

Material & Process: Where the end is the beginning

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Section 1 - Proposal

WHEN I WALK AROUND THE CITY







A photograph showing a close-up of a dark, curved metal handle embedded in a floor. The floor is covered with a large amount of discarded paper and trash. In the background, a white bus with orange and blue accents is visible, suggesting a public transit or station setting. The overall scene conveys a sense of neglect and environmental impact.

FROM THE SURFACE



ENEO

ENEOS

EN



WHAT IS
GOING
ON WITH
THIS
PLACE



TRADITIONS STILL EXIST



信
家
地

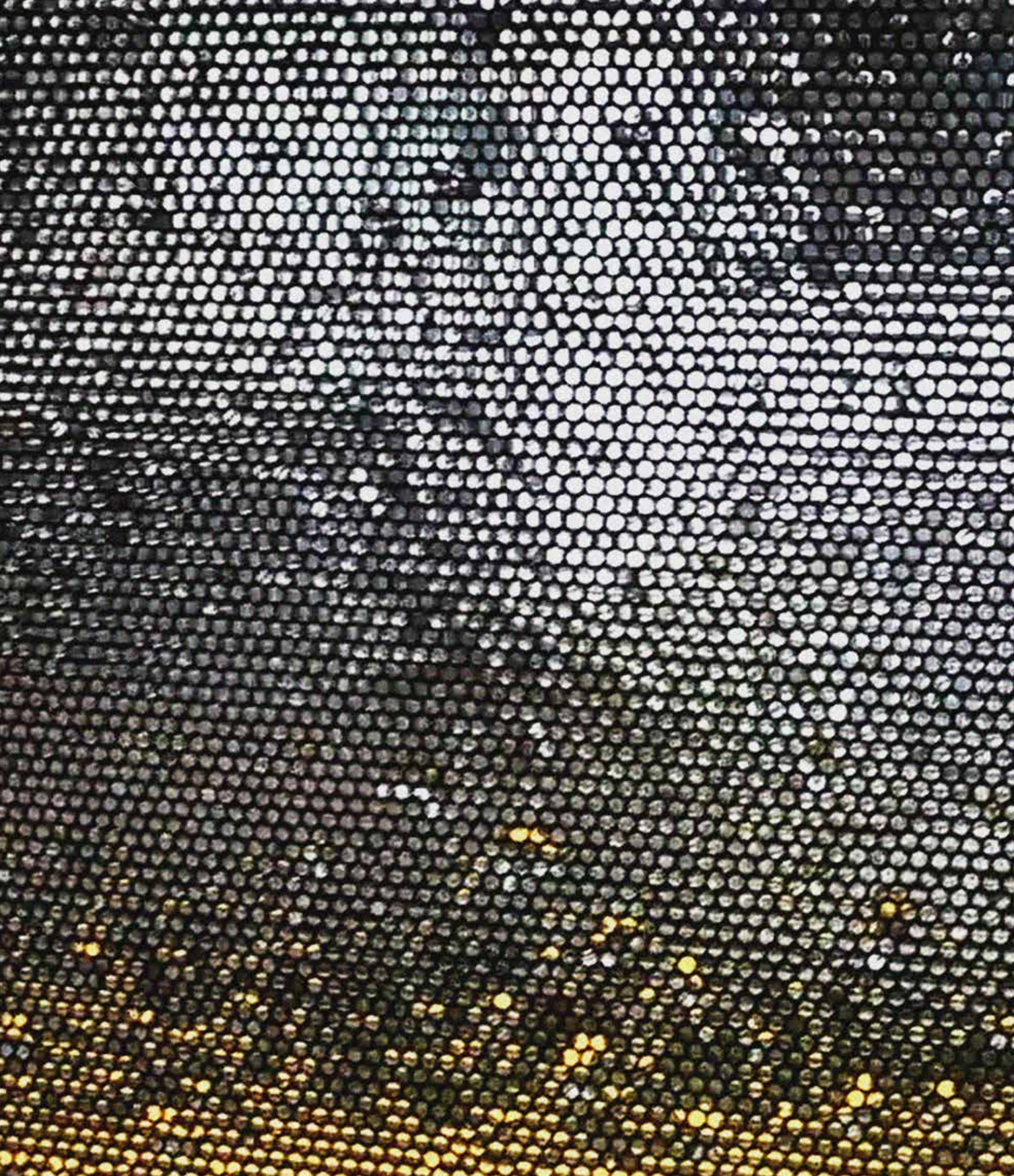
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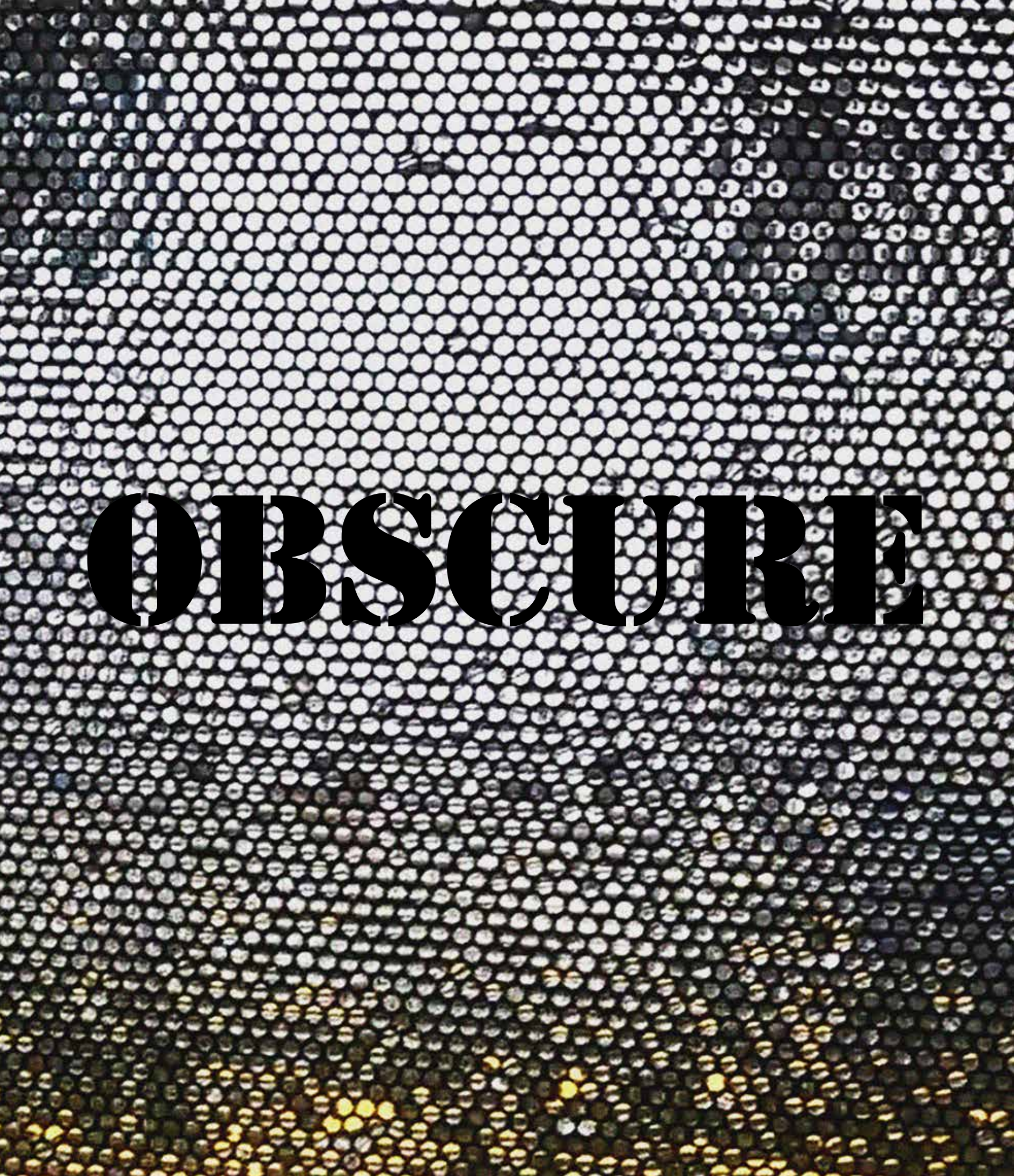




WHAT IS GONE







OBSCURIE

Abstract

Everyone inevitably goes through changes - physically, mentally and emotionally. Over time we have all had the experience of seeing the end of one part of one's life that it is only the beginning of another life story. Whether we like it or not, change is natural and an inexorable part of the endless cycle of life, death and birth.

My artwork reflects the changes in life with the passing of time. Changes in my environment have brought about changes in me. By finding ways to represent these personal experiences in a creative process utilising different, materials, processes and visual outcomes, I explore ideas relating to the human condition. Differing materials and processes are central to the project as a way of signifying ideas relating to cyclic events and experiences in both long term and short term histories. They signify personal and universal histories that are in a constant state of flux and change. Although my starting point was my own personal experience, change is universal and I hope the themes trigger a resonance amongst all of us.

While the experiments/projects may ostensibly seem to deal with ideas of material decay, ruin and structural failure, these should be contextualised as working symbiotically with ideas of rebirth, hope and optimism. There is a binary nature to the research that explores relationships between destruction and regeneration. While the artworks I present might on first viewing seem bleak, in fact they attempt to metaphorically site the reality of human frailty in the wider context of geological time and natural life cycles.

Description

Through a series of experiments and projects, this two year practice-led research investigated how material processes, their documentation and visual outcomes could be used to explore and represent aspects of change as a metaphor for the human condition and the passage of time.

Change not only affects us individually, in both the physical and experiential aspects of aging, but we also experience it in our human interactions and relationships; in social changes in our lifetimes; in changes to our immediate environment and the wider world, both urban and natural. Things are repeatedly created, destroyed, reconstructed and transformed. The environment is changed by human activities and society's development and expansion. Intentional behaviours may bring about unintended consequences.

As an artist I am interested in using the transformation of materials and the transference of energies to represent my ideas. I am as interested in documenting the processes that materials undergo as they change state or shape as I am the forms which may be displayed as physical artworks. Therefore I want my artworks to be as much about the process and material as they are about the form and object. It is very important to acknowledge that content and meaning exist metaphorically in both the process/material and the form/object.

The artworks incorporate a range of mainly natural materials, including wood, charcoal, wax, ice, water, and are subjected to naturally transformative processes such as burning, melting and freezing. Elements of traditional fine art and contemporary media and technology, including painting, video and digital imagery are also used. This deliberately relates the artworks to the natural world but also sites them in relation to the urban lifestyle that is increasingly prevalent in modern life.

It may be increasingly hard in this urbanized modern life to make a connection to the natural world, but a key tenet of ancient Chinese philosophical thought is not only still relevant but can also help to make sense of the apparent hopelessness of a fleeting individual life span: Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* "is structured around the generative life force of the cosmos, and this system of thought weaves the human into natural process at the deepest levels of being."¹ This is a philosophical approach that helps me to make sense of the world and my artwork.

I aimed to make use of a range of materials and natural processes to create artworks. I explored how different natural materials could be utilised with the aid of naturally transformative processes to generate a sense of imminent and unstoppable life changes. I intended to illustrate how the certainty of natural process interacts with the environment to generate uncertain outcomes, which are themselves creative and to use methods to show both the causal and non-causal relationship of changes. I aimed to generate a body of artworks that would enable the viewer to reflect on the concept of change as not only an end but also the beginning of something else and employ a range of installation and display strategies to support this understanding.

1 David Hinton, introduction to *The Four Chinese Classics*, (Counterpoint, Berkeley, California, 2013), 26.

Research Questions

How can the transformation of physical materials through natural processes, such as burning, melting and freezing, be used to as metaphors for the passage of time and human life experience?

How can the cyclical nature of both short term personal histories and long term societal histories be represented in a contemporary fine art practice through the use of certain materials, processes and documentation of their transformation as they change state?

Rationale

Prior to starting the Masters Programme, I had experienced a sustained period of unsettling change, from personal to work related and environmental. It was a stressful period and I felt helpless and yet had no choice but to confront all these changes in life. These events inspired me to reflect upon how nothing in life we experience is static and how we all exist in a state of continual flux and changing circumstances. The changes we all experience led me to think about the well known Buddhist idiom *nothing is forever except change*. I assume that at one stage or another of life each and every one of us will experience unwelcome changes similar to mine. Some people may simply accept them as the inevitable and learn to numb their feelings towards them. For me, I have never lost sight of the fact that human life is ephemeral and fragile. Human beings have the ability to feel and reflect on the changes in their lives. This idea is something that preoccupies me more and more as I get older. How these ideas could be represented in artworks I didn't know and did not set out explicitly to discover.

At the beginning of the programme, I did not have any idea as to what kind of work I wanted to create and what I wanted to convey through my work. I did not want to make any overt attempt to convey my emotion and experience in my work, I set out to just test and create with materials and processes and follow where that led. In the course of my experimentation, the ideas started to flow in and be realised. Upon reflection, I realised that there were recurrent common themes in my works; melancholy; the passage of time; detachment; the helplessness associated with life and death; decay, degeneration, transformation and renewal; and the overarching siting of the human experience of change within the disinterested larger cycles of the natural world. My work, I realised, was a mirror reflecting my experience in life and how I go through changes in life.

Sometimes changes are resisted due to their uncertain nature, what may seem chaotic or unsettling may on reflection be part of a logical process. Changes can easily be mistaken as an end, but more often than not changes are also the beginning. Too often changes are just taken for granted, and we let events pass by without much thought. Nonetheless, reflecting on changes and their meanings are important to the person and the society. Changes can lead us to think deeply about ourselves, our life and the people and the environment around us, and how these aspects interact with each other. Changes can remind us of our mortality and how powerless we are in the face of nature.

Using process in my art practice is vital as a way to embody my concerns about change through not only resolved artworks but also the studio methodology that produces them.

