approached with attentiveness, accountability, and care. The work suggests that technology does not have to dominate the organic in order to appear contemporary; it can remain in relation.

The chrysalis offers no guarantee of flight. It is a condition of internal reorganisation — a holding space where something alters without spectacle. What emerges depends on how carefully the process is sustained, and what we choose not to force into closure.

What matters, then, is not acceleration, but sensitivity. Not dominance, but contact. A technology that listens, that lingers, that allows the image - and the body before it - to remain porous.

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# APPENDIX I TECHNICAL SPECS

## 1. IMAGE PRODUCTION SPECIFICATIONS

### Source Material

Original photographic material captured in South Africa (2022–2025)

DSLR and mirrorless digital cameras

RAW format capture

Natural light and environmental conditions (no studio fabrication)

### Digitisation & Editing

Software: Adobe Photoshop (version XX)

Workflow: Layer-based compositing

Colour: Derived exclusively from photographed source material

No digital drawing

No generative AI systems used

No stock imagery incorporated

No algorithmic image synthesis

### File Format

Master files: PSD (layered archival format)

Print export: TIFF (300 dpi, CMYK)

Digital projection export: High-resolution PNG sequence / MP4 (lossless compression)

## 2. PRINT SPECIFICATIONS

### Canvas print

Pigment ink printing (archival quality)

### Dimensions

Vulnerable Creatures: 60 x 120 cm

Thinly Veiled: 120 x 90 cm

Lumen: 80 x 80 cm

Eden's Dialogue (Diptych): 60 x 120 cm & 80 x 120 cm

### Mounting

Direct wall mount

## 3. PROJECTION SPECIFICATIONS

### Projectors

Model: Samsung Freestyle: 2<sup>nd</sup> generation

Lumens: 550 LSD

Resolution: Full HD / 4K

Aspect ratio: 16:9 / custom

### Projection Type

Front projection onto printed surface

Projection mapped to artwork dimensions

Seamless looping playback

### Loop Duration

Approx. 3 minutes 40 seconds per work

Continuous playback (no visible start/end point)

## **Playback System**

Media player: [e.g. Mac Mini / BrightSign / laptop]  
Software: Adobe After Effects export

## **4. ANIMATION PARAMETERS**

Animation created in Adobe After Effects  
Base still image remains structurally primary  
Animated layers limited in opacity  
No character animation  
No narrative sequencing  
Seamless loop construction  
Subtle displacement and opacity modulation only

## **5. SOUND SPECIFICATIONS**

Field recordings captured in South African environments  
ElevenLabs.io:  
Layered ambient drone construction  
Non-musical structure (no harmonic progression)  
Playback through concealed speakers

### **Audio Format**

MP4  
Looping ambient track  
Stereo output

## **5. INSTALLATION CONDITIONS**

### **Lighting**

Controlled ambient light  
No direct spot lighting  
Reduced glare environment

### **Viewing Distance**

Designed for 1.5m – 3m viewing range  
Human-scale encounter

### **Spatial Configuration**

Non-linear circulation  
Lifecycle sequencing  
Sound bleed intentional but controlled

## **6. AI DISCLOSURE**

No generative AI systems were used in:  
Image production  
Animation development  
Sound composition  
Compositional decision-making

## 7. SOFTWARE & PRODUCTION ENVIRONMENT

### **Image Compositing**

Adobe Photoshop: Layer-based compositing of analogue and digital photographic material; colour calibration derived exclusively from source matter; no generative tools employed.

### **Animation & Temporal Extension**

Adobe After Effects: Development of restrained opacity respiration, gradient drift, displacement modulation, and seamless looping structures (~3:40 per work).

### **Video Encoding & Projection Output**

Adobe Media Encoder: Export and compression of master files for projection and online presentation formats.

### **Sound Development**

ElevenLabs.io: Final soundscape constructed through field-derived and manually structured audio layering.

### **Catalogue Design & Publication**

Adobe InDesign: Layout, typographic structure, image placement, and final publication formatting.

