



RYAN BOTHA

Sometimes I Dream I'm Drowning

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Background.....	7
The Why.....	8
Within the Liminal.....	14
In-between (Conclusion).....	44
Curriculum Vitae.....	47
List of illustrations.....	49
Bibliography.....	51

INTRODUCTION

I live with bipolar disorder. In contemporary society, where inclusivity and acceptance are widely promoted, mental illness and psychological disorders are still stigmatised, concealed and met with shame. *Sometimes I Dream I'm drowning* (2021) involved a process of trying to understand myself. I explored memories, dreams and my thoughts, and how my life is impacted by my brain's chemistry and the psychiatric medication that regulates it. This body of work unravels the liminal experiences, feelings and thoughts between the states of mania and depression. The works included in this exhibition attempt to create a more empathic viewer encounter to lessen the stigmatisation of mental illness.



Fig 1. Ryan Botha,
Spirit of the sky (2021).

BACKGROUND

There are a host of different types of bipolar and related disorders: Bipolar I, in which mania can induce a psychotic break from reality. Bipolar II involves depressive and hypomanic episodes to the exclusion of manic episodes¹. Cyclothymic disorder involves experiencing hypomania and depression over a prolonged period. Bipolar II disorder is not a milder form of bipolar I, but a separate diagnosis. While the manic episodes of bipolar I disorder can be severe and dangerous, individuals with bipolar II disorder can be depressed for longer periods, causing significant impairment². Although the root cause of bipolar disorder remains unknown, genetic factors make it more likely, while others appear to have biological differences in their brains (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/bipolar-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355955>).

Those who endure mental illness find it difficult to articulate or even to recognise their own state of mind. As someone who lives with this disorder, I have found it challenging to describe the details of my depressive periods, especially when I do not feel the extremes of severe melancholy or hypomania. The ideal psychological state between manic and mania is elusive: prescribed medication designed to balance the brain's chemistry is invariably a trial and error affair, and since each brain is unique, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' medication.

It is incurable.

¹Mania and hypomania are two distinct types of episodes with the same symptoms. Mania is more severe than hypomania, causing more noticeable social and relationship problems. Mania can trigger psychosis, requiring hospitalisation (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/bipolar-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355955>).

²Major depressive episodes cause difficulty in daily activities, whereby sufferers take no pleasure in life, feel worthless, tired or insomniac, melancholic and suicidal (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/bipolar-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355955>).

THE WHY

According to the World Health Organization, bipolar mood disorder is the sixth leading cause of disability in the world, and in South Africa it affects over four million people and their families. Although so many people suffer from what was previously labelled manic depression, the stigma surrounding mental illness is perpetuated through ignorance and a lack of compassion (Smith 2018).

As a person diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder, I have had to find a way to navigate my life. I grew up near the ocean and have always loved being in the sea because it engenders a sense of peace, a spiritual calm. Conscious of the precariousness of my liminal position, I use water and its sensation to articulate the place between mania and depression.

During my statistical research on the variety of mental syndromes that are included under the term, bipolar disorder, I

realised that my specific interest is in the liminal space between depression and mania. Through the lens of my art practice, I incorporate these liminal spaces into my materials and the preparation of the work space that finally leads to the art-making process. Schnugg (2019) describes these phases, within the context of collaboration in the field of art-science, as not being physical space but rather “cognitive and experiential phases” that fall outside of regular daily life. I propose that within the time spent in the studio, an artist can transition into a liminal state at the inception, and transition out on completion.

I found several artists such as Paul Benny and Penny Siopis, whose work resonated with me, although their work is conceptually different.

The ethereal, surreal subjects of Paul Benney’s work of figures that float in mid-air and visages that stare back at the viewer, my mind considered the link to a metaphysical plane, where

reality is questioned and my thoughts of floating or falling in my dreams seem similar to the metaphors he uses in his paintings.

When asked about his study of pre-twentieth century drawings and their relation to his levitation paintings, he replied, "The idea of levitation has a strong resonance with me. I think we all have this sense that we'd love to sort of transcend our earthly bonds at some point, and [those images] of humans levitating feeds into that notion."

I find a connection in the process Penny Siopis used for her ink and glue works referenced in "Material Acts" (2019). When asked by O'Toole (2019) about her process, she responded, "The process is not just about getting a formal effect. The correlations between what I do here physically and my philosophical and political interests in agency, subject/object and figure/ground distinctions, opacity, immanence, viscosity - it all happens experientially in the work



Fig 2. Paul Benney,
Tether (2015).



