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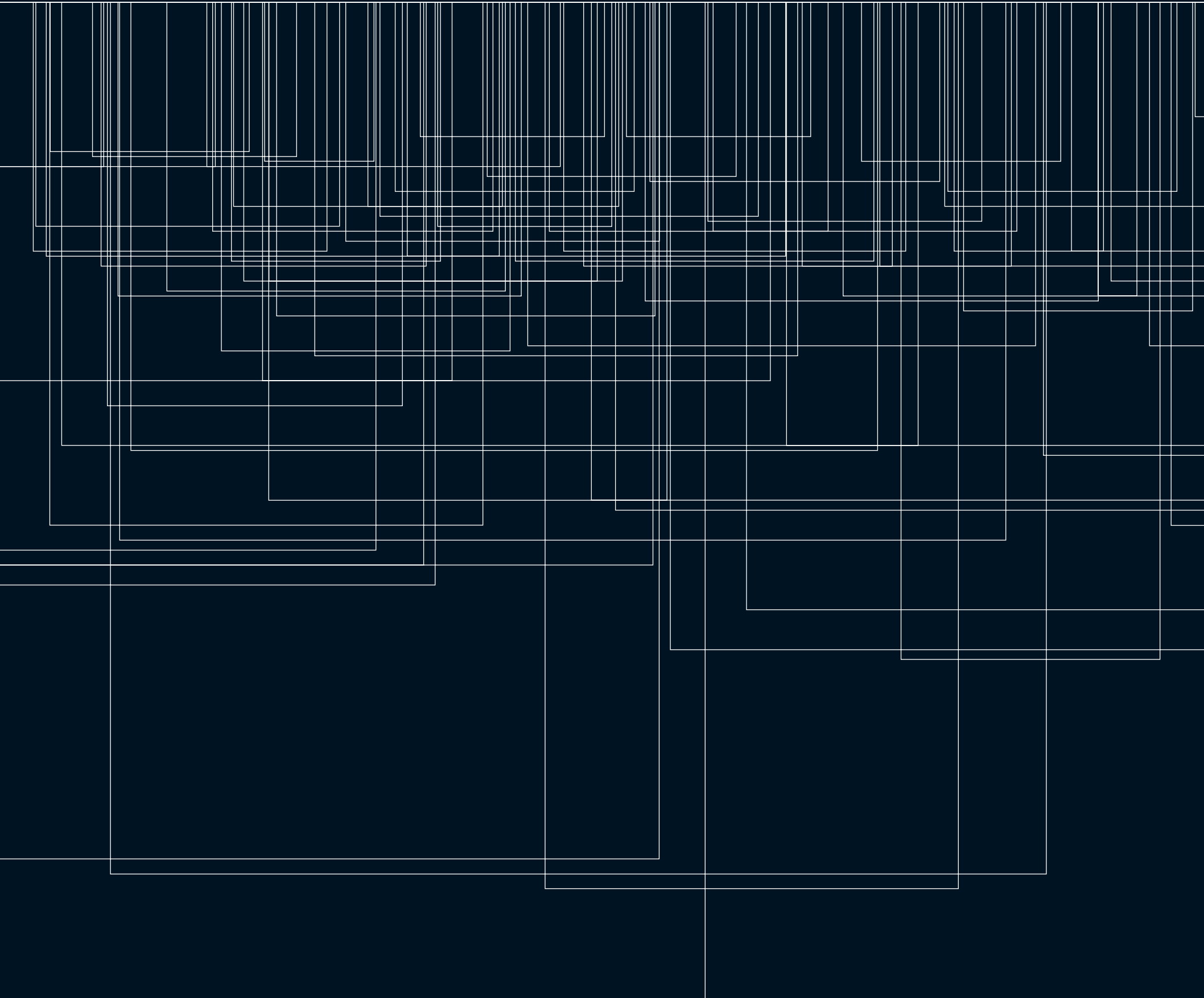
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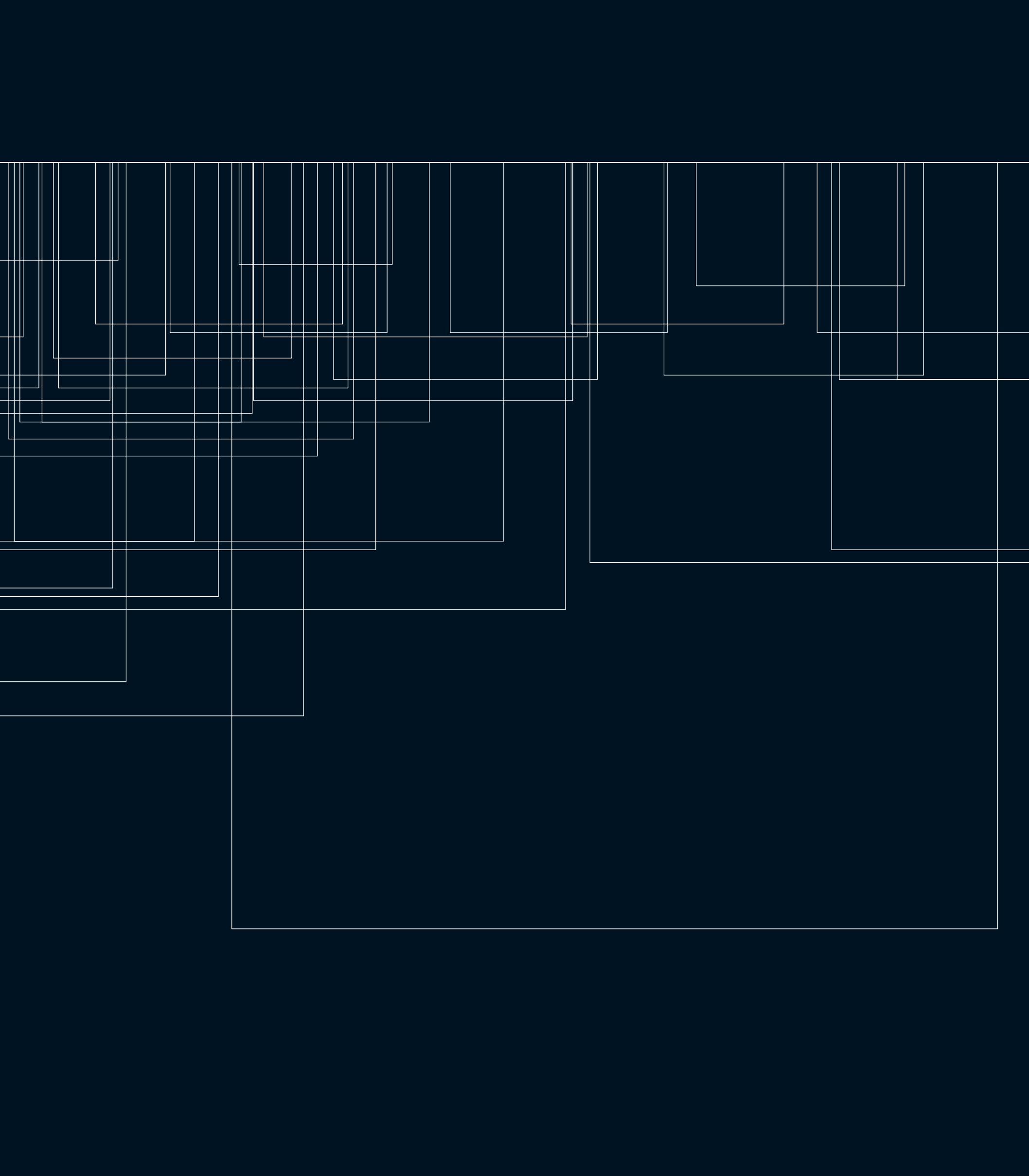
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For Studio Stamp
Project Manager: Hedwig Barry
Photographer: Wayne Oosthuizen
Colour Correction: Ralph Broemer and Claire Godby
Design: Fred Swart
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Researcher: Catherine Green
Proofreader: Diane Stuart