“The term “process” when used in the context of art, is both precise and imprecise, an ahistorical referent and historically specific periodizing marker. Artists used process simultaneously as a natural phenomenon, the focus of their working method, and style. Process visualized both actual conduct of materials and behaviors of artists in their studio.”²

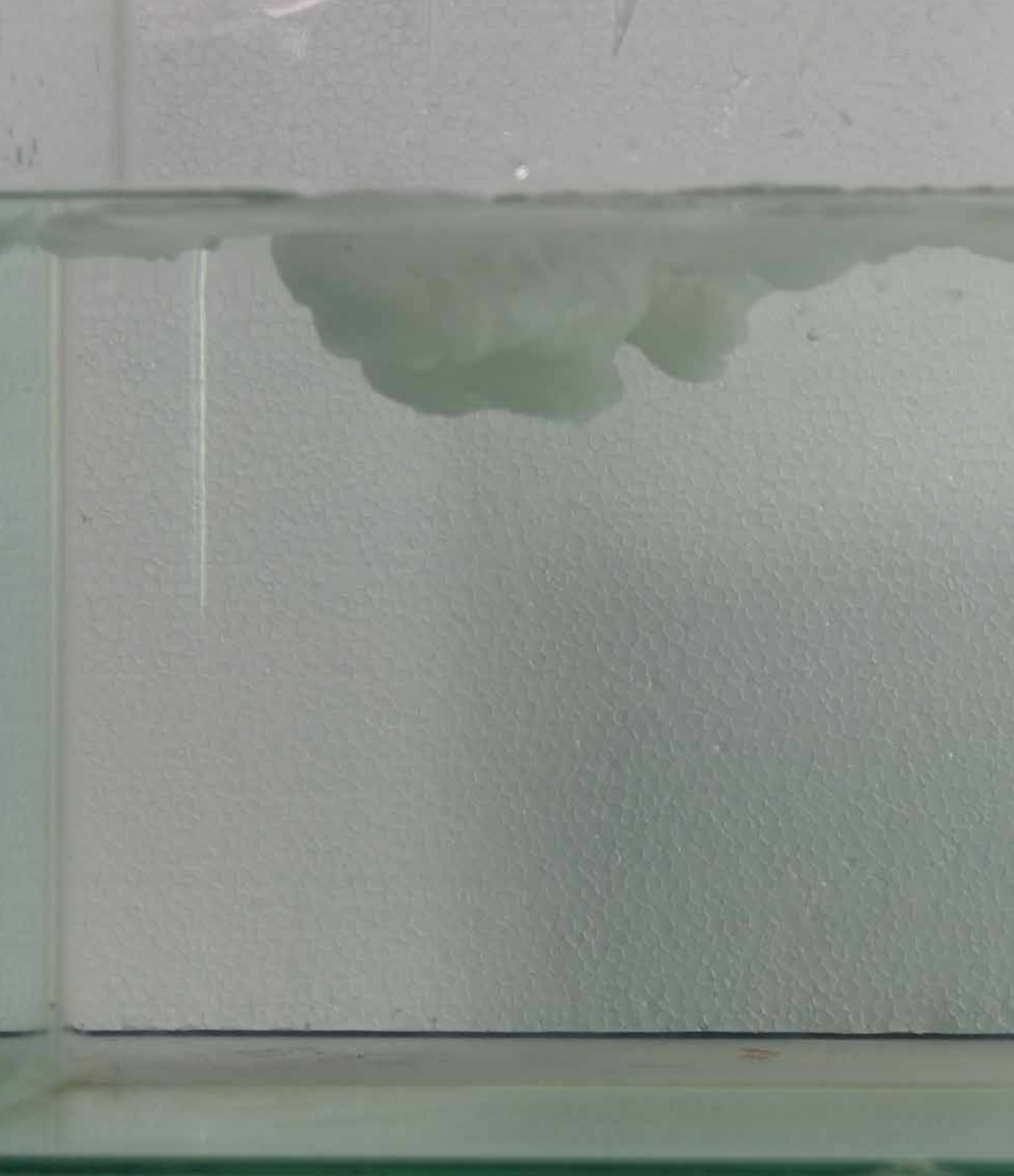
Process art, especially in the 60s and 70s, was a reaction to the increasingly consumerist nature of society and the art world. We live in an increasingly hubristic and consumerist environment and so these concerns seem as relevant as ever. Geological time and nature will consume us all, as human beings of course we have our cares and concerns, but ultimately we are “living in a conceit of human sized time and space.”³

In Robert Smithson’s seminal *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, he talked about the nature of buildings that would be constructed, not as progress in the conventional sense but as “the opposite of the ‘romantic ruin’ because buildings don’t *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built.”⁴ For me this makes sense, structural failure and the decay of materials, especially those that indicate human endeavour, are part of a longer non-human life cycle; one that will outlive civilisations and all individuals within them.

2 Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, (University of California Press, 1996), 577.

3 Jane Fudge, “The Clay Grows Tall: The World of Charles Simmons,” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, Second Edition, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (University of California Press, 2012), 595.

4 Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey, 1967,” in *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Brian Dillon (Whitechapel Gallery, London and The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2011), 49.

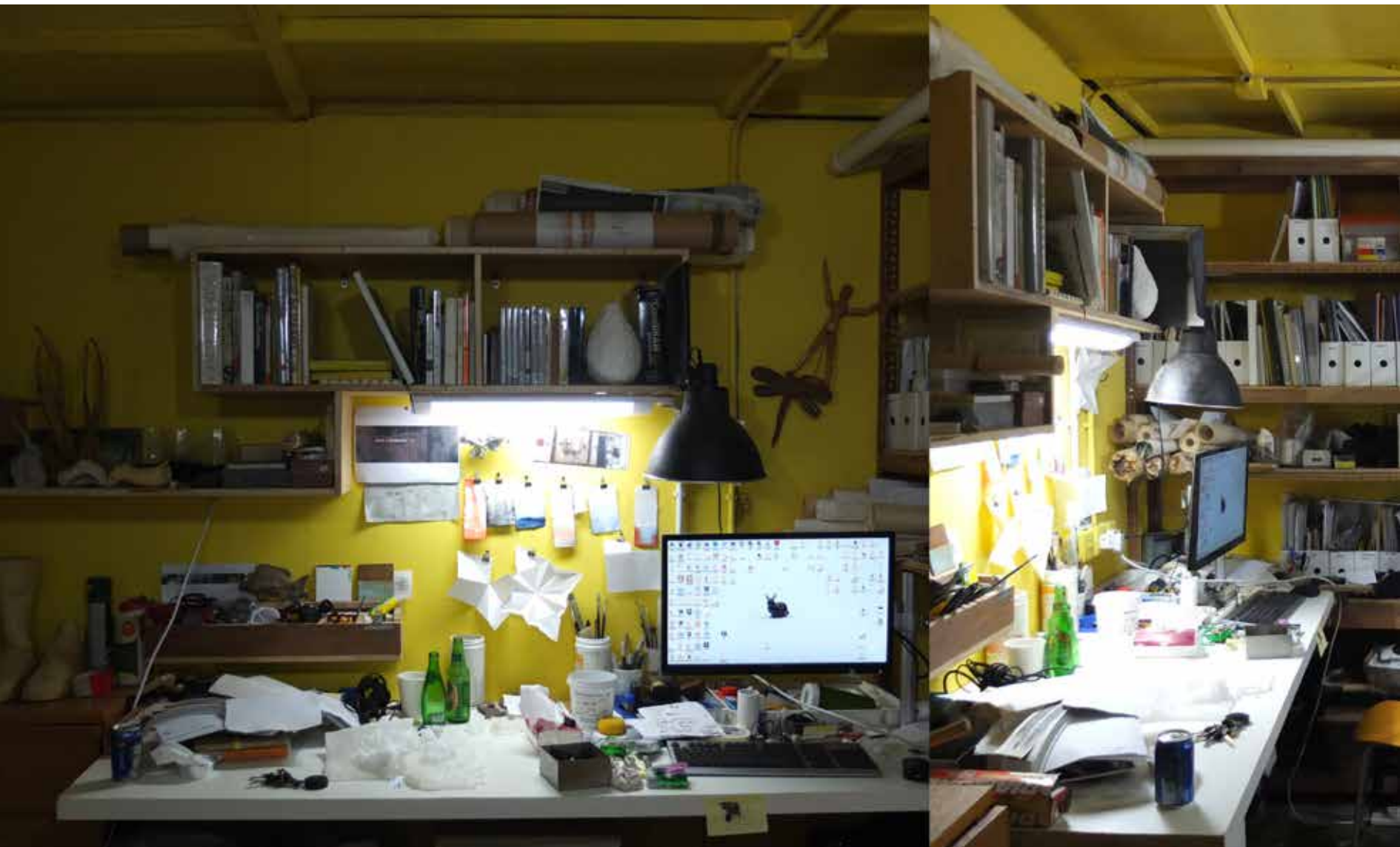


Section 2 - Studio Experiments

My studio is filled with over ten year's worth of materials, tools, books, and objects filling most of the available space from floor to ceiling. It is a working environment in which I prefer not to throw anything out, everything is useful or might be useful at some point in the future, or gets recycled. It is a space where nothing is wasted but it can seem as though there is little actual free space in which to work. In fact it functions in an organic way, which reflects my artmaking process; a space is cleared or reconfigured as needed, then that clearing will in turn make way for whatever needs to be done next.

At any time, ideas, notes, photos, samples, fragments, materials, works in progress, remnants of old work are stacked, pinned, and layered all around. The studio might seem cluttered, even chaotic to someone else, but to me everything is in its place, at hand, and it is the ideal space to experiment in the way a pristine space would not be. It could be considered a laboratory of chaos. Indeed for the first year, the studio became a laboratory for testing a range of materials and processes as a way to find out what form my artworks might take and how meaning could be carried.

In the first year of the programme I wanted to keep the work in a space of experimentation and not focus on any resolutions at this stage. So in these studio experiments a wide range of materials were used, some deliberately chosen for a particular quality, some chosen randomly because they were available; sometimes a process, action or a physical experience led to a material. Out of the chaos came



Reconfigured studio space for experiments and installation tests



Alchan

Lynn

Lynnda

Janet

Motors

Stanca

Simon

rethschile

ACTIVO

[scribbles]

THINK

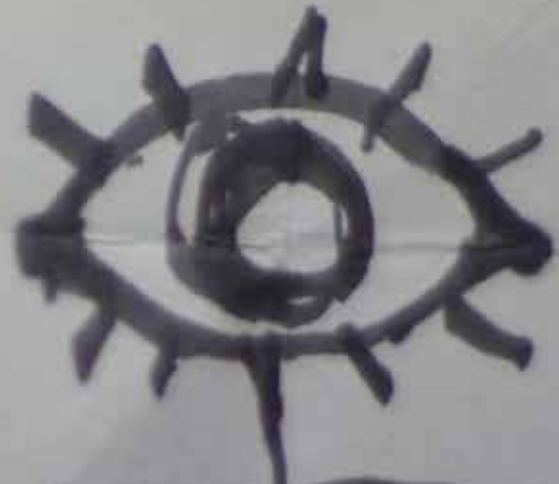
[scribbles]

All the things

Mind map drawing

FORM / SPACE / PLACE

SURFACE




WORK

METHOD

how to build
what tool /
material





Experiment 1: Drawing/Erasing with the Body

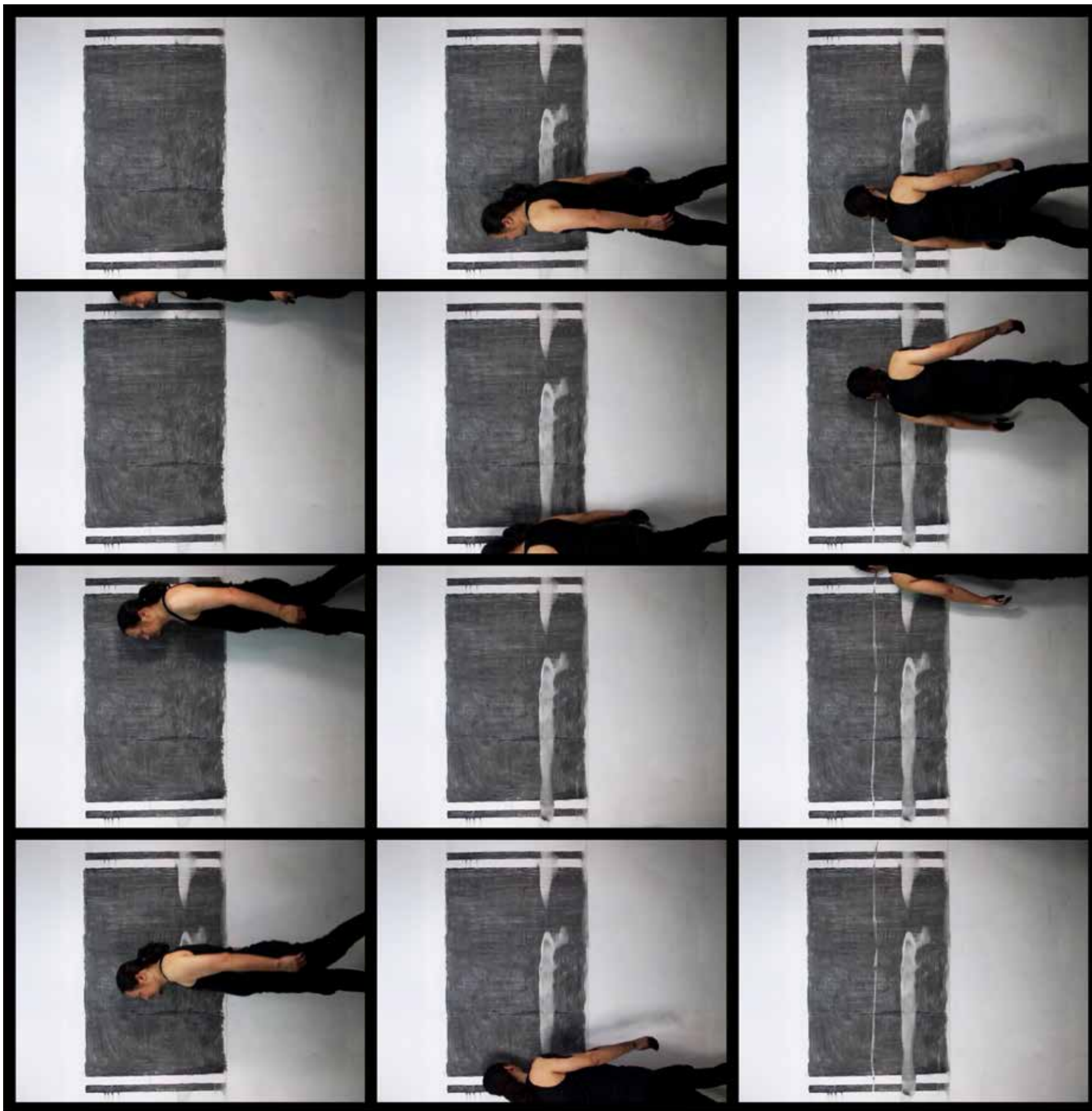
In this experiment I wanted to find ways to represent how human activities affect or change the environment. I explored this idea through using my own body as a drawing instrument to create images on paper. The mark making process was recorded on video.

For the first drawing event, I used paper blackened with charcoal and fixed on the wall to cover an area from approximately my waist to above head height. I devised an action based process to generate marks on the paper: as I walked past the paper, only one part of my body touched it, erasing the charcoal as I moved. I did this three times, using my shoulder, hand and finally forehead.