Fig 3. Penny Siopis,
As if a Rag (2011).

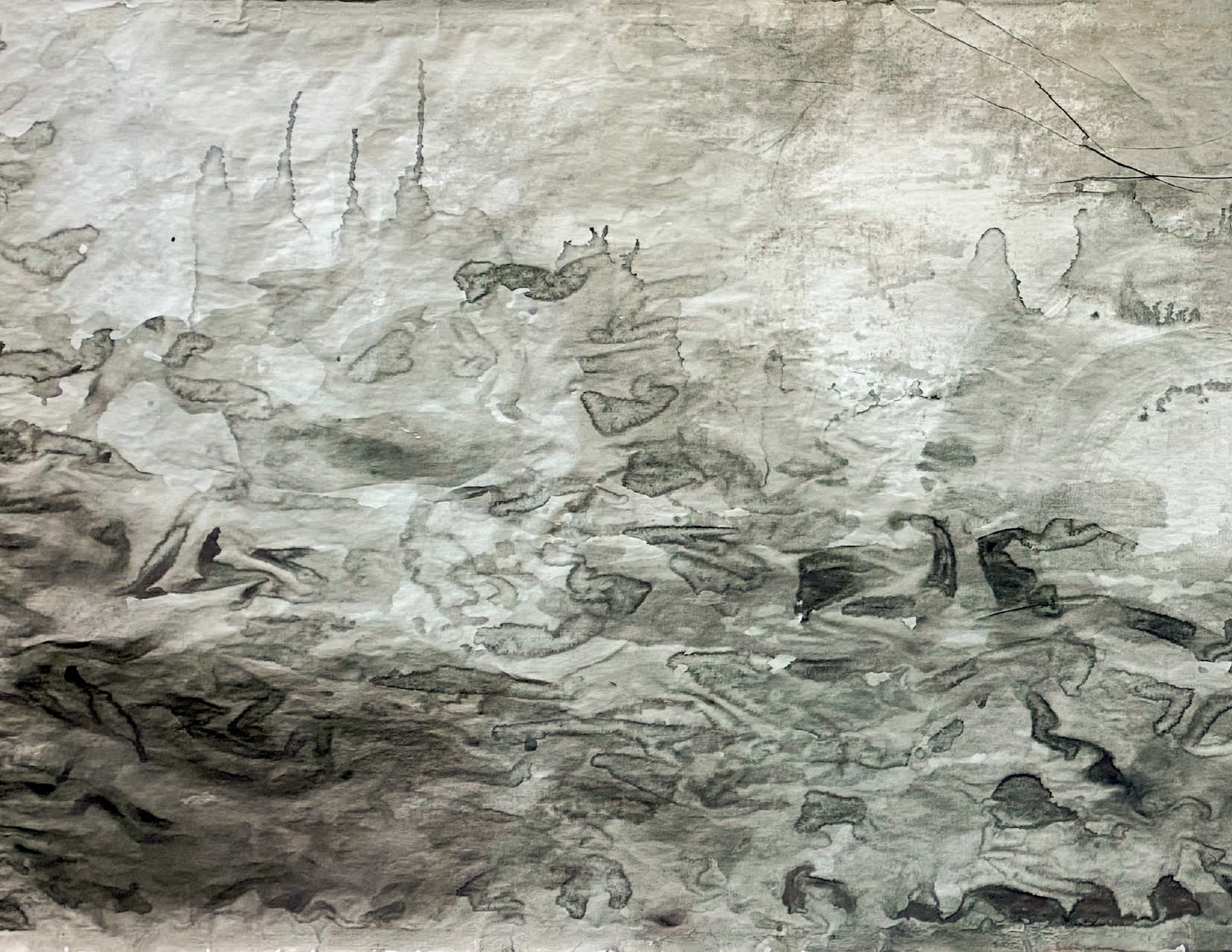




Fig 4. Ryan Botha,
*Treading water,
dreading warfare*
(2021).

WITHIN THE LIMINAL

My visual references have largely been about water and the sensation of being suspended in water. With imagery that alludes to liminality, dreams, anxiety and memory, this body of work borders on the surreal. For me, water: submersion, suspension and floating has a meditative effect on my mind. I now live far from the ocean and long for its therapeutic tranquillity.

Water suspends us from gravity, takes life and sustains it. There is a connection between water and the mind, perhaps unsurprising since the brain is comprised of 75 percent water (Kim 1974).