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



(Introduction continued)

There have been a number of approaches to book-form presentations of corporate collections. Two of the predominant approaches include the alignment of a collection with an established linear history, and the attribution of serious worth and academic status to a collection's holdings. The 1991 South African Reserve Bank art book, with its 'story' of South African landscape art, is an example of this first approach, and reflects a desire to organise a collection's holdings in terms of, and therefore belonging to, established chronologies of particular subjects and genres. The second approach – established locally with the publication of *Contemporary South African Art: the Gencor Collection* in 1997 and followed in a number of more recent publications on corporate collections – uses one or more long essays, often written in an academic style, to underpin the art historical weight of a collection. Both these approaches are usually invoked in response to the characters and ambitions of the corporate collections concerned.

Extending and shifting the role and use of figure/ground beyond the organisation and interpretation of a specific work to the presentation and understanding of an entire corporate collection is the foundation of the approach taken in this book. This approach not only responds to the strengths and limitations of the examples mentioned above, but also responds to the specific character and needs of the Bank's Collection. Using figure/ground as a conceptual tool for framing the South African Reserve Bank's Art Collection has two important effects.

Firstly, it does not rely on the origination of or conformity to an overriding linear history, which is useful since chronological orders are often never the strength of corporate collections. Such collections often respond to more than just the history of art, and these responses often create a set of peculiarities that are sometimes difficult to then reconcile with current trends and debates about art and its histories. Figure/ground itself is about the occupation and organisation of spaces rather than times. So while there are chronological impulses in the organisation of artworks and texts in this book, the figure/ground concept permits fluid movements between different spaces in different times.

Secondly, it underscores the role and use of art books in relation to corporate collections. By focusing on this particular Collection, as distinct from other collections, and drawing attention to particular works within the Collection, this art book has the effect of 'figuring' the Collection, signalling its importance within a tradition of corporate collecting and significance within a history of South African visual art. But in doing so, it makes the particularities and subjectivities of the art book selection self-conscious and offers an acknowledgement that this is but one way of reading and understanding the eclecticism of 53 years of collecting. What is critical to the application of this concept to the understanding of a collection and the organisation of an art book is that as much as some works might come to the fore, this figuring relies on an extensive 'ground' of artworks that constitute the foundation of the Collection as a whole. The selections for the figure/ground section draw on a set of works that signal the foundation and future of the Collection, while the thumbnail section in this book offers the reader a sense of the eclectic breadth of the Collection, and the foundation for other ways in which the Collection might be read and understood.

The figure/ground concept is reflected in the design and layout of the artworks, as well as in the form and character of the texts in this book. Collectively these elements offer a number of endorsing and competing layers that prioritise artists, groups and subject matters differently. In terms of design and layout of each double-page spread, the single 'figure' work is always reproduced on the right page and up to three 'ground' works are reproduced on the left page. The priority of the figure work is emphasised by its scale on the page, relative to ground works.

There are three different kinds of texts that accompany the reproduction of artworks. The extended caption is the shortest text form and for the most part relates directly to the works on any particular spread.

The short essay is a longer text form and usually relates to a larger number of works. By and large this text form signifies areas where the Bank has consciously or unconsciously collected in particular areas. The seven short essays cover a range of diverse themes: The extension of non-figurative expression into abstraction, and the attendant place of minimalism; the diverse output of artists working with the prodigious Caversham Press; industry and labour, a theme echoed in the preoccupation of the Bank itself; landscape and its current entanglement with questions of archive and memory; the loosely organised but influential New Group; religion and spirituality; and lastly, close and distant views of Table Mountain and its immediate surroundings. While some short essays relate directly to artworks, others are more contextual, to the extent of sometimes saying nothing about the works themselves.

The final text form is biography. The only direction given to writers in this regard was that the biographies give prominence to particular artists. The interpretation of biographical information was at the writers' discretion, resulting in a series of texts that move from highly personal details about artists' lives to direct and detailed readings of specific works by the artists. The following 18 artists' biographies are included in this book:

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There is a close and often unexplored relationship between books and exhibitions about art. Reading this book is meant to be like walking through an exhibition, and the organisation of this book takes its inspiration from two features of exhibition meaning: The production of space and the practice of walking.