### **AI Systems**

Generative AI platforms (for example Leonardo.ai) were explored conceptually during early research phases but were excluded from all final visual outputs.

### **Online Exhibition Environment**

Platform: Kunstmatrix

Function: Virtual exhibition hosting and spatial simulation

Content: Pre-rendered image and video files uploaded in completed form

Modifications: No automated visual generation or alteration by the platform

Purpose: Screen-based translation of the physical installation structure

The online exhibition does not attempt to replicate the phenomenological conditions of the physical installation but translates its durational and spatial logic into a navigable digital environment.

All digital processes were human-directed and manually calibrated.

# | RESEARCH TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

This doctoral project has been developed and executed in accordance with principles of authorship integrity, methodological accountability, and ecological responsibility. The following statement clarifies the processes, boundaries, and ethical commitments underpinning the practical component of The Chrysalis Code: Unfolding the BioDigital Feminine.

## AUTHORSHIP AND ORIGINALITY

All artworks, digital compositions, animations, sound environments, and installation configurations included in this submission are the original work of the artist.

No external creative producers, image-generating systems, or uncredited collaborators contributed to the symbolic, formal, or structural development of the works unless explicitly acknowledged elsewhere in this document. All conceptual, compositional, and technical decisions remain attributable to the artist.

## ETHICAL POSITION ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

No generative artificial intelligence systems were used in the production of the final artworks.

Artificial intelligence platforms capable of autonomous image synthesis, generative visual production, predictive modelling, or algorithmic aesthetic decision-making were intentionally excluded from the creative workflow. This exclusion was methodological rather than reactive. The research investigates Artistic Intelligence as an embodied and accountable mode of compositional judgement grounded in perceptual calibration, material traceability, and iterative correspondence. The introduction of generative systems would have displaced the central inquiry into human-led relational making.

Digital software was used strictly as a mediating instrument for:

- photographic compositing
- opacity modulation and layer calibration
- animation development
- projection formatting
- sound integration

These platforms functioned under direct human control. They did not generate symbolic content, determine compositional structure, or autonomously produce imagery.

This position does not reject artificial intelligence as a broader field of practice. Rather, it establishes a clear boundary within this research between assistance and authorship. All formal, symbolic, and structural decisions remain human-led and examinable.

## WORKFLOW INTEGRITY

All image layers originate from fieldwork photography conducted by the artist. No stock imagery, pre-generated image libraries, or synthetic datasets were incorporated into the final compositions.

Version archiving was maintained throughout the project. Iterative edits, compositional adjustments, opacity calibrations, and projection refinements remain traceable through documented file histories and process journals.

## DIGITAL TOOLS & AI DISCLOSURE

### **Leonardo.ai**

During early research testing phases, AI image-generation platforms were explored conceptually to examine the aesthetic and ethical implications of generative systems. These platforms were not used in the production of the final artworks. No AI-generated imagery appears in the submitted works.

### **ElevenLabs.io**

ElevenLabs was explored for experimental voice-texture testing during preliminary sound research. No AI-generated voice or synthetic speech is included in the final exhibition soundscape.

### **Adobe Photoshop**

Used for human-led compositing of field-derived photographic material, including opacity modulation, masking, layering, and controlled erosion. All compositional decisions remained artist-directed.

### **Adobe After Effects**

Used for restrained animation development, opacity calibration, and seamless looping. Animation did not generate new symbolic imagery but extended existing compositions temporally.

### **Adobe Media Encoder**

Used exclusively for video formatting, compression, and export preparation for projection and digital presentation.

### **Adobe InDesign**

Used for catalogue layout, typographic design, and formatting of the written and visual components of the doctoral submission.

## SOURCE MATERIAL TRACEABILITY

All biological textures and environmental elements included in the works derive from documented field photography undertaken within South African ecological contexts. Materials such as feathers, plant matter, mineral traces, grasses, water surfaces, animal hides, and fibre structures were photographed observationally. These materials were not collected destructively, harvested, or removed from their environments for studio manipulation.