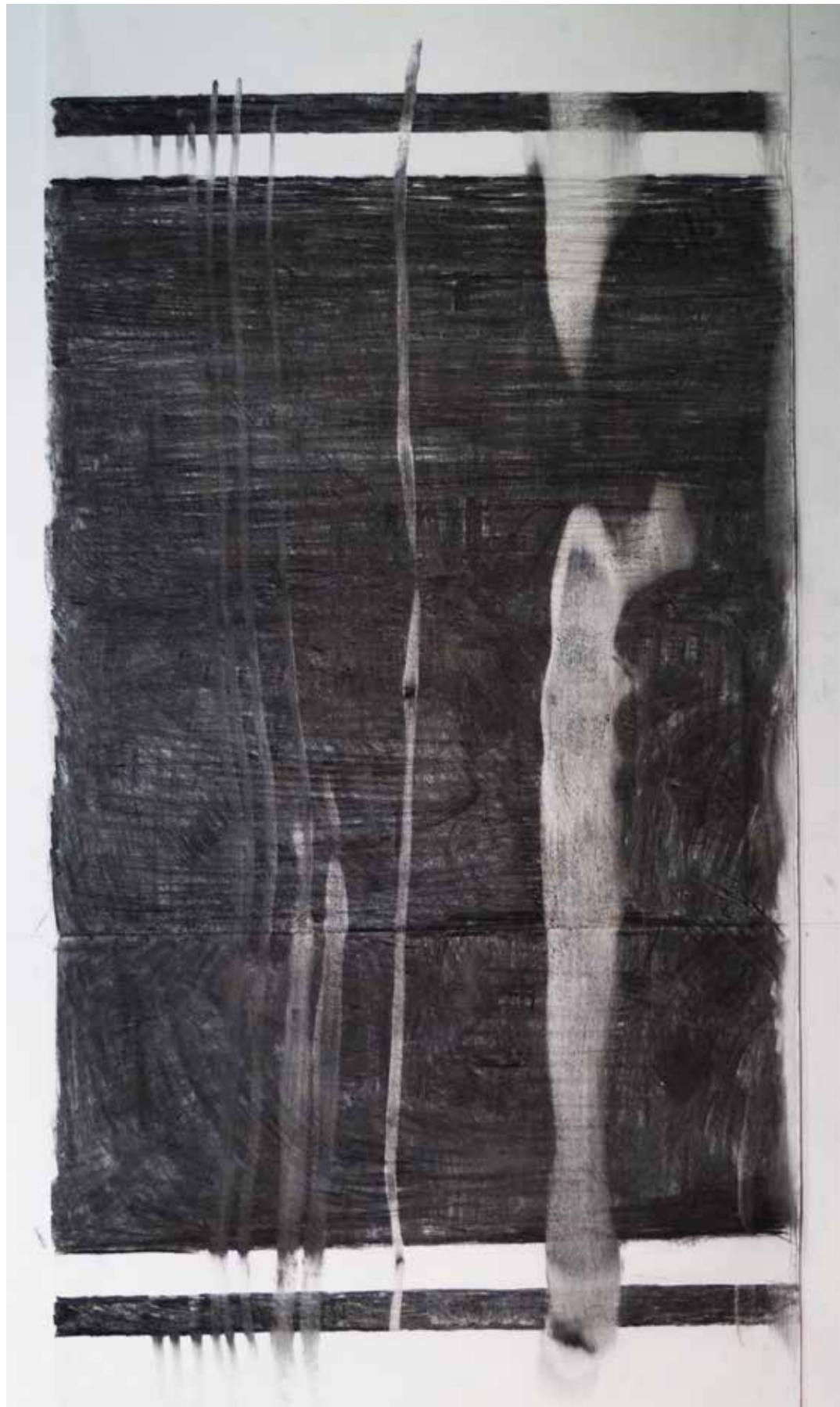
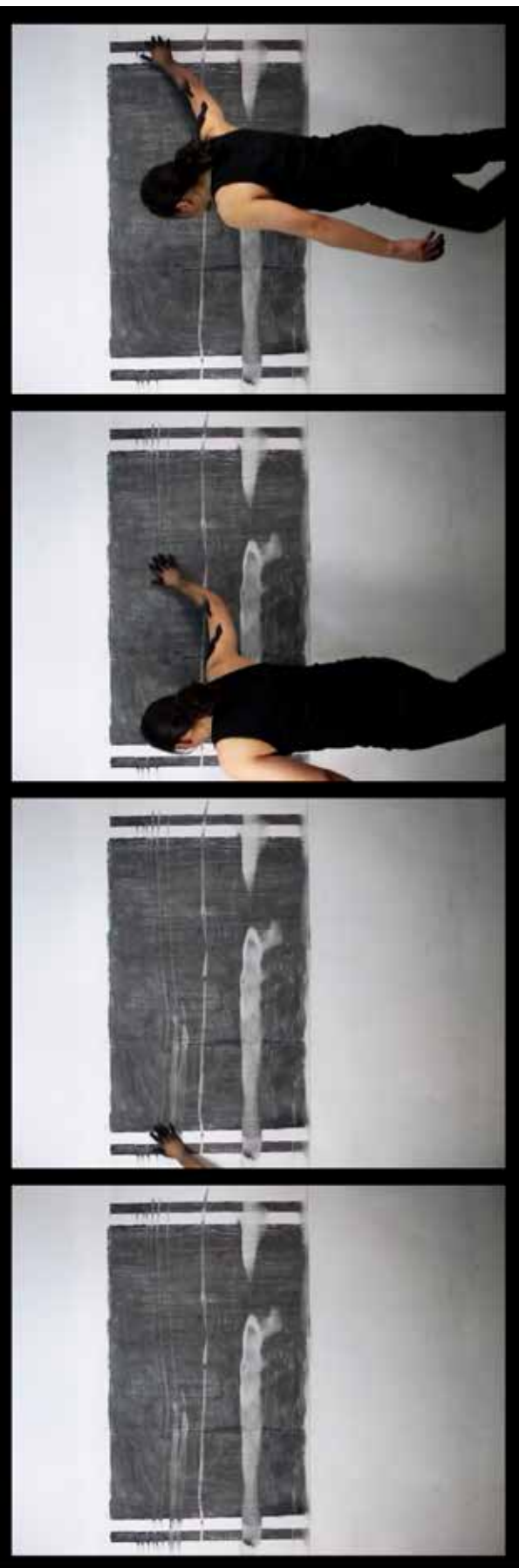
For the second drawing event, I only covered half of the paper with charcoal, leaving the left side blank. Again, it was fixed to the wall at the same height but this time I rolled across the paper from right to left. As a result, the charcoal that was erased by my body on the right side was partially re-deposited onto the blank side. I combined different body motions, gesture and movement, and successfully showed a relationship between human behavior and the environment

This action based drawing experiment resulted in two outcomes, the images on paper created through the movement of my body and the videos. The videos were originally made for record keeping purposes, but when I reviewed them I found that they were unexpectedly slowed down. Later I found that I had mistakenly taken the video in 60fps, which made the playback speed slower. This little accident generated a beautiful slow motion video. It made me realise that time is an important factor that I could use in my artworks about change and that the idea of the "deliberate accident" could be an important element in my artworks. Furthermore, when I played the videos, another accident happened with the media player: it displayed vertically. This unintended formatting created a strange spatial view I had not envisaged but which was very engaging.

These "accidents" became a strong impetus to stay open to chance during the experimental studio process; to be attentive and notice what happens between materials, intentions, processes and outcomes. The studio accident might become the artwork, generate something new or be the part that carries the intended content.



Stills from drawing test 1, *Erase*, 2014, video 00:55





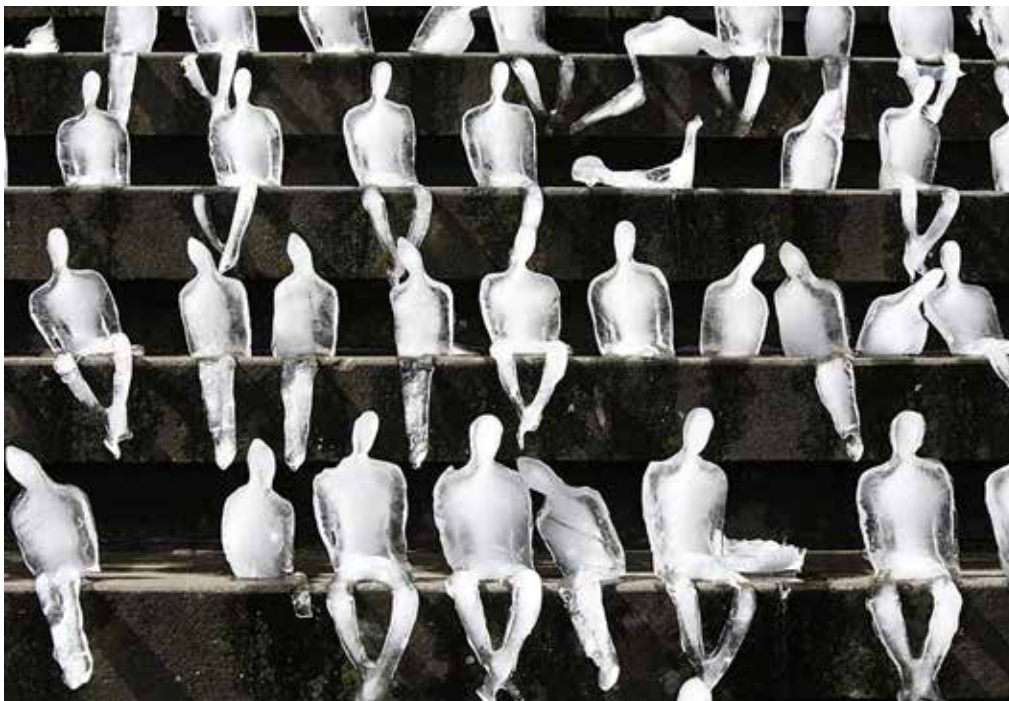
Still from drawing test 2, *The Drawing Body*, 2014, video 01:10



Experiment 2: Ice Forms and Melting

While researching ideas and artists dealing with similar concerns I discovered Nele Azevedo's work *Melting Men*. The video of this installation shows seated human figurines made of ice slowly melting until only water is left behind. I felt watching the ice men slowly disappear was like seeing the duration of a human life from birth to death. I felt a strong sense of helplessness and melancholy.

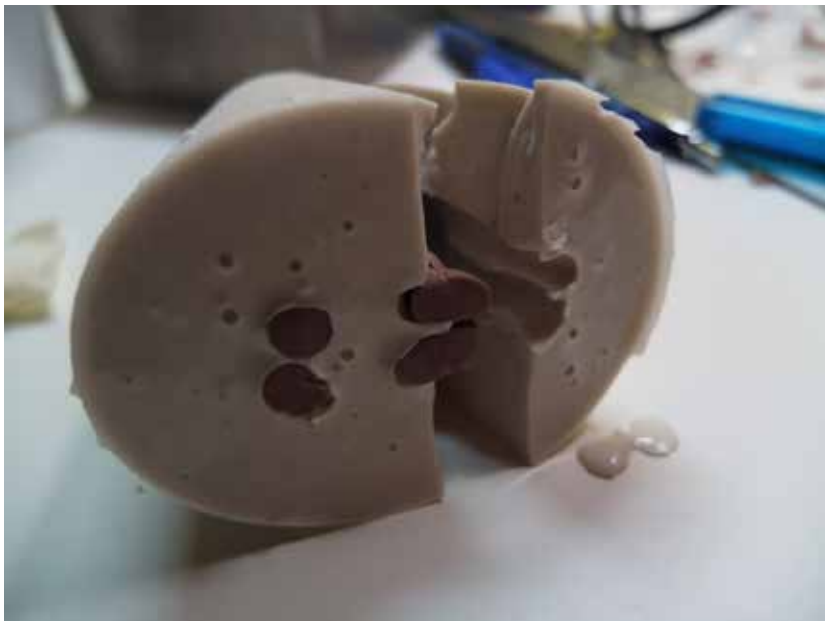
I decided to respond to Azevedo's work and make a similar project with small scale cast ice figures but melt them in varying ways and do something with the resulting melt water. First I let the ice men melt naturally and recorded it on video. One interpretation I had while watching the ice men melt was that it made me think of situations where people want to protect someone or something but whatever they do, their actions can't stop the inevitable. That led to me holding an ice man in my hand and the melting was accelerated by my body heat. The fact that the ice was human shaped and small enough to be held in the palm of a hand, also played into the idea of vulnerability. This seemed especially poignant as the ice man in my hand melted and seeped through my fingers.



Nele Azevedo
Melting men, 2012
Installation
Berlin, Germany



Documentation of ice figure casting process



Documentation of ice figures melting





“Try to improve it and you ruin it.
Try to hold it, and you lose it.”⁵

5 Lao Tzu, translated by David Hinton, “Tao Te Ching”, in *The Four Chinese Classics*, (Counterpoint, Berkeley, California, 2013) 64.



Melting in my hand, 2014, photograph, 11 x 8.5 cm

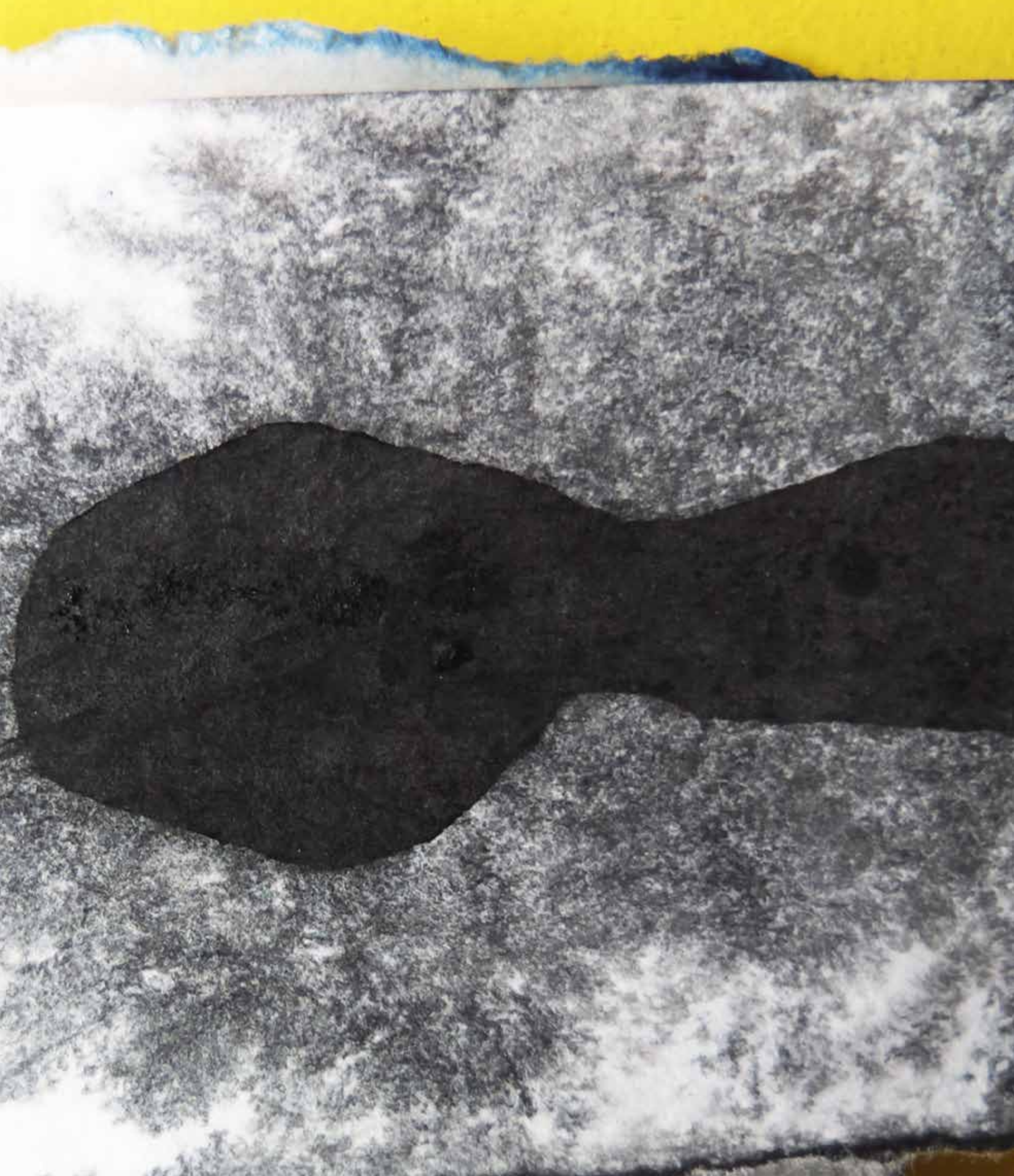


Studio view of coloured ice melting tests



Finally I added coloured ink when making the ice men and let the coloured figures melt on paper. The coloured ice left images as the melting ice marked the paper, I found these images intriguing because they were more oblique less obvious. If you only see the final image, you might not know how it was made, even if you could tell it was a pattern made by a melting process, it would be impossible to know the shape of what had melted. The viewer sees a new object, the end result of a transformation. The pigment residue looked like a snowflake, which made this melting process poetic and I realised that residues and traces were important as markers of time passing, the power of nature, disappearance, dissolution and evidence of transformation.

Coloured ice figure
traces on paper



Experiment 3: Wax Forms - Melting and Solidifying

I decided to test my ideas using another material capable of melting, but with physically different properties, wax. I used the same moulds and made a set of small wax men. I had become interested in documentation so I took photographs every 10 seconds as these figures melted. I then combined the images in series backwards and forwards and played them as a looped video so that they figures endlessly dissolved and reformed. I began to see how material transformation could be used as a metaphor both for individual human decay but also for longer natural and societal cycles of decay and regeneration.

When melting the wax figures, an unexpected image was made. The melted wax dripped onto paper laid to protect the table and as it solidified it created a flowing cloud like shape. Unlike the ice melting to water, the wax melted to liquid but reformed at room temperature and in the process changed from a cast representation of a figure to a naturally formed abstract shape.