Fig 5. Ryan Botha,
Break, break, break
(2021).

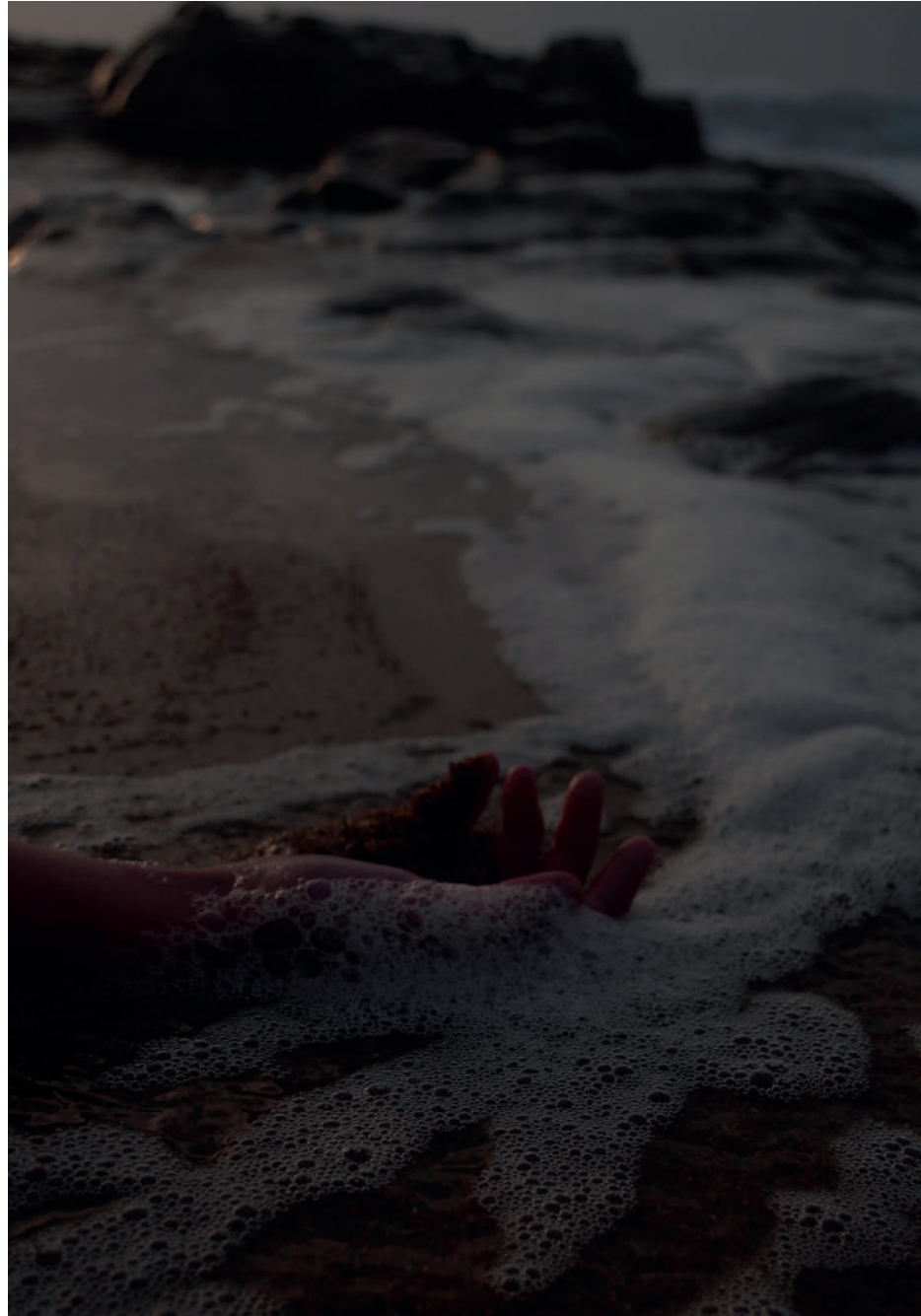






Fig 6. Ryan Botha,
Amnesic (2021)

The art in this body of work is a somewhat self-conscious, internalised view of my life, reflecting years of worry, overthinking and trauma caused by my bipolar disorder. Before being prescribed chronic medication, there are life events that I vaguely remember, whereas other memories of the same time period are vividly clear. During severe episodes, I rarely dreamed. I wonder if this was my mind's way of protecting itself from additional trauma.

