

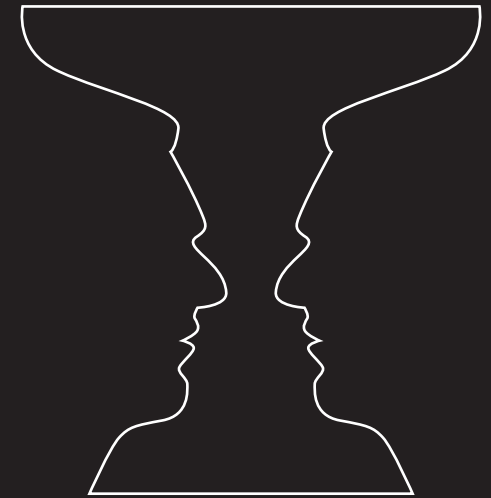
Before we can
read we need
to be able to
separate the letters
from the page they
are written on.
This separation
brings the text
forward and pushes
the paper into
the background.

In art and design this is the difference between 'figure' and 'ground' – a fundamental principle of perception in which the 'figure' is what is seen, noticed and prioritised by the viewer, and the 'ground' is everything else in a representation.

Originated by Danish phenomenologist Edgar Rubin (1886-1951), the figure/ground relationship is based largely on the rendering and reading of contrasts between dark and light areas in an image. The relationship captures the difference between what comes to the fore and stands out as prominent within an image (but is not necessarily in the foreground) and what remains de-emphasised, camouflaged or hidden within that same image (but not necessarily in the background).

It also captures the extent to which both figure and ground elements within an image rely on each other for their respective emphases, and the generation of the understanding and meaning that comes from these different inflections. One of our most common encounters with the figure/ground relationship is geographical maps that include both land and sea areas. Rendered in black and white, it is often difficult to know which part of the map is sea and which is the land that stands out from the water mass. But coded in colours that we've learnt to associate – blues for water depths and browns, greens and whites for earth heights – it becomes much easier to distinguish between figure and ground.

Many of the illustrations used to demonstrate this relationship rely on ambiguous rather than clear differences between figure and ground. The famous visual example of the ambiguity between figure and ground was originated by Rubin himself, and is commonly known as “Rubin’s vase”. Here there is no *true* (or at least stable) figure and ground, and our eyes are left to shift between a figure that is at once a vase and two faces in profile, depending on our attention to the black and white parts of the image. Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972), a Dutch graphic artist, produced over 400 lithographs, woodcuts and wood engravings that utilise positive and negative shapes not only to reverse figure and ground elements in a single image, but also to disrupt distinctions between different depths in the composition.