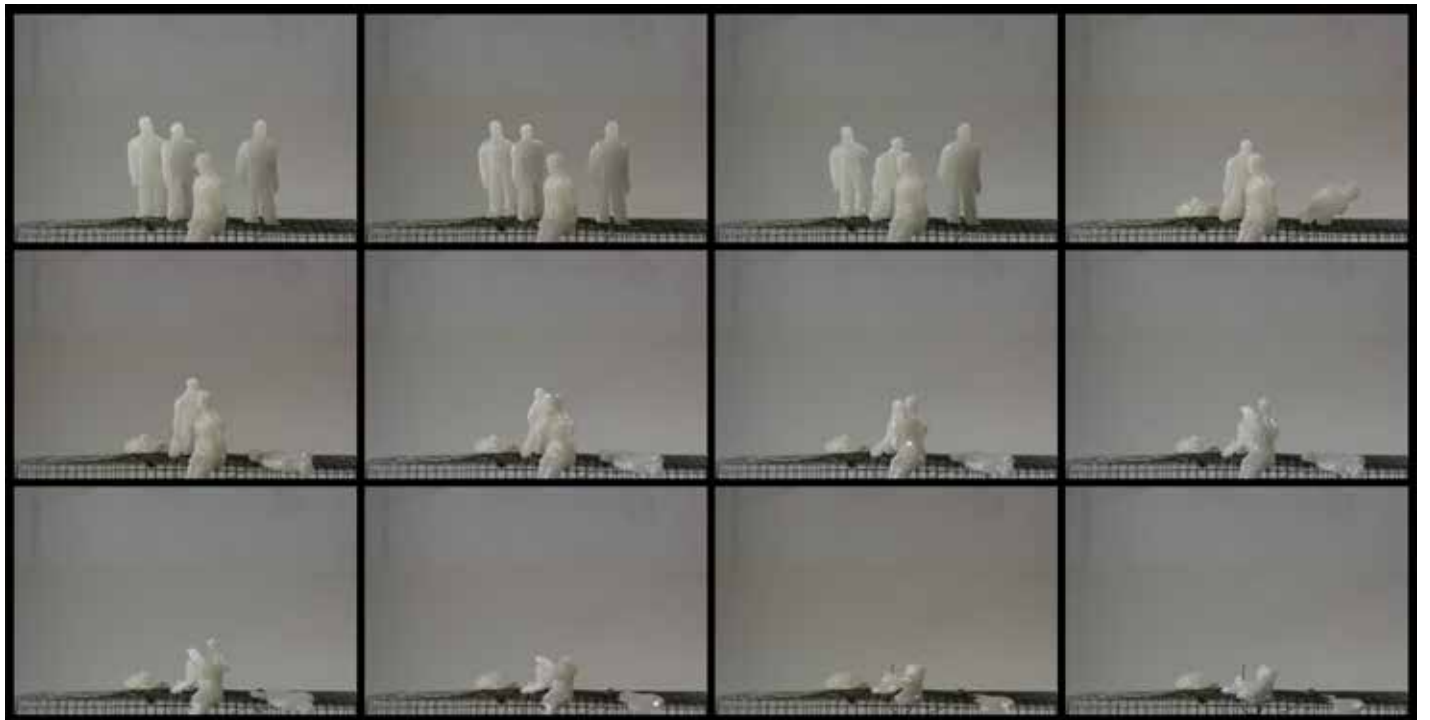
This image increased my interest in using the wax as a medium to express the idea of change. I tested pouring molten wax into water. The wax instantly condensed in the water and created a solid form. Curiously, this experiment resulted in a similar visual outcome. The condensed wax again resembled cloud formations. There was an elemental look to the process, as if landscape was being formed in miniature. I considered that the resulting photographs carried a sense of elemental transformation in a poetic way.



Setting up wax figure melt test



Wax figures



Stills from *Wax figures Melting*, 2014, video, 00:24









Documentation of wax forming process (p.48-53)





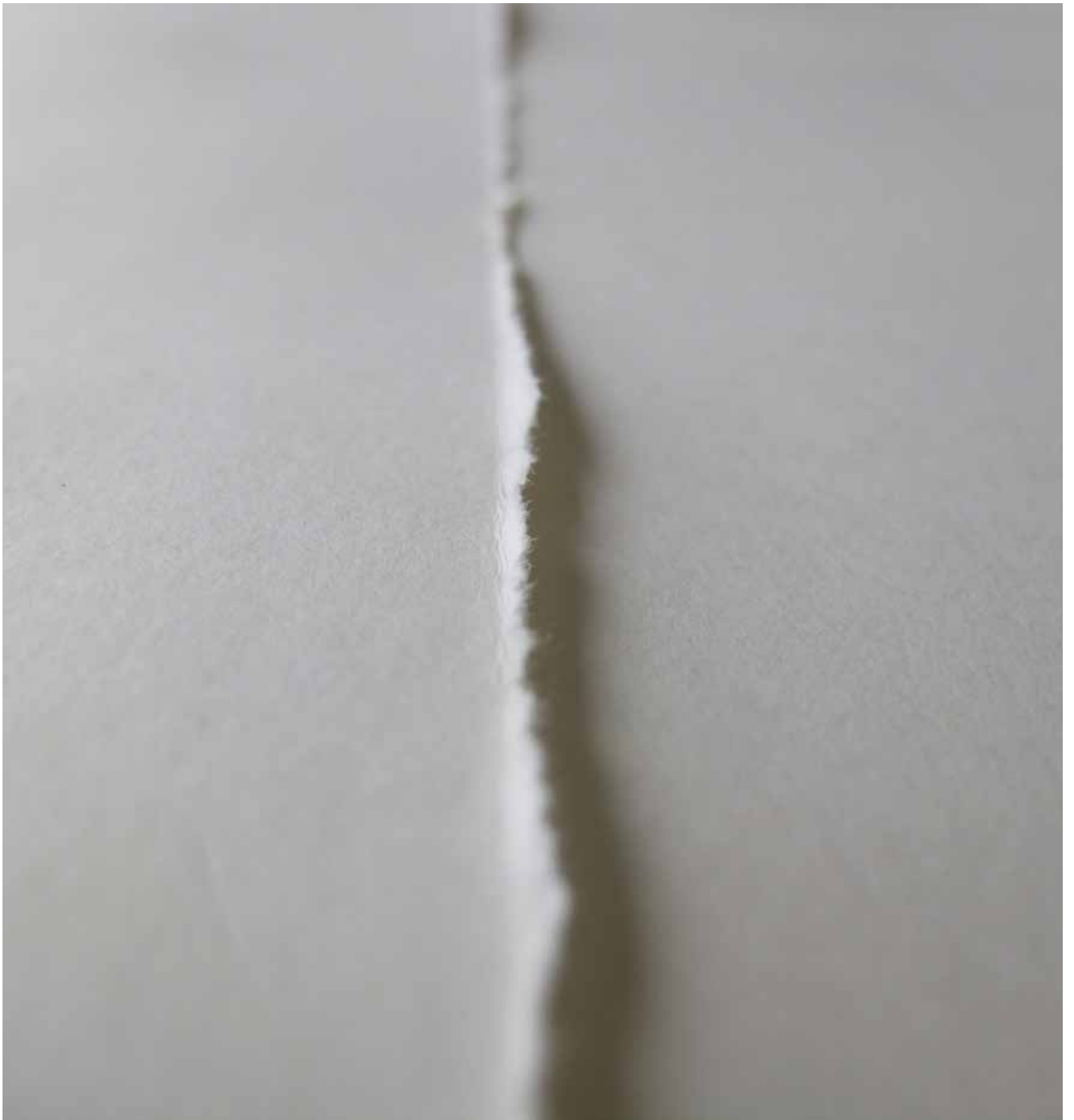


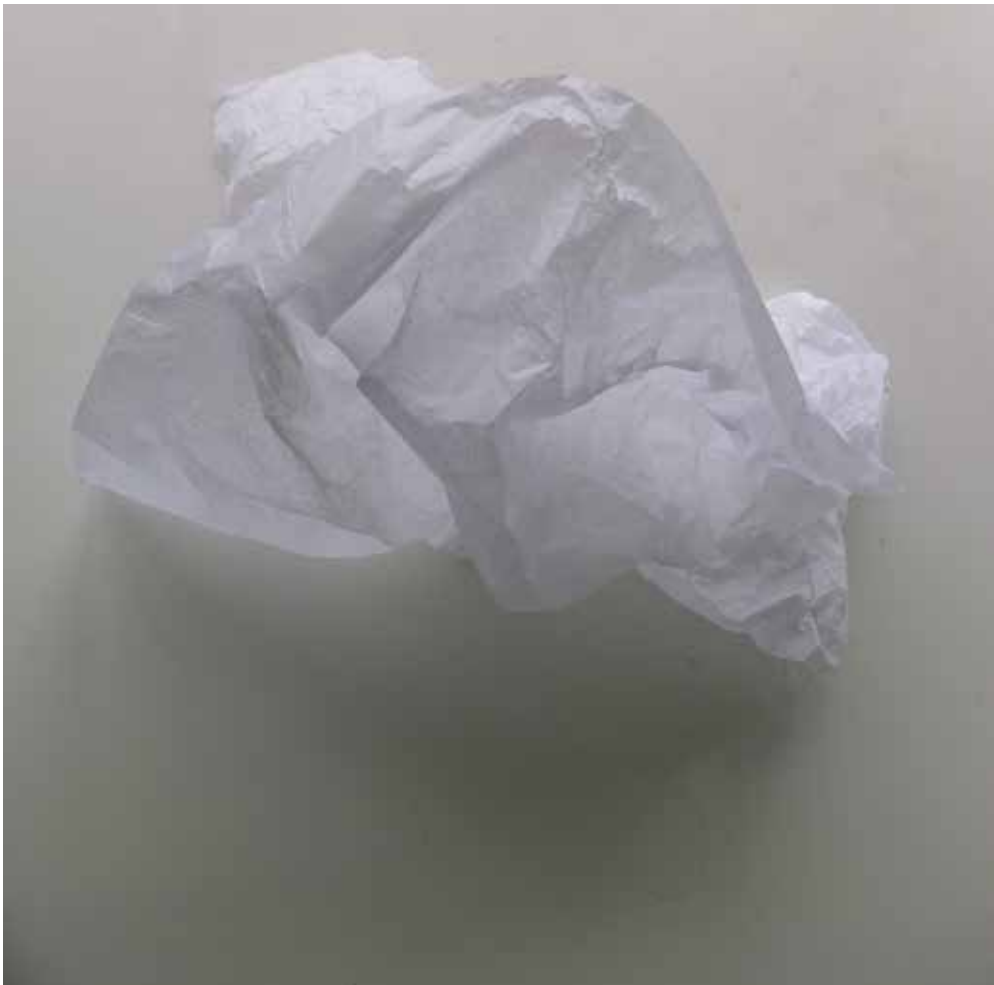
Experiment 4: Paper forms

In these paper experiments, I used different kinds of paper and tested methods of changing their original state - crease, pleat, bend, hinge, corrugate, drape, twist, collapse, wrinkle, curve, fold, wrap, changing the paper from 2D to 3D forms. Also I introduced other materials, water and mud, to break down the paper structure or solidify it while twisting. Some of the resulting forms were formally interesting, however overall these experiments were less interesting to me than the ice and wax experiments because although the paper changed its shape, it was not in itself materially transformed.



Documentation of paper form tests (p.54-59)











Experiment 5: 3D Scanning

3D scanner technology is available to me and I decided to test some processes and materials that were hi-tech and man made rather than only focusing on natural resources. Whilst 3D scanning some objects I discovered that some of the scanned images were incomplete. These images reminded me of an earlier work of mine, *Memory Rebuild*, 2008, where I had cast parts of my house as "memory fragments" I thought I might be able to use these incomplete 3D scanned images to explore the concepts of incompleteness and erosion as metaphors for memory.

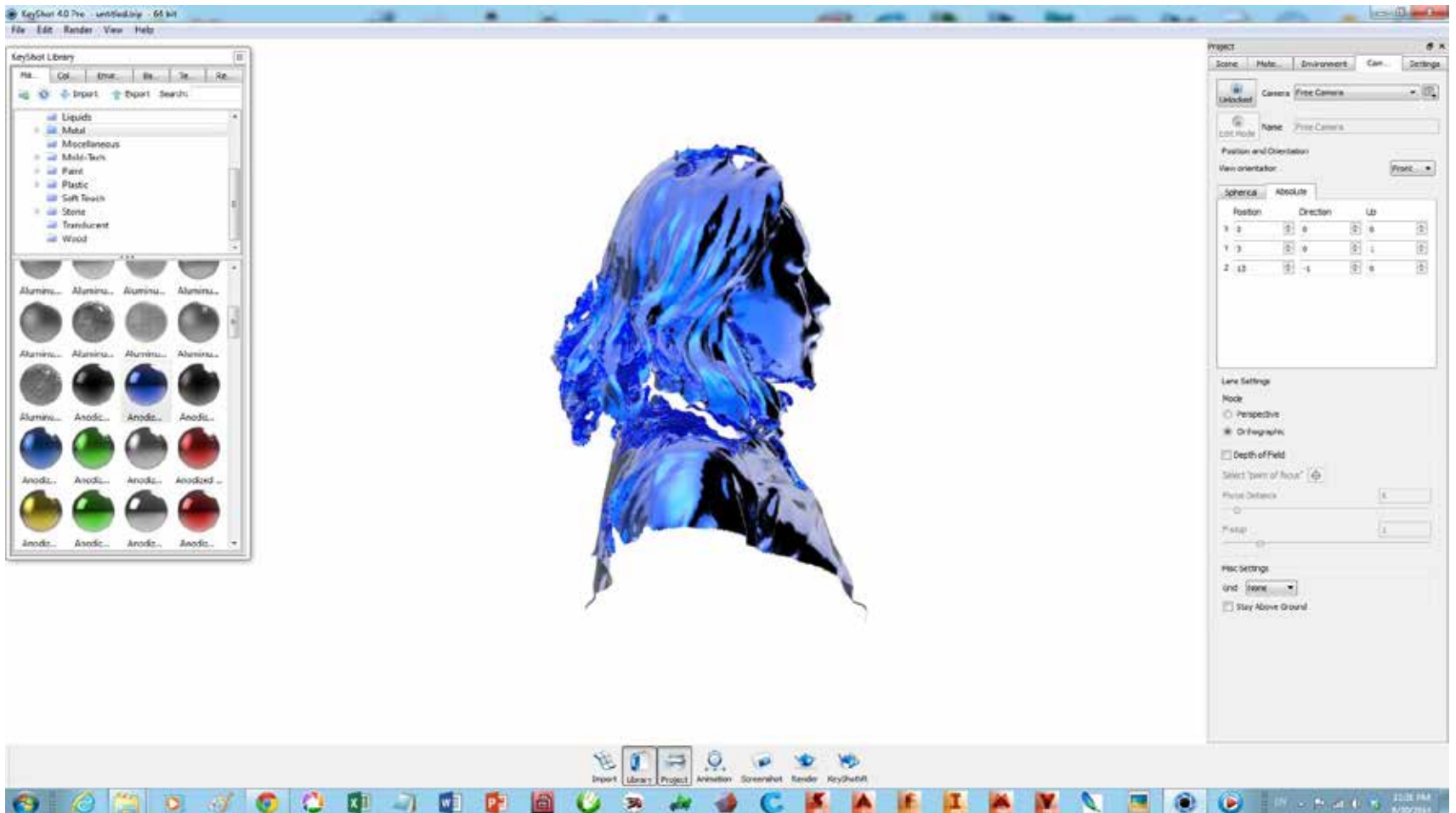
In testing this idea I decided to change the texture and material of the images on computer to instigate different visual outcomes. I felt the scanned images would work better as real objects which led to further experimentation using cast materials to simulate the digital images in tangible 3D form. Coloured liquid acrylic polymer was poured into containers to create thin translucent lattices. However, I did not pursue this method as the plastic material did not seem to carry the increasingly important relationship to the natural world that I found in other materials.