When I dream, I am either floating, flying, or falling, and sometimes I am drowning. I use the water metaphor to visually manifest these phenomena, using mixed media, digital and photographic media. I push beyond self-portraiture, as my images depict a male form as a "dark mirror" reflecting the self-destructive forces and habitual negative thoughts, and how I emancipate myself from these (Nolan 2014).

The multimedia and digital works are not representations of

my mental state during mania or depression, rather the state of psychological liminality in between these. As an artist, grappling with an empty canvas or place where the art is created, renders the studio space as a liminal one. In this regard, one can consider this a 'transitional state' of moving into a creative state, moving into the studio to physically create: activities that occur in tandem but that are not mutually exclusive.

Fig 7. Ryan Botha,
Incubate (2021).





Fig 8. Ryan Botha,
Utter the words I (2021).



Fig 9. Ryan Botha,
Utter the words II (2021).



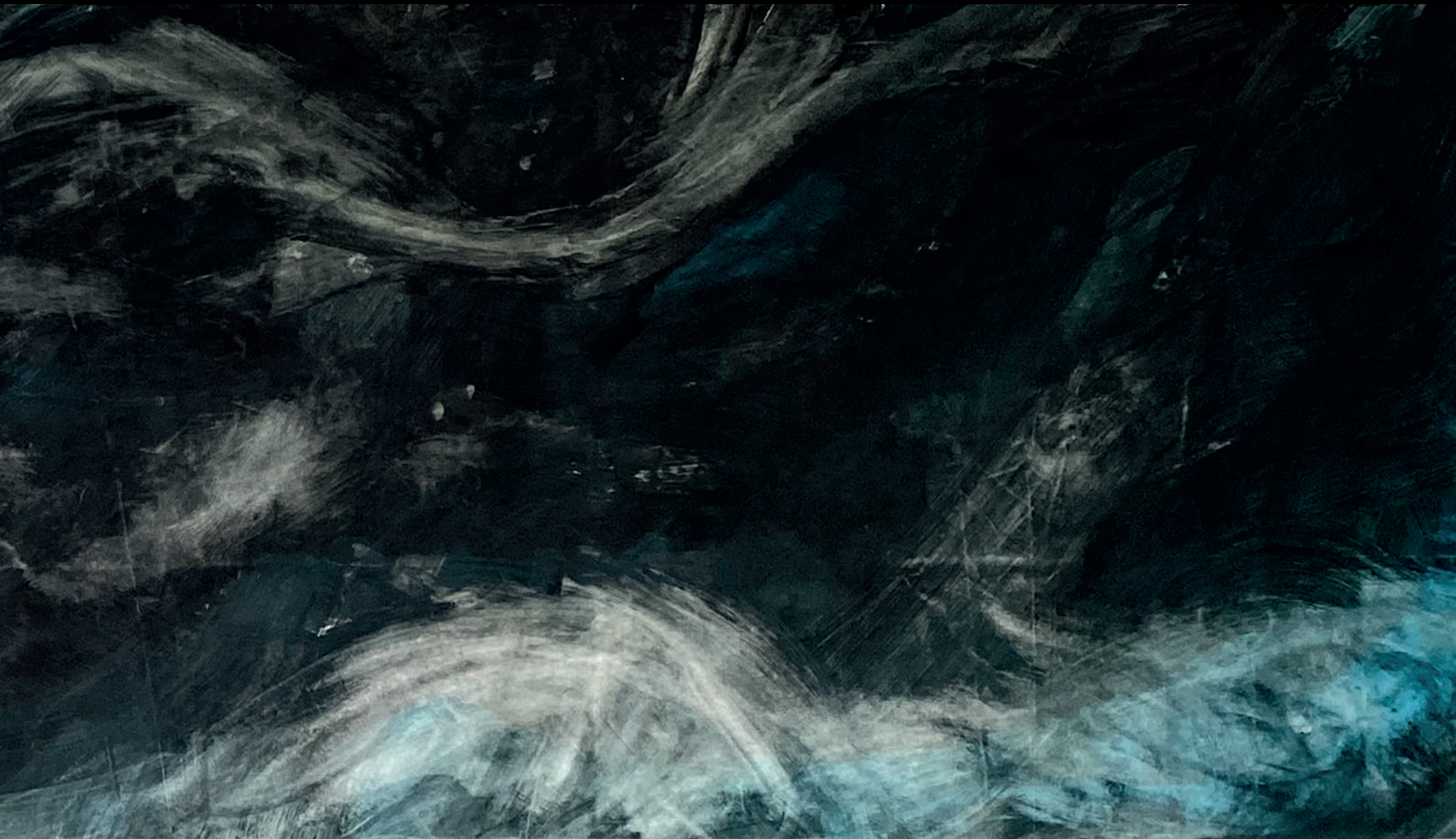


Fig 10. Ryan Botha,
Acceptance (2021).