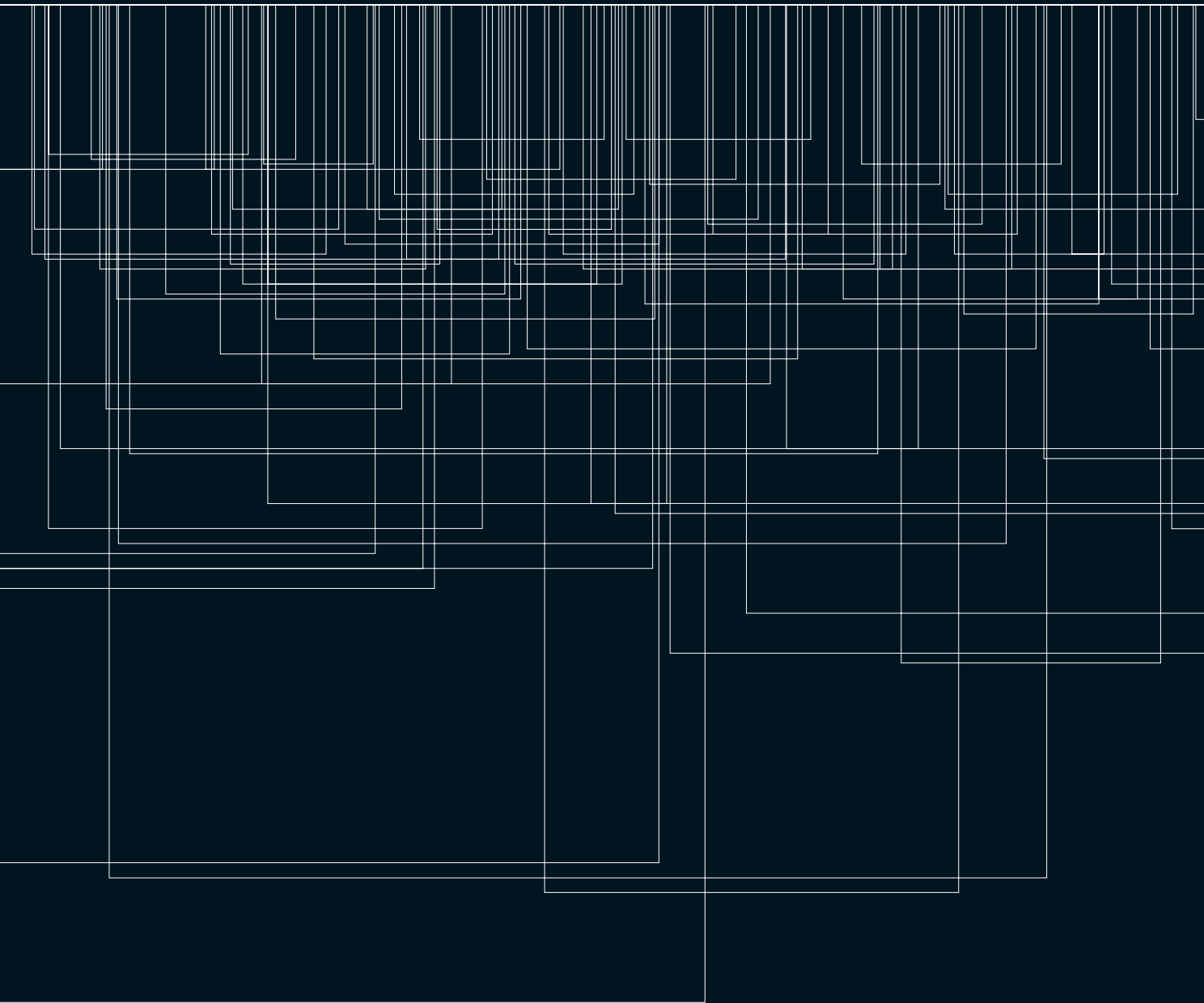


That the figure/ground relationship permits the performance of these two reading functions – distinguishing more and less important elements within a composition, yet at the same time relying on all these elements to generate meaning and significance – provides the impetus and basis for extending its use beyond the organisation and interpretation of individual artworks to the conceptual presentation and understanding of collected bodies of artworks. In the same way that an individual painting might be made up of elemental pieces and interpreted in terms of the relational prominence of these pieces, so too can an accumulated collection of individual artworks be understood in terms of the relational prominence of these artworks.

These collected bodies of artworks take on a number of forms. Three of the most significant of these forms are individual private collections, public or museum collections and corporate collections. Individual private collections in South Africa are not publicly exhibited as often as they should be and often receive much of their attention when they are dissolved through sale. An excellent example of this is the February 2007 auction of a collection of 45 paintings collected by the late Jack and Helene Kahn. Commenting on the sale, which netted R23,9 million, auctioneer Stephan Welz said: “This was the most successful single-owner auction ever staged in South Africa.”¹ While a number of South Africa’s public museums have significant art holdings, constraints on resources and purchasing budgets have often resulted in these institutions not always taking their rightful place in the collection and exhibition of South African art both locally and internationally.

Corporate collections occupy the ground between private and museum collections. On the one hand they are often initiated and nurtured by one or more individuals within an organisation, and as a result frequently reflect the personal tastes of these individuals. On the other hand, and especially when they come to have significant and valuable holdings, corporate collections are often showcased for wider public consumption. In a landscape where few private individuals publicly exhibit or donate their collections, and where few museums have the resources to critically explore the future of a local art history, corporate collections – especially those that revel in the shifts between the ‘privacy’ of office spaces mostly only accessible to staff and the ‘publicity’ of exhibition spaces that are open to the general public – have come to play a significant role in defining the character of South African art. Corporate collections most obviously include the holdings of private companies such as Absa, BHP Billiton (formerly Gencor) and MTN, but might also encompass entities that are funded, managed and/or owned by government, such as the Constitutional Court, the SABC and Transnet.