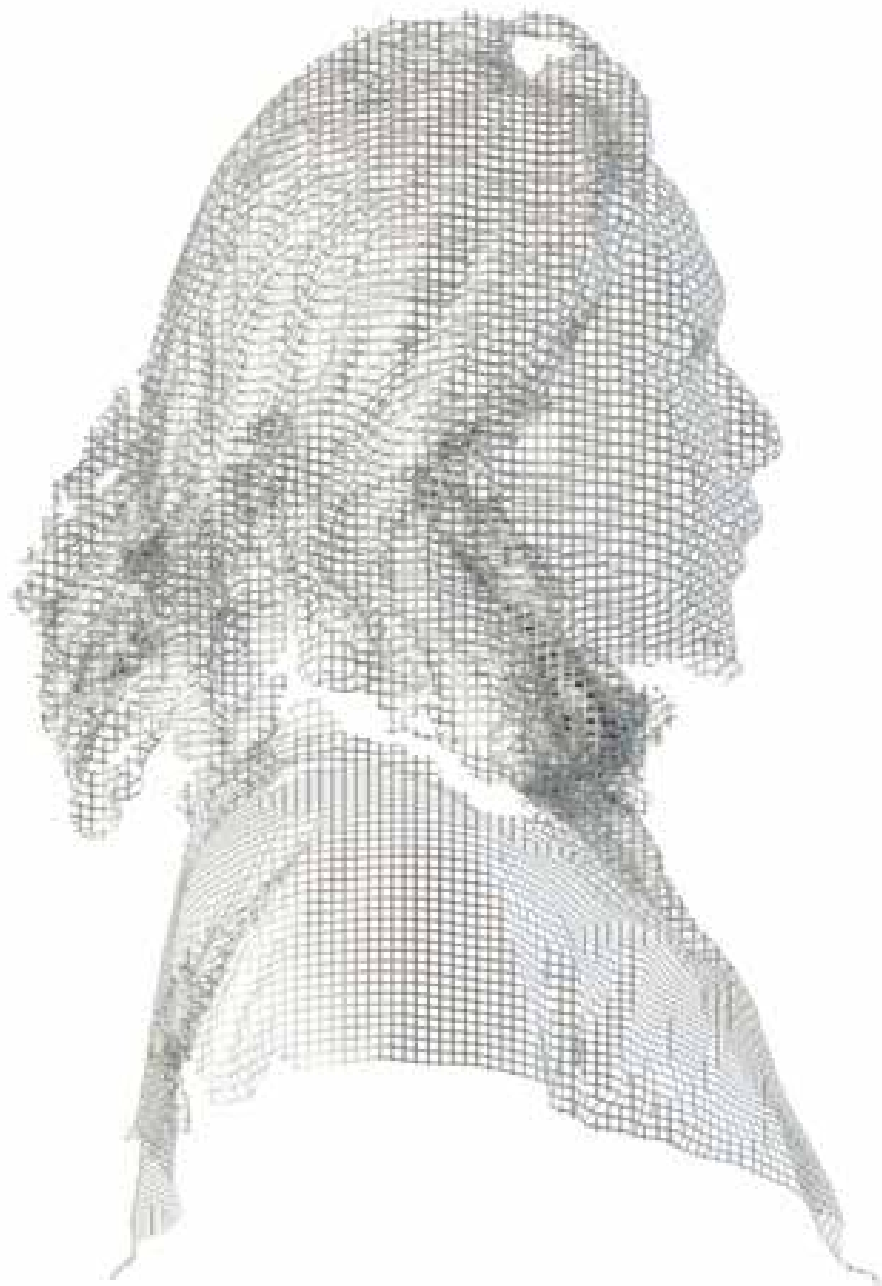
Sense 3D Scanner



3D Scanned digital images of self-portrait and objects



Editing scanned images with 3D rendering software











Coloured liquid acrylic polymer tests





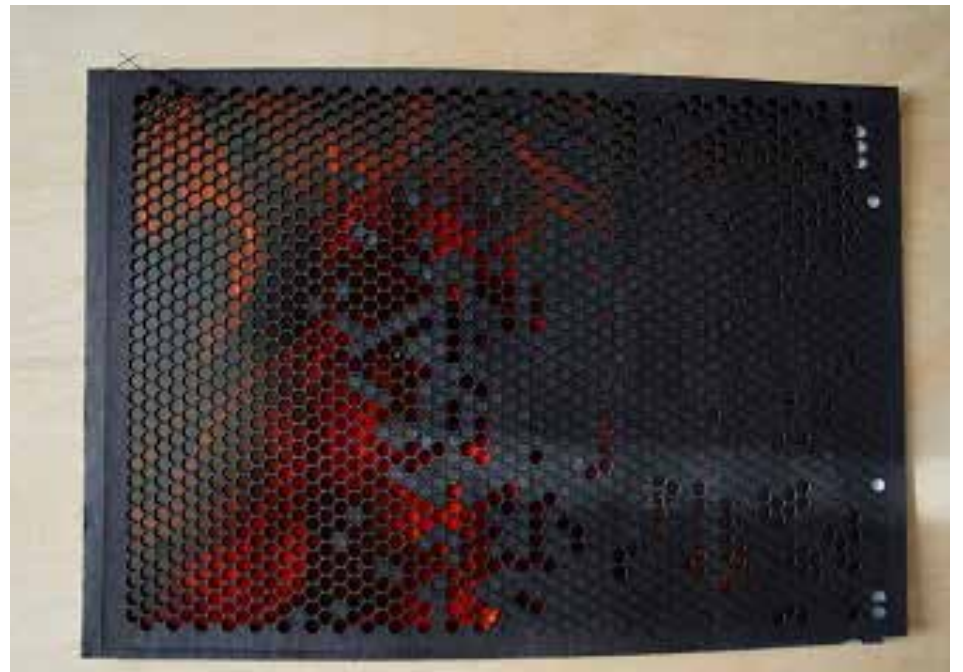
Experiment 6: Visual Information Distorted

On a rainy day I was travelling by bus and looking out of the window. The window was covered by an advertisement adhered to the exterior of the bus, effectively masking the window with a filter and partially obscuring the view.. Combined with the blurring rain the visual effect was interesting so I took an impromptu video of the view.



Still from *View through bus window*, 2014, video, 05:00

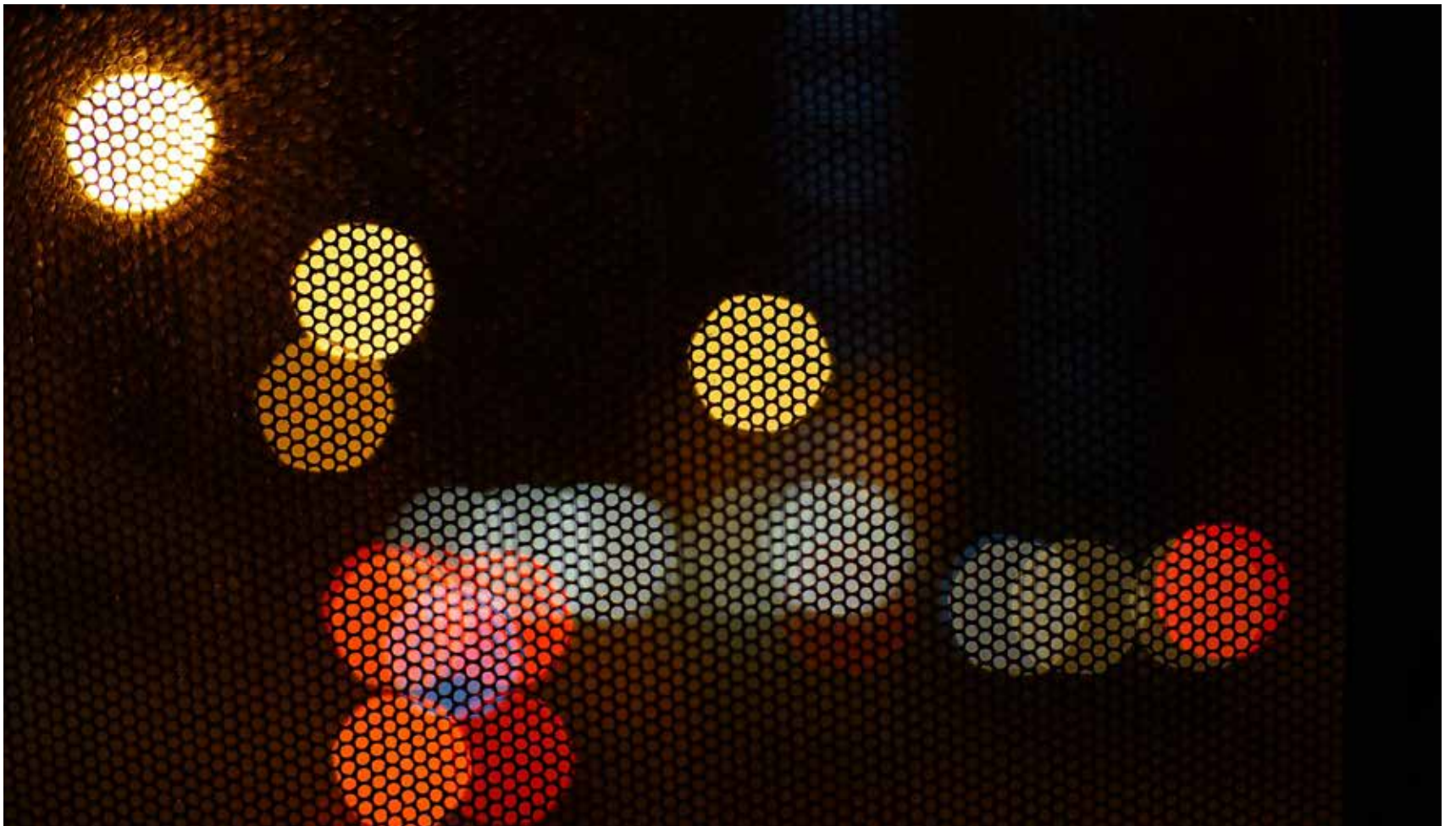
I then made my own filter based on the bus window advertisement layer and tested how I could create and record its distorting effects on the reception of visual information. I took a video of a TV news clip with the filter placed in front of the camera lens. The resulting work symbolizes the distortion in news information we receive from different media every day. I then further expanded on this concept by adding noise distortion to the video. This work was interesting and also engaged with ideas that are important to me, but at this stage I decided not to continue with it as it seemed to be taking my developing focus in a different direction. However, it did make me realise that audio could add another dimension to my work.



Filter based on bus window advertisement layer



Documentation of lens filter tests





Lens filter setup for video recoding



Distortion #1, 2014
video, 00:45



Distortion #2, 2014
video, 01:14



Distortion #3, 2014
video, 02:01



Ap Lei Chau Fishermen's Worship Ceremony

Experiment 7: Ritual Destruction/Rebirth through Burning

I visited Ap Lei Chau, an island in Hong Kong, to see the traditional Fishermen's Worship Ceremony. The finale of the ceremony is the ritual burning of a huge paper and bamboo effigy on a fishing boat at sea. I recorded the process in photographs and on video and while editing focused on the burning figure and its reflection in the water.

The effigy burning is symbolic of the end of the fishing season and renewal/preparation for the next. So it already carried content that I was interested in, as well as being part of a traditional way of life that is itself undergoing change and erosion. I slowed the speed and audio of the video of the burning event to enhance the sombre atmosphere and to allow the viewer to linger more contemplatively on the elemental act of destruction through fire. The man made ritual construction and destruction of the effigy act as metaphors for regeneration; fire was the medium used to activate the material change from wood and paper to ash. The burning process itself was interesting because the energy was made visible in the flames, the colours and the noise. This experience led to the next experiment where I tried to harness some of the effects of burning.



Still from *Burning over water*, 2014, video, 01:51

Experiment 8: Burning Charcoal

In the next test I experimented with creating and burning human shaped charcoal figures. The charcoal men were cast from a paste made of ground charcoal mixed with glue. They were oven dried whilst laid on individual cardboard supports. Again, like the previous coloured ice tests, I observed interesting residue images left on the cardboard. They had burnt along the sides and a charcoal mark of the figure's shape was left in the middle. These marks were also records of the burning process and can be seen to be representative of time as it passes.

The figurines were then used in exactly the same way as charcoal briquettes: they were used to make a fire and burnt. I took video and some photos of this happening. In these video and photographic recordings I intended to represent the concepts of creation and destruction. During the burning process, the charcoal figures glowed red and I found that to be the most interesting part. What I had noticed in the burning effigy (and tried to enhance in the slowed down video of that event) was extended and intensified in the video of the charcoal burning. Over an extended period of time, as charcoal slowly burns down to ash and releases its energy, the release and dissipation of that energy is made visible in the intensity of the glowing red colour and its eventual diminishing to a dull lifeless grey. The burning charcoal men came to symbolise life itself, its vitality and eventual decline.

It also made me realise that the charcoal itself captures and can be a metaphor for an in between state, a state of flux. Charcoal is made through burning, but is burnt without oxygen so it retains the form of the original wood object that was burnt and it isn't reduced to ash. Charcoal is an interim medium, between solid strong wood and delicate almost disappeared ash.



Documentation of charcoal figure casting and drying process











Experiment 9: Deconstruction - Altered Photographs

I took photographs of my urban surroundings and then used a range of processes to alter and extend the images, including direct painting, screen printing, drawing, washing out the image using solvents, and over-painting using acrylic followed by an oven-drying process.

Through these processes the original images were altered almost to the point of elimination and new images were created. This process acted as an allegory to the city around me where many buildings and communities are destroyed and then new constructions arise and with them altered communities.