Through my chosen large-format media, I am considering their materiality and how they translate the psychological state before transitioning through the liminal veil: a period of waiting or a form of tension and struggle.

Although it may seem literally aligned with the metaphor, I use water-based acrylic and liquid tempera paint for the large chalk and charcoal drawings. The fluidity lends itself to the subject matter, since I cannot always control the movement of the paint. The paper is fragile when wet, warping the paint when it is applied. This creates unpredictable pools on the surface as fragile as an individual coming out of a psychotic episode and as erratic as the subsequent emotions.

This supports the process of interpreting my liminal experience after a 'rupture' when I extricate myself from an oppressive state (Nolan 2014). Although the layout and narrative of my work is considered and planned, I cannot control the final outcome. The liminal position becomes a waiting game of tension as if one were submerged in dark water, waiting to rise to the surface, or struggling and fighting to reach it for that life-saving breath.





Overleaf 29:
Fig 11. **Ryan Botha,**
Shifting outwards (2021).

Fig 12. **Ryan Botha,**
Words within (2021).

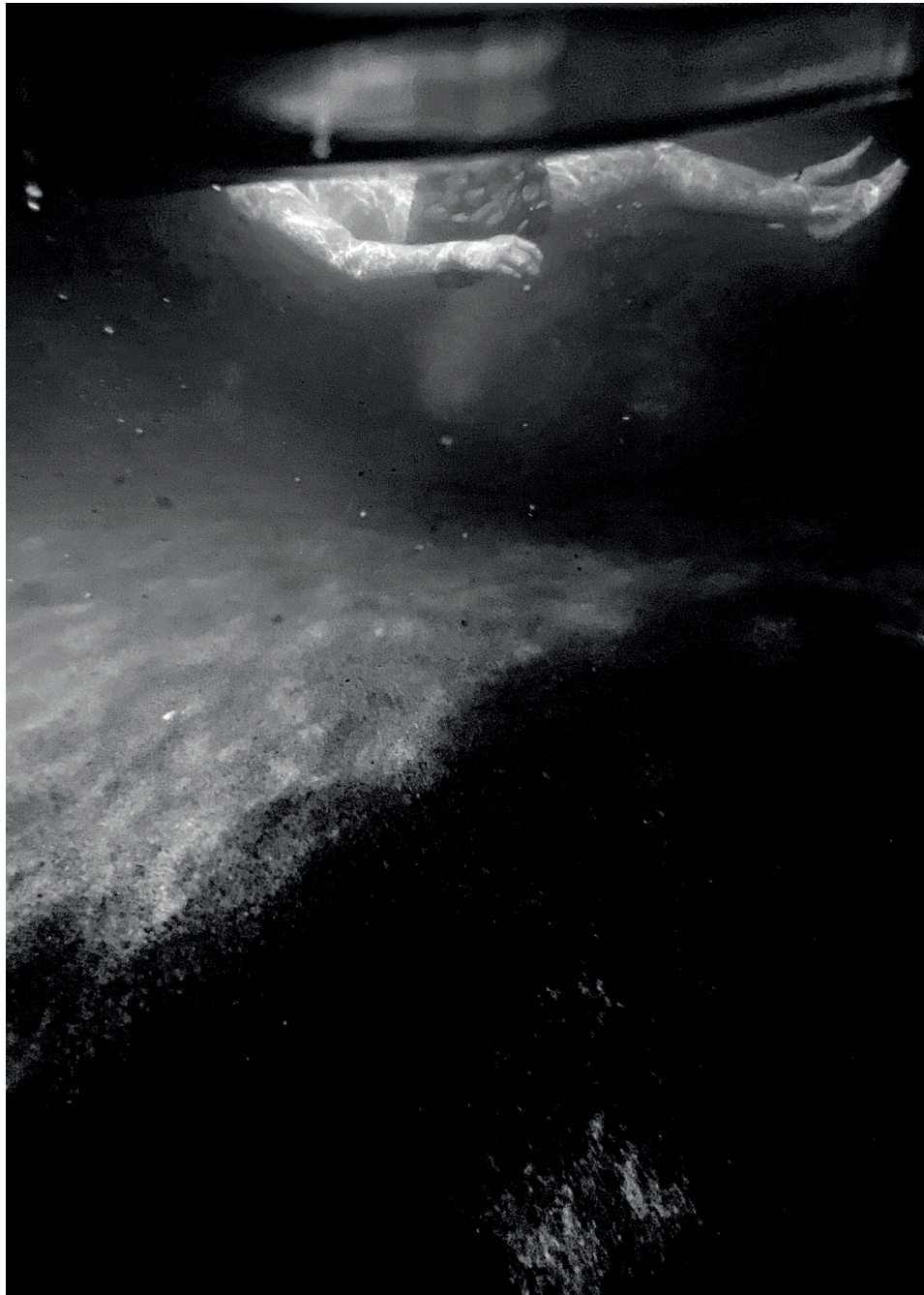


Fig 13. Ryan Botha,
Rupture (2021).



Fig 14. Ryan Botha,
I would I might Forget that I am I (2021).



Fig 15. Ryan Botha,
Outward yet inward (2021).



Fig 16. Ryan Botha,
Betwixt (2021).



Fig 17. Ryan Botha,
Thoughts that arise (2021)



Fig 18. Ryan Botha,
Words without (2021).



IN-BETWEEN

My work is deeply personal and intimate. The viewer is invited in to see my mind and subconscious self. As a man, I am particularly aware of how men are expected to 'just get over it' or portray hypermasculine strength. This is terrifying because in most cases, they have no idea what it is that they are experiencing. This series is a view into my journey with bipolar disorder, my battles through depression, self-doubt, loneliness and the chemically induced in-between.

Fig 19. Ryan Botha,
Boundless (2021).



CURRICULUM VITAE

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BORN 1979. Ladysmith, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

EDUCATION