The art holdings of the South African Reserve Bank (the Bank), an example of a corporate collection, have their origin in artworks that were accumulated and intended for display in hotels attached to the railway stations in Cape Town and Pretoria.² When the state abandoned these hotel plans the 146 artworks were put up for sale at two much-anticipated auctions in 1954 and 1955. Dr M H de Kock, the Bank’s Governor from 1945 to 1962, dispatched a representative to the first auction, where the following works were purchased for the Bank’s headquarters in Pretoria: George W Pilkington’s *Nosing her in* (1946), Walter Wiles’s *On Trek* (undated) and Frans Oerder’s *River Scene, Waterval-Boven* (undated).³ In the ensuing 53 years the Bank’s eclectic Collection has grown to over 600 artworks dispersed through its Head Office and the SARB College in Pretoria, and its branches in Bloemfontein, Cape Town, Durban, East London, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Pretoria North. Since Mr T T Mboweni became Governor of the South African Reserve Bank in 1999, the Collection has seen the inclusion of a number of works by contemporary artists and historically important black artists. (Continued on p.252)



An outline representation of the works in the South African Reserve Bank Art Collection

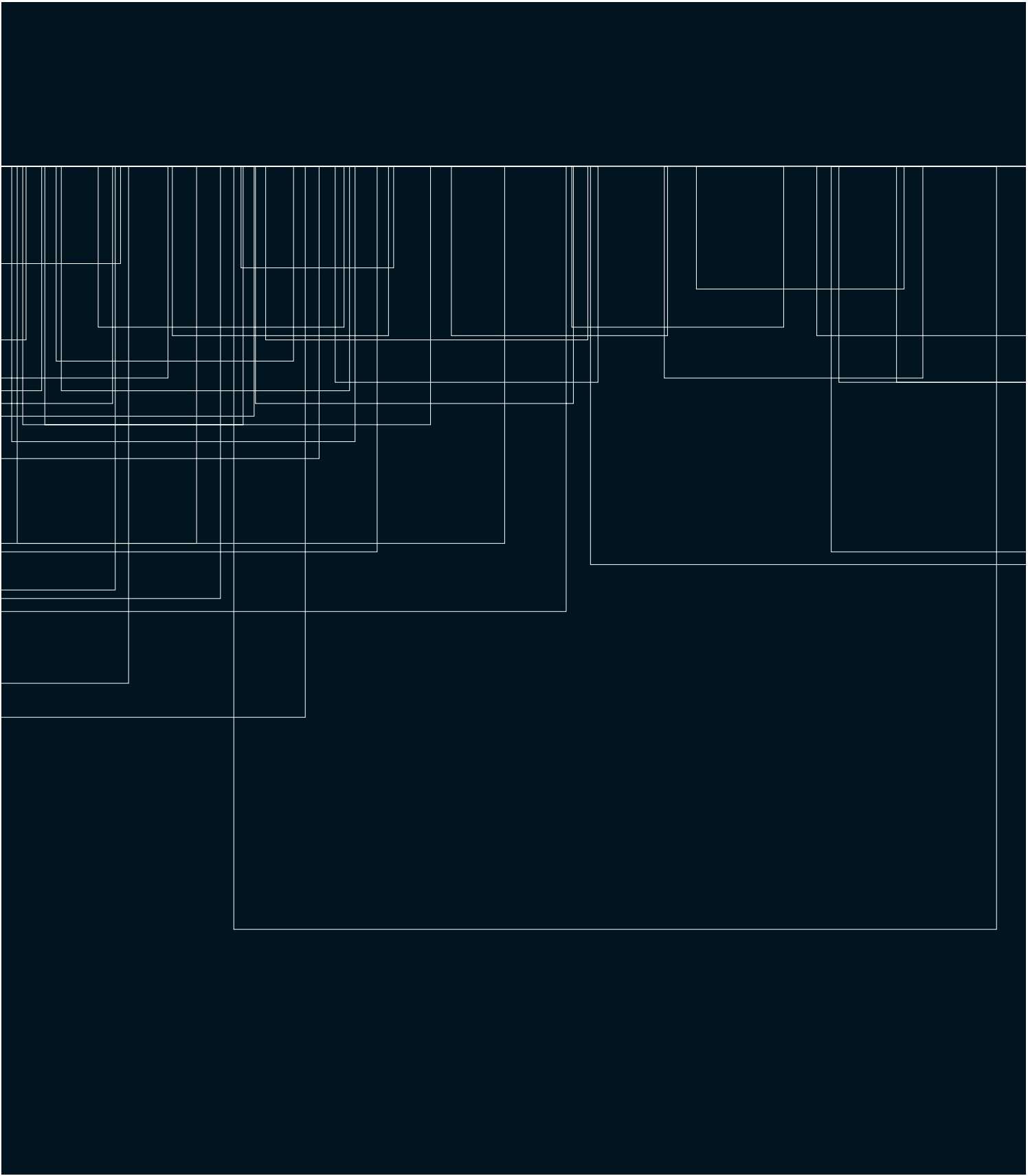


Figure / Ground

Figure / Ground

Reflections on the South African Reserve Bank
Art Collection

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Editor

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