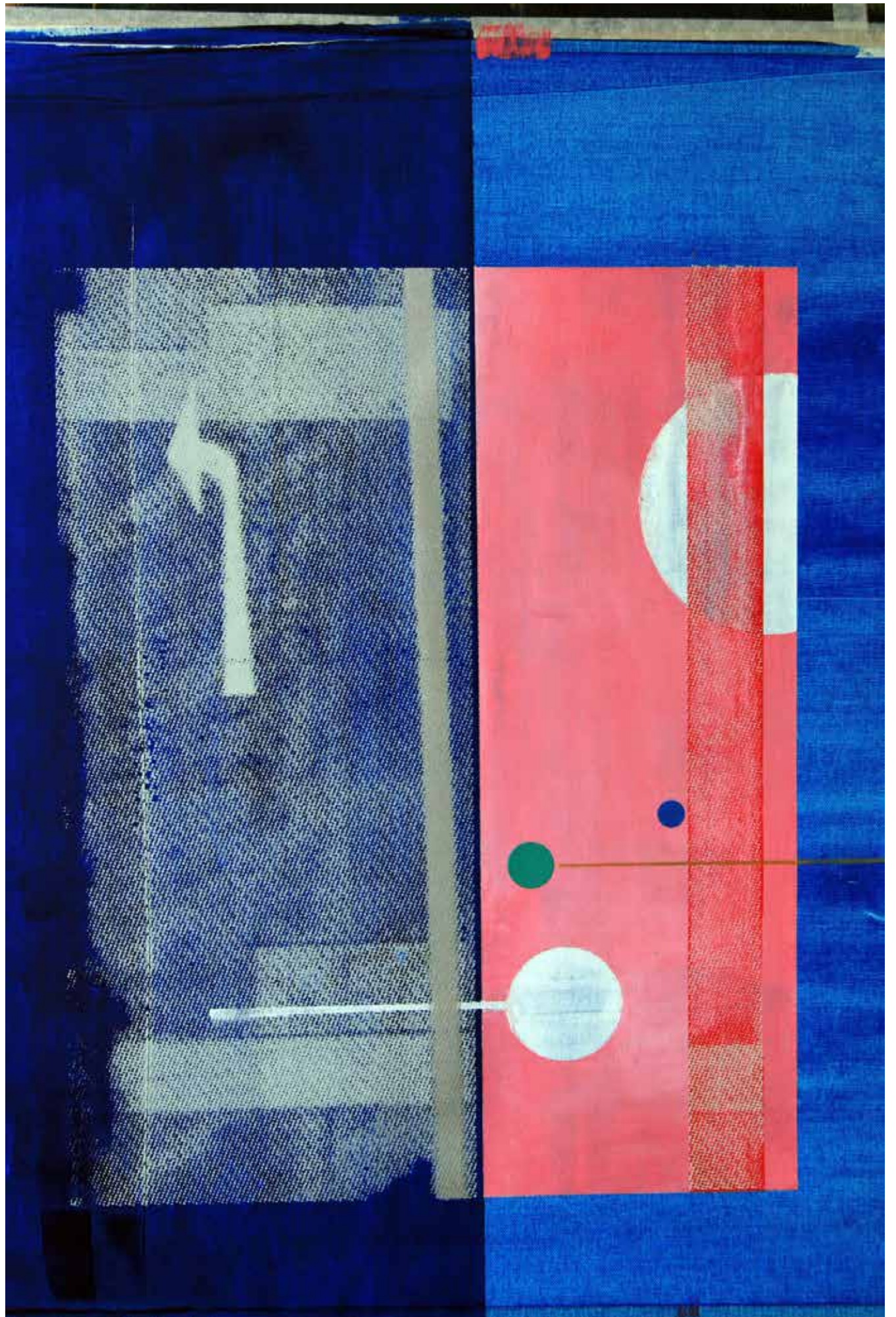


Untitled 1-6, 2014
mixed media on photograph
21 x 30cm (each)





City #1, 2014
acrylic on canvas
60 x 40cm



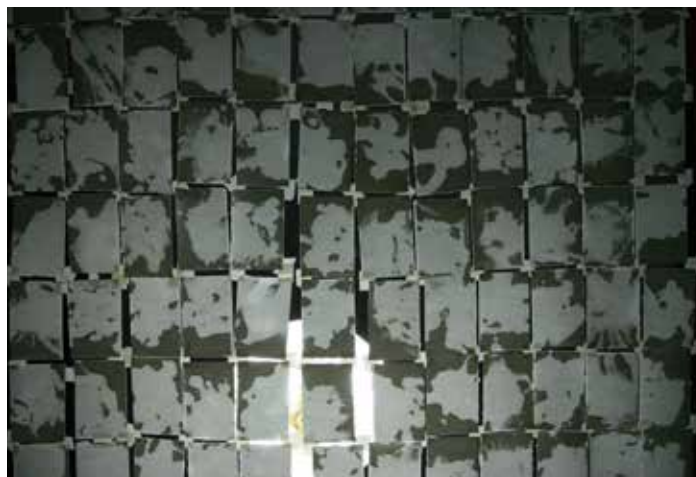
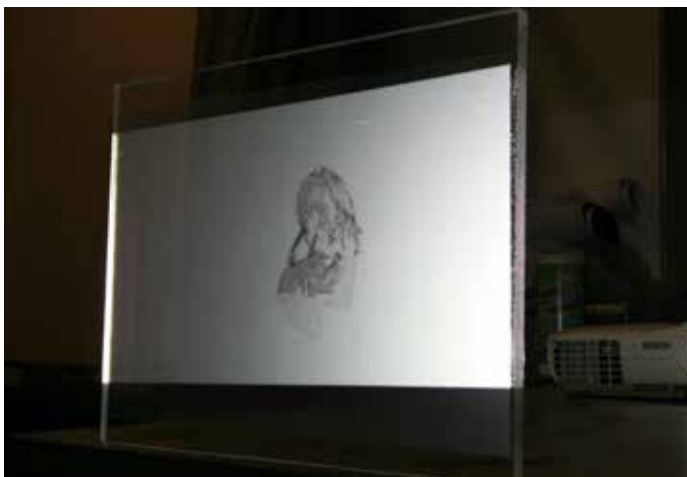
City #2, 2014
acrylic on canvas
60 x 40cm

Experiment 10: Projection - Image and Screen as Artwork

I experimented with displaying images by projection using various materials as a projection screen. First, I applied small pieces of paper with wax and combined them to create a screen. I then projected the video of the burning effigy from the fishermen's ceremony in Ap Lei Chau. The work was intended to show the contrast between the fire in the video (representing destruction) and the wax screen (representing creation), but was unable to do so clearly. However, even in this it may have been successful as it involved the accidental and unintended as part of the end artwork and thus indicated how change can be unpredictable.

I experimented with projecting the same video on a transparent screen created by sticking a back projection film to an acrylic board. I also tried projection of images of objects and portraits on canvas screens.

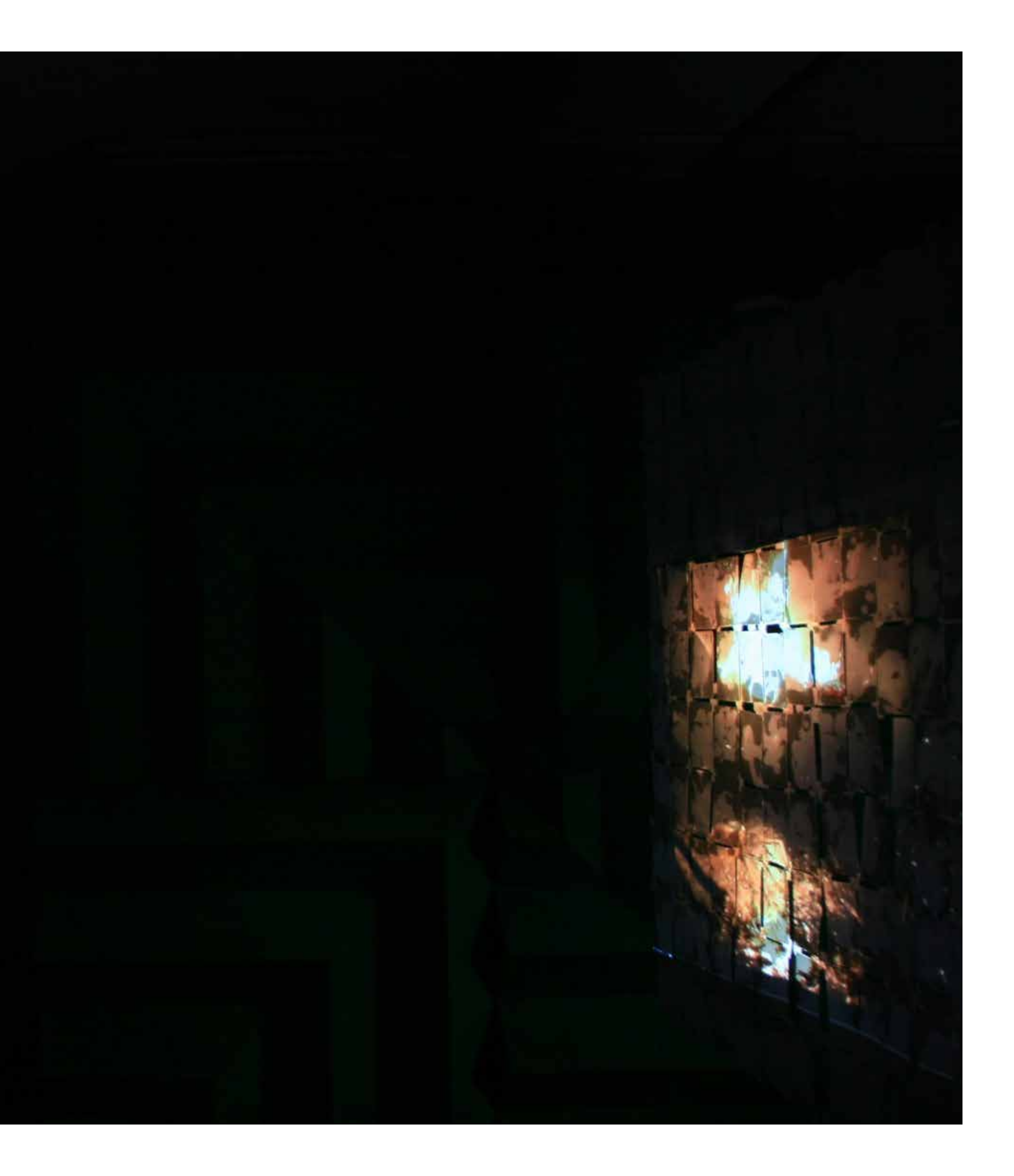
Finally I tried the least conventional of all the screens tested, a block of ice. I projected the video of the burning charcoal men onto the ice and found an interesting commonality between the fire on the screen and the melting of the ice, both independently showing the concept of disappearance and decay over time, but linked as one artwork. As the ice melted the images also became more transparent and representative of unpredictable changing time. They may be seen as metaphors for memory.



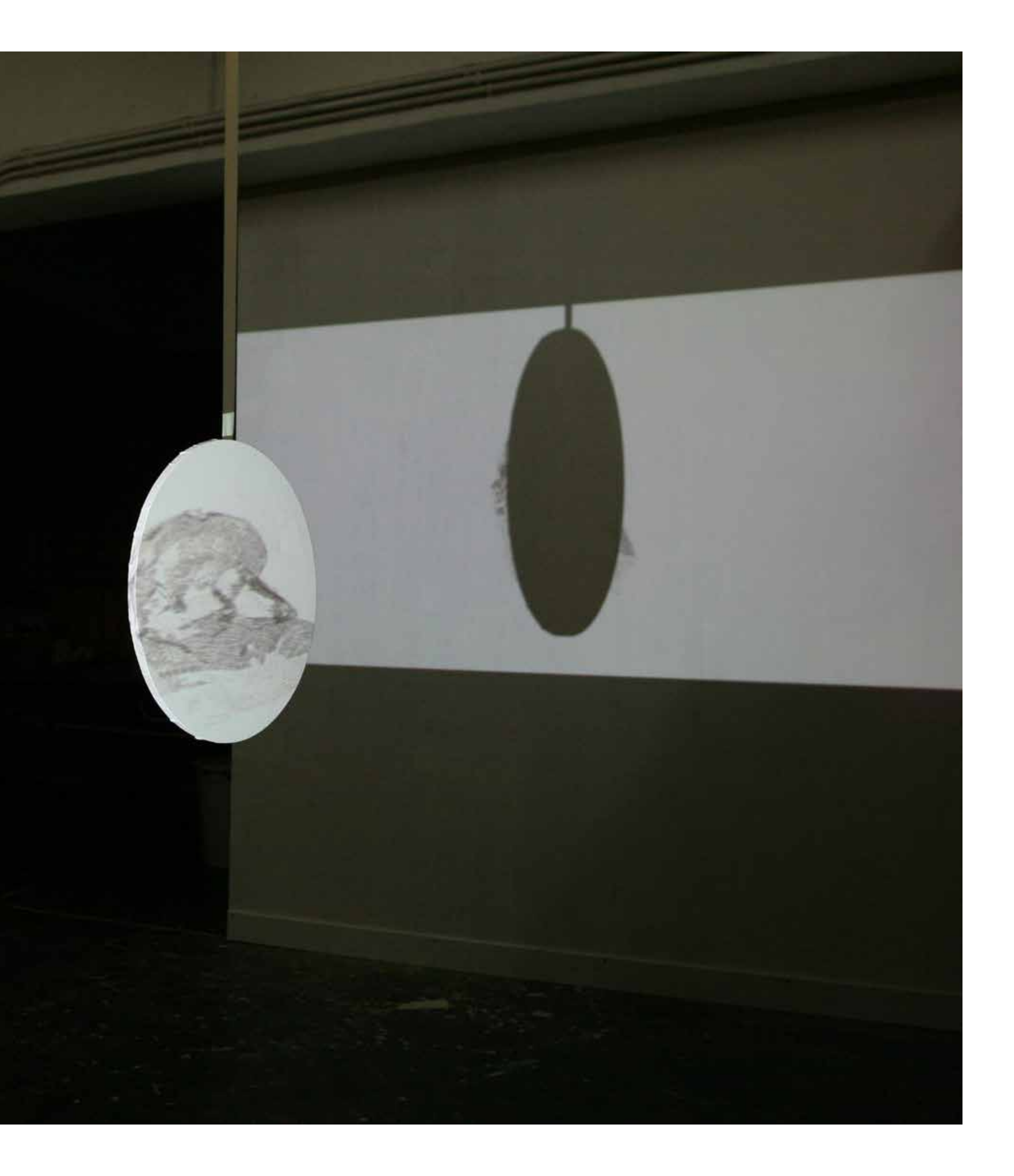
Documentation of projection tests (p.84-93)



















COLD, WAX

DRAW

ICE

TIME

PH

FIRE /

DE

W

CYCLE /

LIFE

PROCESS

MATERIAL

ING SPACE

E CHARCOAL

PHOTOGRAPHY Projection

PAPER FOIL

STRUCTION

WATER PAINTING

E / TOUCH

VIDEO DURATION

Section 3 - Outcomes

“Idea is inseparable from experience,”⁶ and when I reviewed my experiments from the first year, I realised that what I felt was successful were the aspects that reflected the life changes I have experienced. What I wish to explore and share in my artworks is how certain aspects of changing process and outcome can convey different meanings. In the second year, I took key elements from the experiments that were best carrying my intended content and developed them further towards a body of artwork that would have a coherence and an ability to convey ideas of destruction, decay, transformation, uncertainty, the passage of time, construction, destruction, ruin, regeneration and hope.

⁶ Gabriel Orozco, Ann Temkin and Briony Fer, *Gabriel Orozco* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009), 91.



Endless, 2015
video installation
dimensions variable



Endless

This artwork developed through several versions using projection to show that the world we live in changes continuously, but on closer inspection, these changes actually repeat themselves - just like our history. "Isn't life a series of images that change as they repeat themselves?"⁷

A 3D scanned image of my head and shoulders was animated and projected onto an oval shaped screen with a mirror on one side and a matt white finish on the other side, creating a variety of effects as the oval revolved: a direct visual image on the white finish; a reflected image on the surroundings; and a direct image on the wall. The viewers could also see their own reflections in the mirror, enabling them to become part of the work. The work was set up at the corner of a corridor, and I used charcoal to draw lines onto the corridor wall to extend the projection and create another perspective.

The 3D scanning technology represents present time and contemporary innovative processes, while the image itself is a self portrait and the oval shaped screen references traditional forms of self-portraiture. On the mirror side, viewers are able to engage with the work through their glimpsed reflection of themselves. The revolving screen and the projected animation create a scene that is never still, that changes every moment and indicates the ceaseless passage of time. The viewer will, after a short while, see that the various effects actually repeat in cycles, just like the history of human beings. The constant change here is in fact stasis.