2017 - Present BVMA studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA)

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

December 2021 The UNISA Third Year Graduate Exhibition (2021), UNISA Art Gallery, Pretoria

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 1. Ryan Botha, <i>Spirit of the sky</i> (2021). Digital photograph.....	6
Fig 2. Paul Benney, <i>Tether</i> (2015). Oil on canvas, 181 x 167 cm.....	9
Fig 3. Penny Siopis, <i>As if a Rag</i> (2011). Ink and glue on canvas 121 x 91 cm.....	9
Fig 4. Ryan Botha, <i>Treading water, dreading warfare</i> (2021). Multimedia drawing, 230 x 84 cm.....	10
Fig 5. Ryan Botha, <i>Break, break, break</i> (2021). Digital photograph.....	15
Fig 6. Ryan Botha, <i>Amnesic</i> (2021). Multimedia drawing, 220 x 84 cm.....	16
Fig 7. Ryan Botha, <i>Incubate</i> (2021). Digital multimedia photograph.....	21
Fig 8. Ryan Botha, <i>Utter the words I</i> (2021). Digital print on Ilford Textured Silk, 30 x 42.3 cm.....	22
Fig 9. Ryan Botha, <i>Utter the words II</i> (2021). Digital print on Ilford Textured Silk, 30 x 42.3 cm.....	23
Fig 10. Ryan Botha, <i>Acceptance</i> (2021). Multimedia drawing, 300 x 84 cm.....	24
Fig 11. Ryan Botha, <i>Shifting outwards</i> (2021). Multimedia drawing, 230 x 84 cm.....	28
Fig 12. Ryan Botha, <i>Words within</i> (2021). Digital print on Ilford Textured Silk, 30 x 42.3 cm.....	31
Fig 13. Ryan Botha, <i>Rupture</i> (2021). Digital print on Ilford Textured Silk, 30 x 42.3 cm.....	33
Fig 14. Ryan Botha, <i>I would I might Forget that I am I</i> (2021). Digital multimedia photograph.....	35
Fig 15. Ryan Botha, <i>Outward yet inward</i> (2021). Digital photograph.....	36
Fig 16: Ryan Botha, <i>Betwixt</i> (2021). Digital photograph.....	37
Fig 17: Ryan Botha, <i>Thoughts that arise</i> (2021). Digital video.....	41
Fig 18: Ryan Botha, <i>Words without</i> (2021). Digital video.....	43
Fig 19: Ryan Botha, <i>Boundless</i> (2021). Digital photograph.....	44

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END NOTES

I was inspired by eighteenth century poets. I have used some titles and lines from these poems to name some of my artworks — Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'Break, Break, Break'; and George Santayana's poem, 'I would I might Forget that I am I'.

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