

INTERROGATING THE EERSTE RIVER EERSTE RIVER

- Saarah Jappie

How do we confront a body of water? To see it for all its submerged stories? And for the traces of the past that we have forgotten? In his multi-work meditation on Cape Town's Eerste River, Abri de Swardt's *Ridder Thirst* demonstrates that we must pause by the river



Abri de Swardt, still from *Ridder Thirst* (2015 – 18)
HD Projection with double seating structure, 13'36 min

and look beyond its surface. We must stand at its mouth and deal with the matter that emerges in that liminal space between colonial sea and settlers' stream. Of the fifty-six rivers in the Western Cape, De Swardt interrogates this one, as the film *Ridder Thirst* informs us, *because it is the first*. Because it is safeguarded and has no middle. Because Javanese princes paraded there. Because it is the river of unmindfulness and of forgetfulness. De Swardt seems to tell us that we must interrogate the river because, at least on the surface, it has refused to acknowledge the past. Geographically, the Eerste River snakes in a forty kilometre curve from Macassar Beach in False Bay, past impoverished townships, through the winelands of Stellenbosch and into the Hottentots-Holland Mountain Catchment Area. Historically, its waters have flowed alongside the displacement of Khoikhoi communities and the establishment of slavery at the Cape, as well as the development of formal agriculture and an Afrikaans-centred academic enclave. Its banks saw the formation of Southern Africa's first Muslim community and, for some, its waters remain sacred for this very reason. The river, seemingly timeless, has witnessed many pasts.

While the film draws us to the riverbank and urges us to meditate on the surface, *Eerste Waterval* demonstrates how we might see inside it. To do this, we must stand within its border – at its watery opening – and collect the fragments. De Swardt has carefully gathered debris that once lay floating in this in-between: a rock, a plastic spoon, seashells, and shoes – so many different kinds of shoes. Collectively, these found objects constitute a messy archive of the lost and discarded. Seen as artefacts in isolation, the objects offer opportunities to imagine everyday stories by the river – of the small child whose sandal was swept away by the current; the woman whose hat, destroyed from exposure to the elements, blew into the endless sky; and the stormy day when the trees gave way and their branches surrendered to the sea.



Abri de Swardt, *Eerste Waterval* (2018)
Steel hoop, plastic bag, debris from Jonkershoek, Stellenbosch, Eerste River and Macassar, collected at the mouth of the Eerste River at Macassar Beach,
Dimensions variable

These curious objects point to recent, personal pasts, but also comment on the predicament of the present. Sewerage leaks and industrial pollution in at least parts of the Eerste River have led to its declaration as a health risk in the last decade. Thus, while the river may remain symbolically sacred to some, its waters are far from pure. *Eerste Waterval* speaks to this human contamination of the local environment, forcing us to look directly at what should not be there but nonetheless is. It also alerts us to what the river might spit back at us in response. From this debris it becomes clear that the river has become, as De Swardt argues, one of lamentation.

Published on the occasion of *Abri de Swardt, Thrust*,
a solo exhibition by Abri de Swardt, at POOL,
Johannesburg, 26 April - 11 June 2018