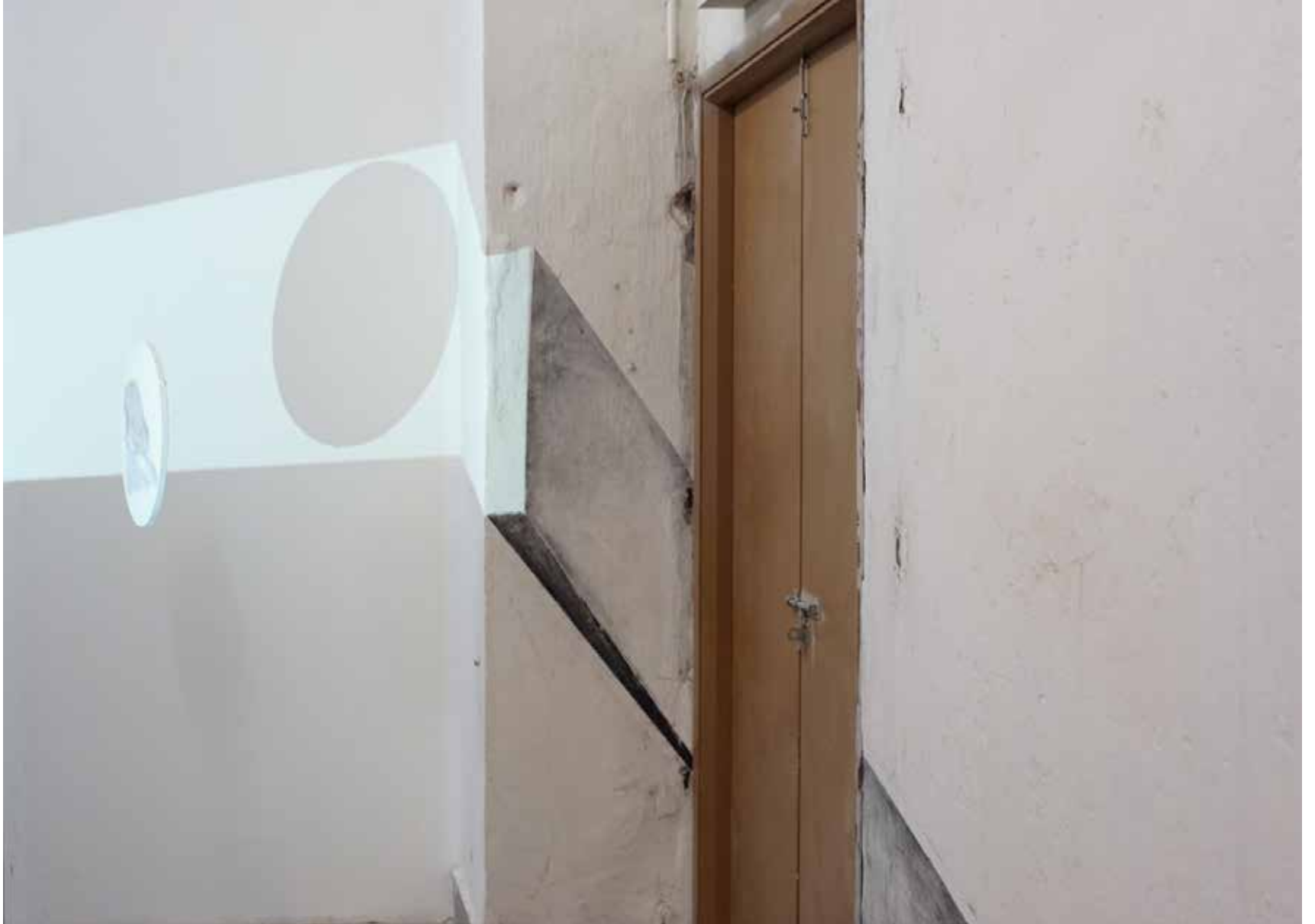
7 Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*, (Continuum, 2001), 116.



Still from 3D animation of *Endless*



Installation view of *Endless* - 1st version



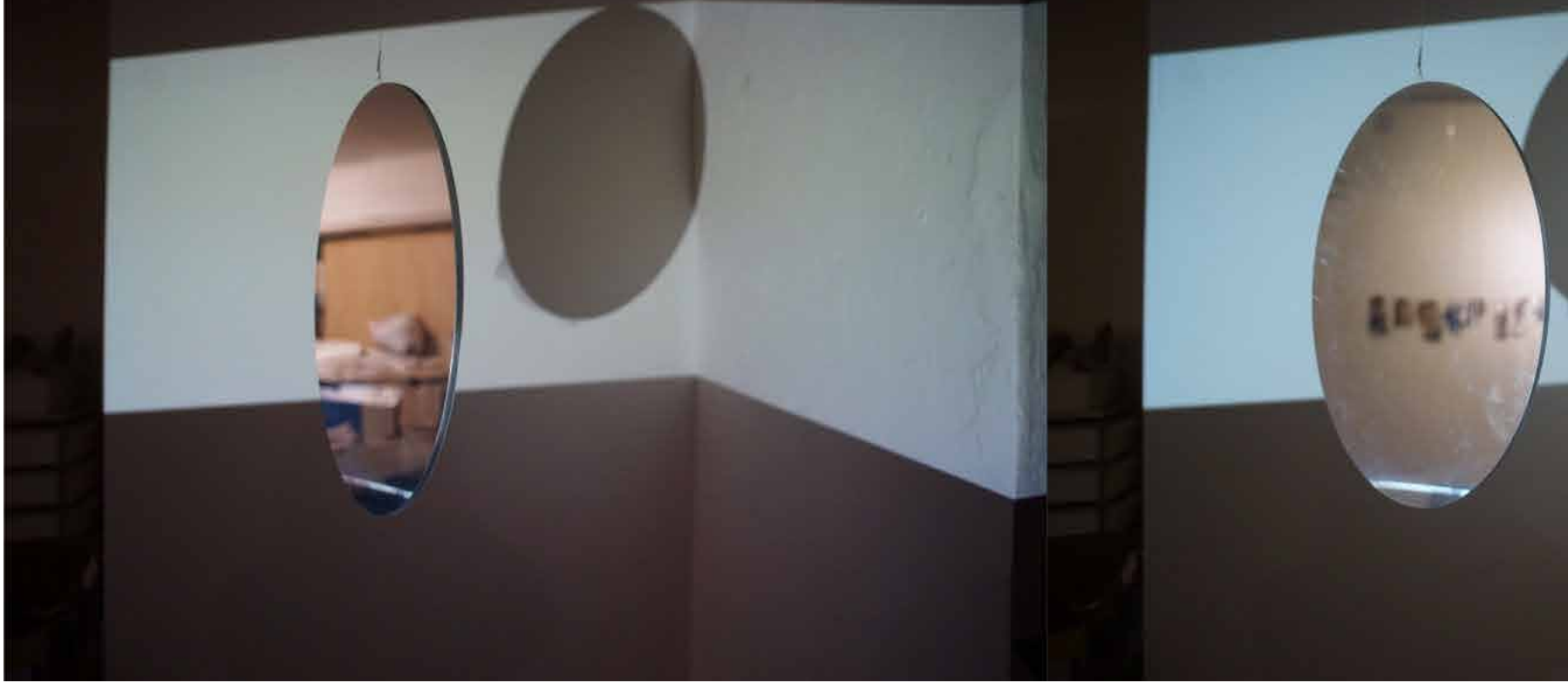
Installation views of *Endless* - 2nd version



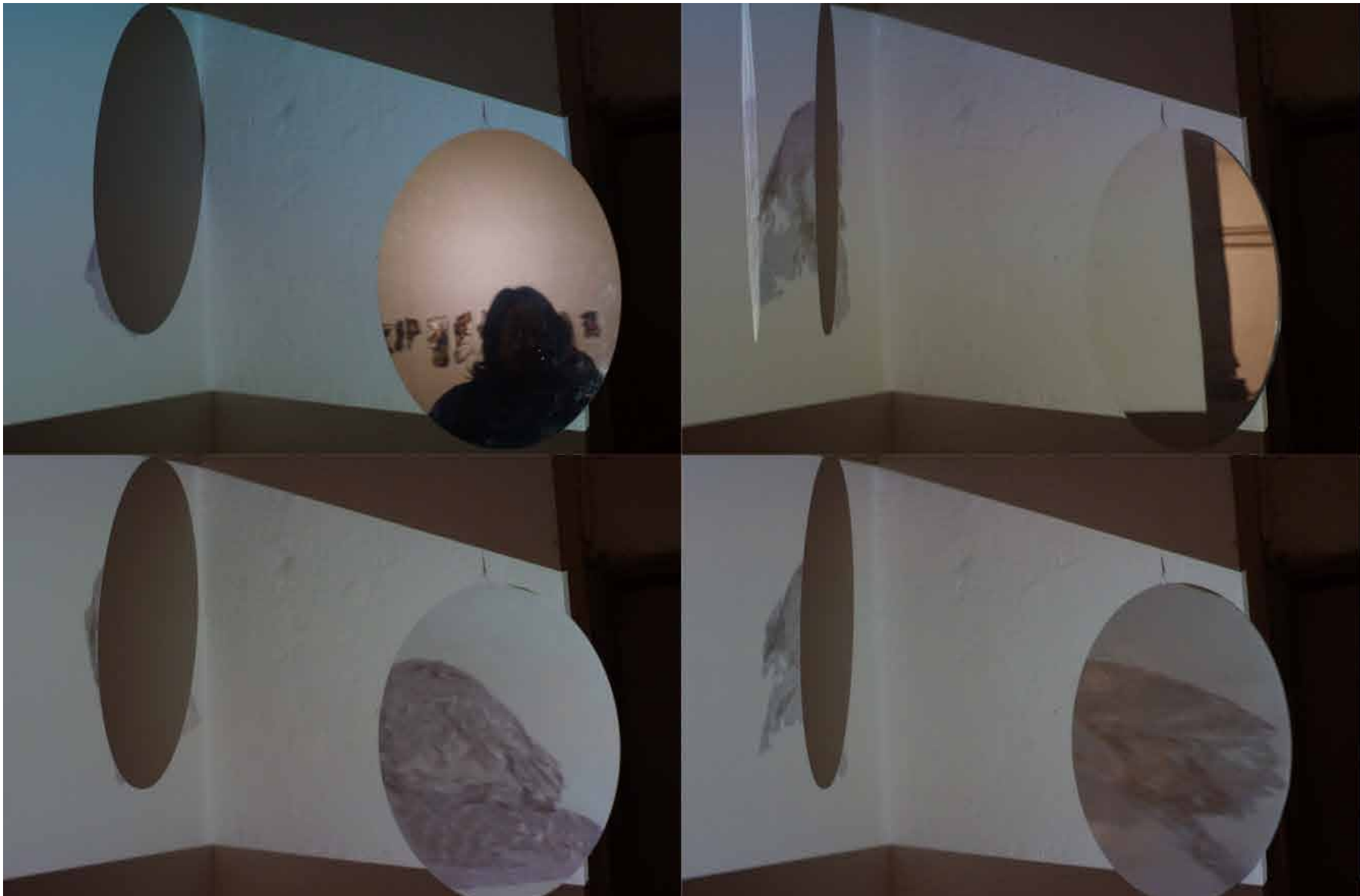


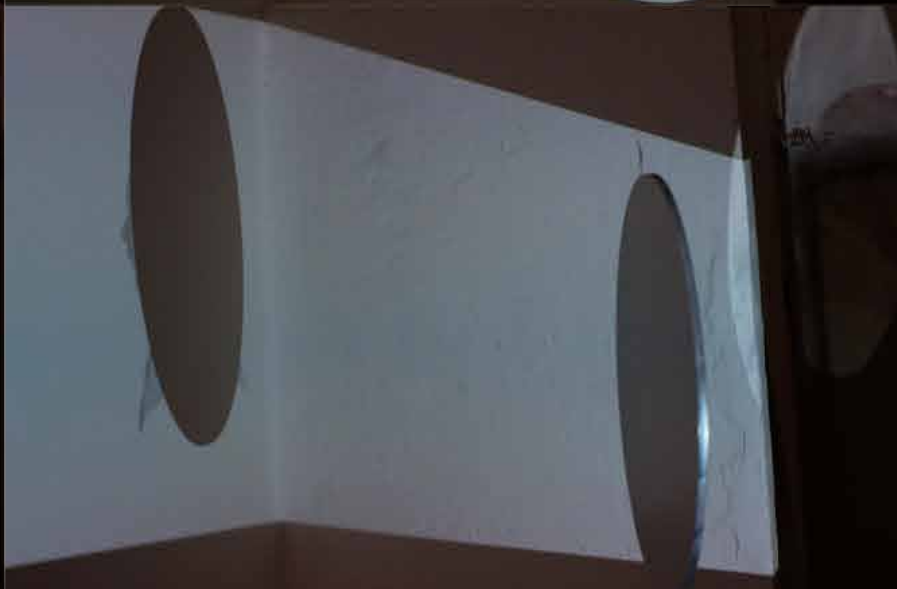
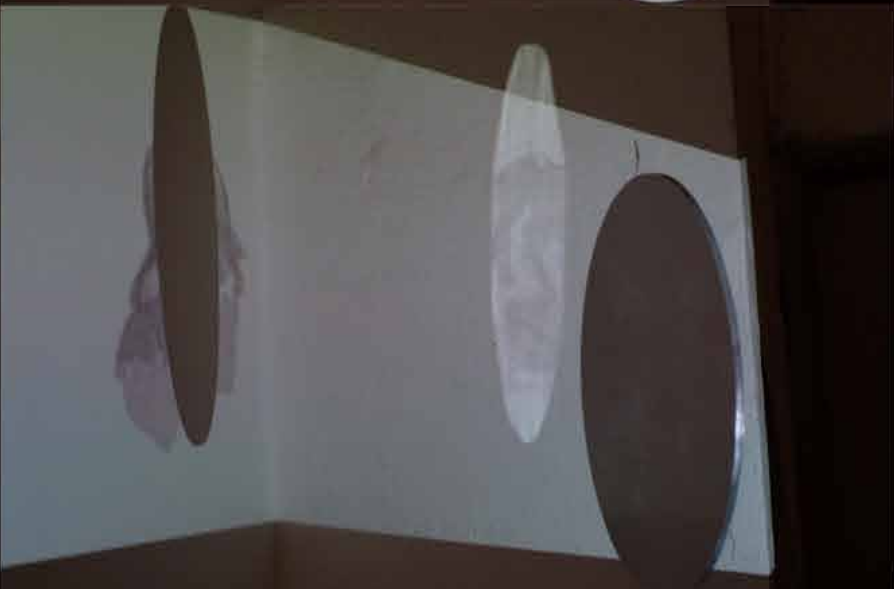
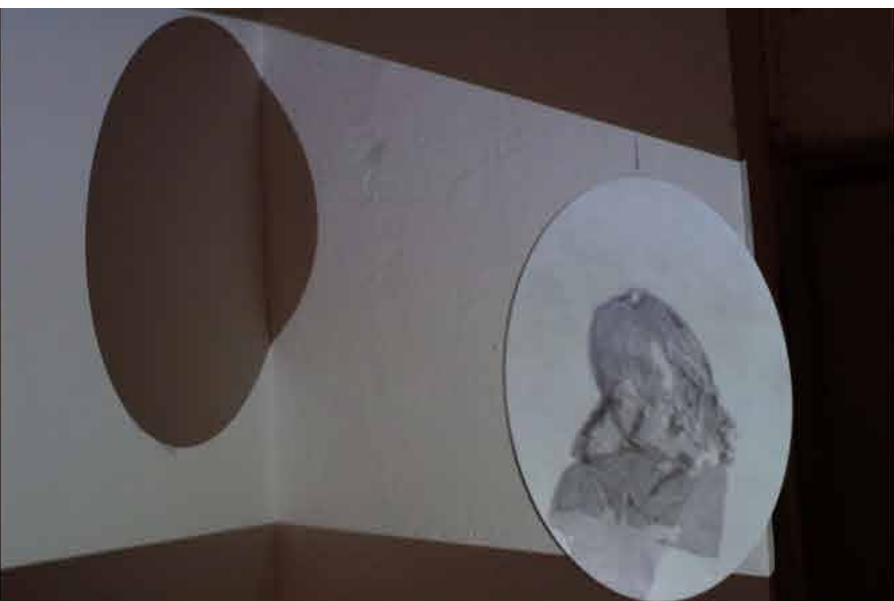
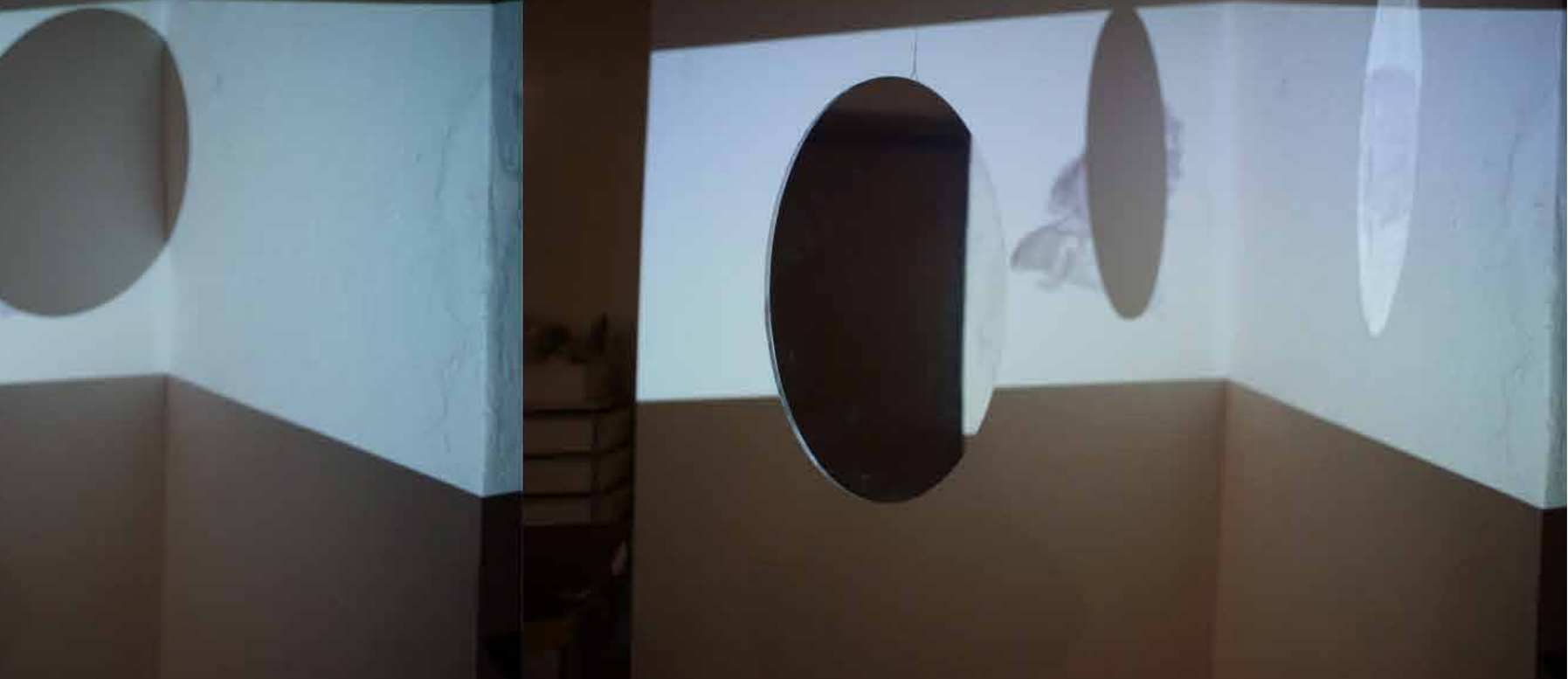
Details of *Endless* - 2nd version