Art-historical references were studied analytically and reinterpreted structurally; no copyrighted historical images were digitally sampled, overlaid, or reproduced in the final works.

## ECOLOGICAL AND FIELDWORK ETHICS

Fieldwork was conducted through non-extractive observational practice. No living organisms were harmed, modified, or removed for artistic purposes.

The project does not involve laboratory-based biological experimentation, genetic manipulation, or biomedical research. It operates exclusively within image-based BioDigital methodology.

Ecological specificity was maintained to prevent abstraction of “nature” into symbolic resource. All field-derived material remains geographically and environmentally traceable.

## DOCUMENTATION AND VERIFICATION

The research process was documented through:

- fieldwork logs
- compositional version archives
- projection testing records
- reflexive studio journals
- supervisory critique cycles

Documentation ensures that the artworks remain academically examinable and methodologically transparent. The catalogue reflects the exhibited form of the works accurately and without embellishment.

## ONLINE EXHIBITION PLATFORM

Kunstmatrix was used as the virtual exhibition platform for the online presentation of The Chrysalis Code. The platform functioned solely as a spatial hosting environment, enabling navigation, scale simulation, and screen-based encounter. It did not generate or alter visual content. All uploaded imagery, animation, and sound materials were artist-produced and exported prior to integration into the platform.

## SCOPE CLARIFICATION

This project does not claim scientific innovation, technological invention, or biological experimentation. Its contribution lies within image-based BioDigital practice, developed through human-led compositing, projection-as-ecology, and uncreation as method.

# | CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the guidance and intellectual support of my doctoral supervisor Dr. Ania Krajewska at the University of South Africa, whose sustained engagement, critique, and scholarly rigour shaped the development of both the written thesis and the practical component of this research.

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Technical assistance in printing, projection calibration, and installation testing is gratefully acknowledged. Appreciation is also extended to those who provided studio access, material support, and critical feedback during iterative stages of development.

Fieldwork undertaken within South African ecological environments remains foundational to the project. I acknowledge the landscapes, nonhuman presences, and ecological systems that informed the material basis of the work. I further extend my gratitude to the staff of the Kruger National Park and the Monument Park Nature Reserve for their stewardship of these environments and for enabling sustained ecological observation.

The sound environment and digital mediation were developed through human-led compositional processes using Adobe software platforms. Any external platforms used during early research testing phases are documented in the Research Transparency Statement.

Finally, personal gratitude is extended to family, friends, and mentors whose patience and encouragement sustained the duration of this research journey.

## | ABOUT THE ARTIST



With a rich background in both artistic practice and curatorial work, Megan Erasmus is a South African artist, creative project manager, and curator currently based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Her work operates across image-making, exhibition design, and interdisciplinary collaboration, bridging artistic production with conceptual inquiry.

Driven by a sustained commitment to cross-cultural dialogue and creative innovation, Erasmus has exhibited both locally and internationally, engaging diverse audiences through projects that traverse mythology, ecology, and technological mediation. These experiences have shaped a practice attentive to the intersections of art, science, and digital culture, and to the ethical implications of working across biological and computational systems.

Her academic trajectory, including a Master's degree and ongoing doctoral research in Visual Arts, provides a rigorous theoretical framework for her practice. Specialising in BioDigital aesthetics, posthuman ethics, and the Feminine Principle as methodological orientation, Erasmus situates her work within contemporary debates around relational intelligence, authorship, and ecological accountability. This research foundation informs her curatorial and project-based work, where she develops immersive environments that prioritise attentiveness, sensory engagement, and conceptual depth over spectacle.

Across her practice, Erasmus approaches digital image-making and animations as a site of relational encounter rather than technological display. She is interested in how sensual perception, ecological awareness, and methodological rigour can coexist and how art might function as a sensuous mode of thinking: a way of knowing attuned not only to what can be seen, but to what circulates invisibly through connection.

She remains open to the possibility that enchantment is a research method.

## | CONTACT DETAILS



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