Installation views of *Endless* - 3rd version





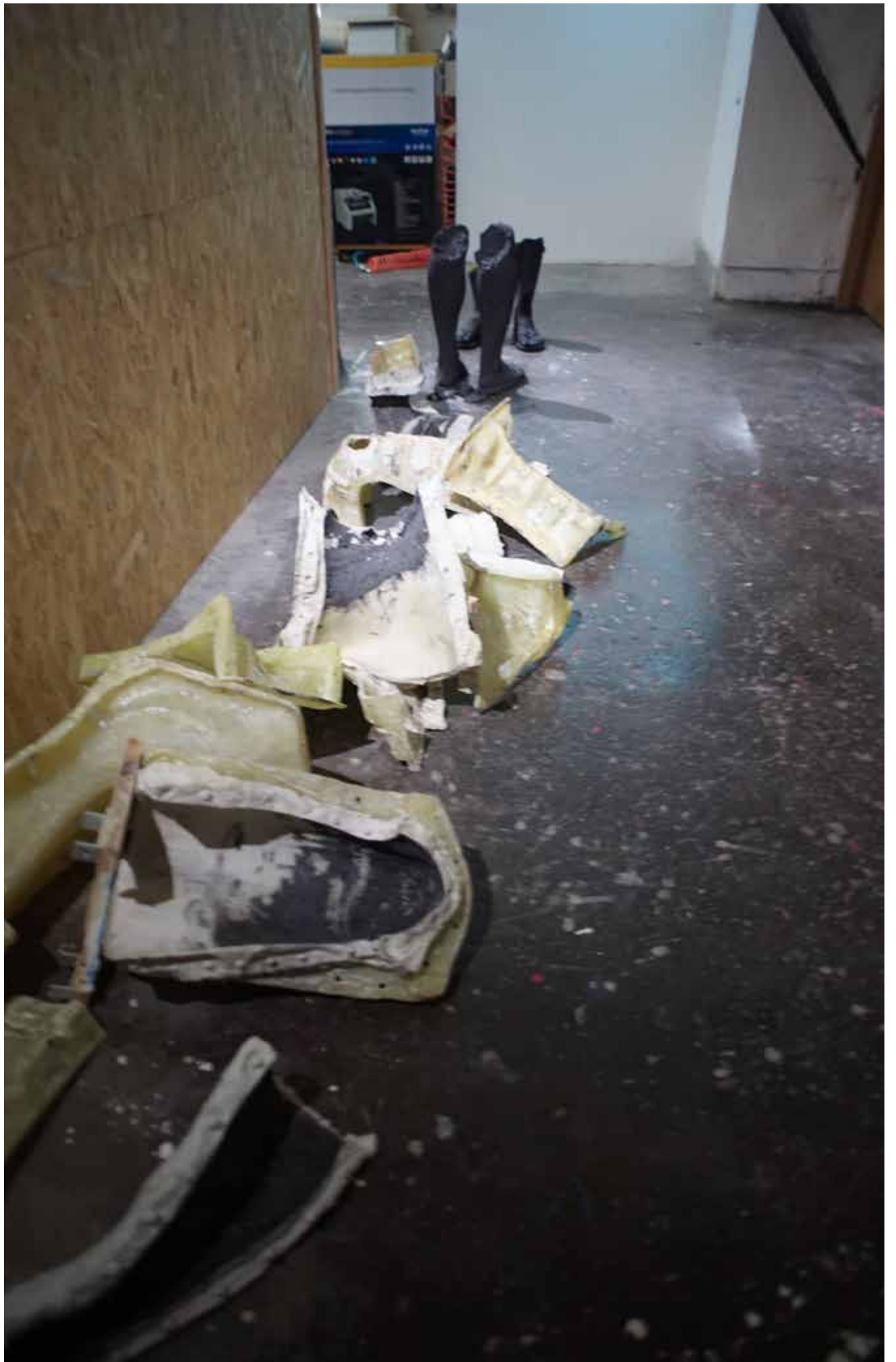
Turning Point

The world we are living in keeps expanding - be it population, technology, economy, society. Will there be a point when all these aspects are expanded to saturation and start to collapse? Are we heading to a tipping point after which there will be only ruins? I wanted to make an artwork that would invite the viewer to reflect on this question.

In this artwork, I cast charcoal using the charcoal paste previously used to make the charcoal men. This time I made moulds from my own feet and lower legs. Charcoal was chosen as the material for this work since it contains carbon, an element which is also an important constituent of human beings, in fact of all organic life forms. The dark colour also gave the feet a sombre look. I deliberately cast them with contemporary yet timeless looking simple footwear to ensure they were seen as current whilst still hinting at classical statuary, a reference to a civilisation whose time has passed. Unintentionally, the casts had a look reminiscent of Pompeian fossilised human remains. Although this was unintentional it was another of those "accidents" that feed into the content.

The work includes the silicon moulds used in the casting. These were left in a trail leading up to one pair of charcoal feet which were stepping out from the moulds, the detritus of making. Another pair of charcoal feet was placed facing them.

The work suggests that the steps our generation are taking are often consumer led. The viewer is invited to reflect on whether these are steps/developments taken actively and independently or are we following blindly, the human equivalent of mass production. The pair of feet pointing in the opposite direction pose the question: is it time to turn against the tide?



Turning Point, 2015
installation
charcoal, moss, silicon moulds
dimensions variable



Documentation of making *Turning point*





Installation views of *Turning point*



Detail of *Turning point*





Before Collapse

I had already identified charcoal as a medium that contains the idea of flux, an interim physical state part way in its transition from solid wood to ash and obliteration. In both the earlier experiments and *Turning Point*, I had used ground up pre-existing charcoal in moulds. For this artwork I went back to the wood source and turned it into charcoal. I used wooden furniture and household objects so that the charcoal objects kept their original form rather than a cast one.

I built my own burning chamber out of tin and devised a process to effectively burn the wood without oxygen: the wood objects were wrapped tightly with aluminum foil, packed into the chamber, which was then sealed before high heat was applied from a continually stoked fire beneath the chamber. As the firing process was experimental, until the furniture was unwrapped I couldn't be sure how the process would work out. Sometimes fire got through and the wood was burnt away entirely leaving only ash, at other times the wood cracked and split or the charcoal pieces were fragmented rather than whole. As I had learned, these "accidents" became important and fed into both the unpredictable quality of the material itself and the metaphor of unpredictability of human life changes.

"Uncertainty and instability characterize these times. Nonetheless, success and progress endure as a condition to strive for, even though there is little faith in either. All individuals and societies know failure better than they might care to admit - failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed humanity, failed failures."⁸

In one configuration, the remnants of two charcoal chairs and a table were reassembled in a typical everyday dining configuration. A table and two chairs has a human scale, it is suggestive of the humanness of sharing a meal at a table, of family, of human connection, but in this transformed, fragile state, the process of structural failure now speaks of melancholy, absence and loss. I continued to experiment with what can actually be turned into charcoal. As well as furniture, there are objects ranging from wooden utensils, pencils, boxes, magazines and hand mirrors. In their new blackened delicacy they are all almost at the point of collapse and contain a sense of time passing, of the ruination that awaits both the individual and all human civilisations. They have become artefacts from a past that is now.

8 Lisa Le Feuvre, *Failure: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Lisa Le Feuvre (Whitechapel Gallery, London and The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2010), 12.





Documentation of charcoal object making process (p.118-131)





























Installation view of *Before Collapse* - 1st version





















Before Collapse - 2nd version, 2015
installation
charcoal objects
dimensions variable

Details of objects in *Before Collapse* - 2nd version (p.142-149)

















Ice Embers

Human beings try to change nature but in geological time spans our influence is minimal. This artwork developed the projection experiments to express ideas about changes happening in isolation, real but not necessarily dependent or causal to other changes. I combined the video of the charcoal men burning down to ash and an ice block slowly melting. The video is projected onto the ice so that the viewer sees the optical illusion of the burning and the melting ice happening at the same time, but the two do not have a causal relationship. The ice melts in its natural course and not because of the burning image.

There are several version of this artwork, it inevitably develops and changes, the ice screen is always different and unique each time it is made and melts. In one version the ice block was set up on a rooftop at night. In the hours it took for the ice to melt, the flickering colours of the projected fire on the ice surface created a dialogue with the lights from the surrounding windows. The ice block itself resembled a semi translucent windowpane, half obscuring the image.

In another version, the ice melted into water but rather than simply be left to evaporate naturally, the melt water was first collected in a shallow container, then allowed to drain slowly through onto a heated metal plate. This added the further process of the water turning to steam and the sonic addition of the water hitting the metal and fizzing. The natural process is speeded up by this intervention, the action is reinforced through sound, but not essentially changed. In this artwork I want to reference the idea that we may have the illusion that we can change nature but in fact our influence is limited. At the end of day, nature still goes by its own laws, we are part of it, not in control of it.

Ice Embers, 2014
video installation
dimensions variable
(1st version shown in *Burning* exhibition,
Wan Chai, Hong Kong, 2014)



Still from video projection in *Ice Embers*





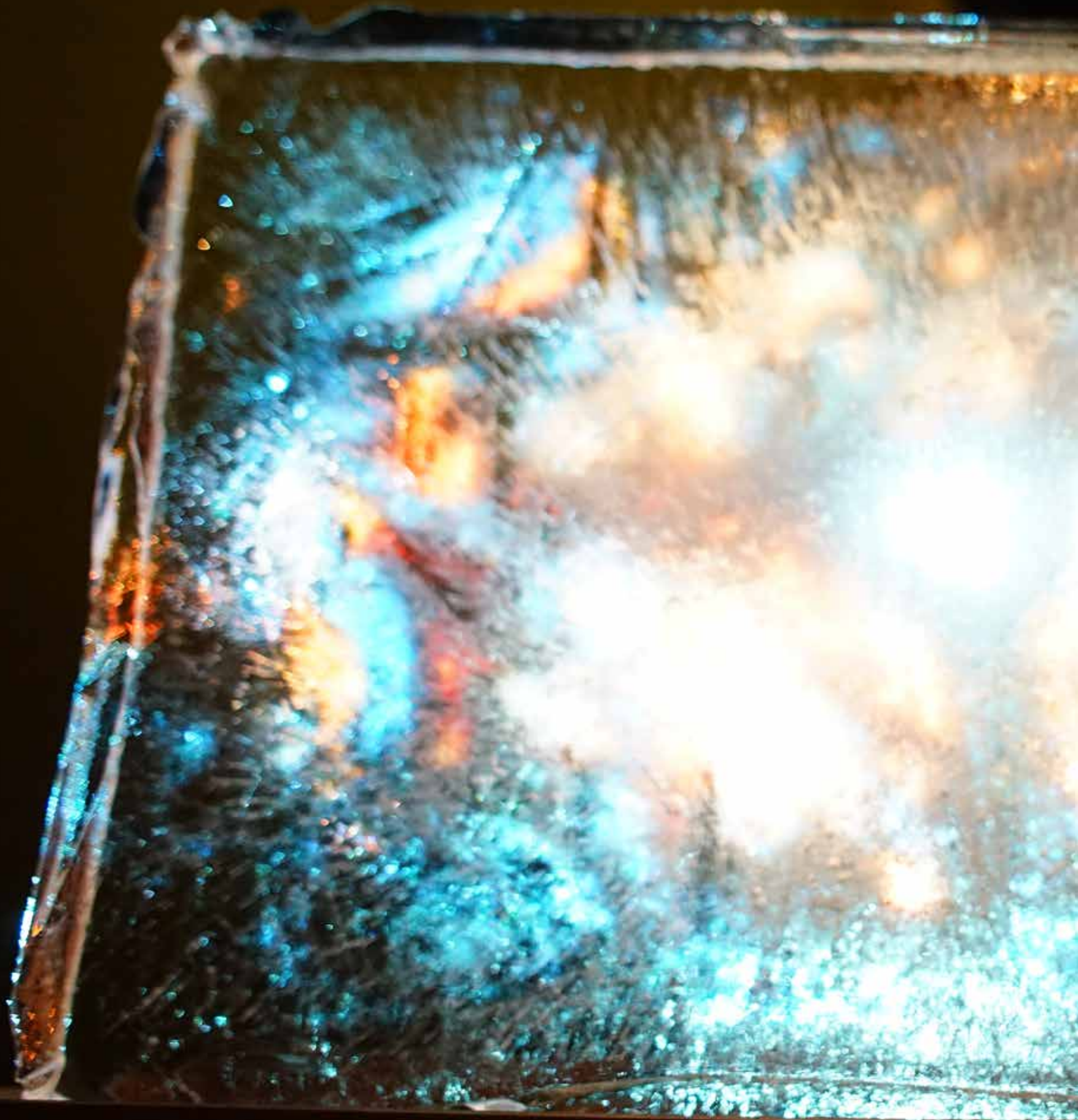
Still from video projection in *Ice Embers*



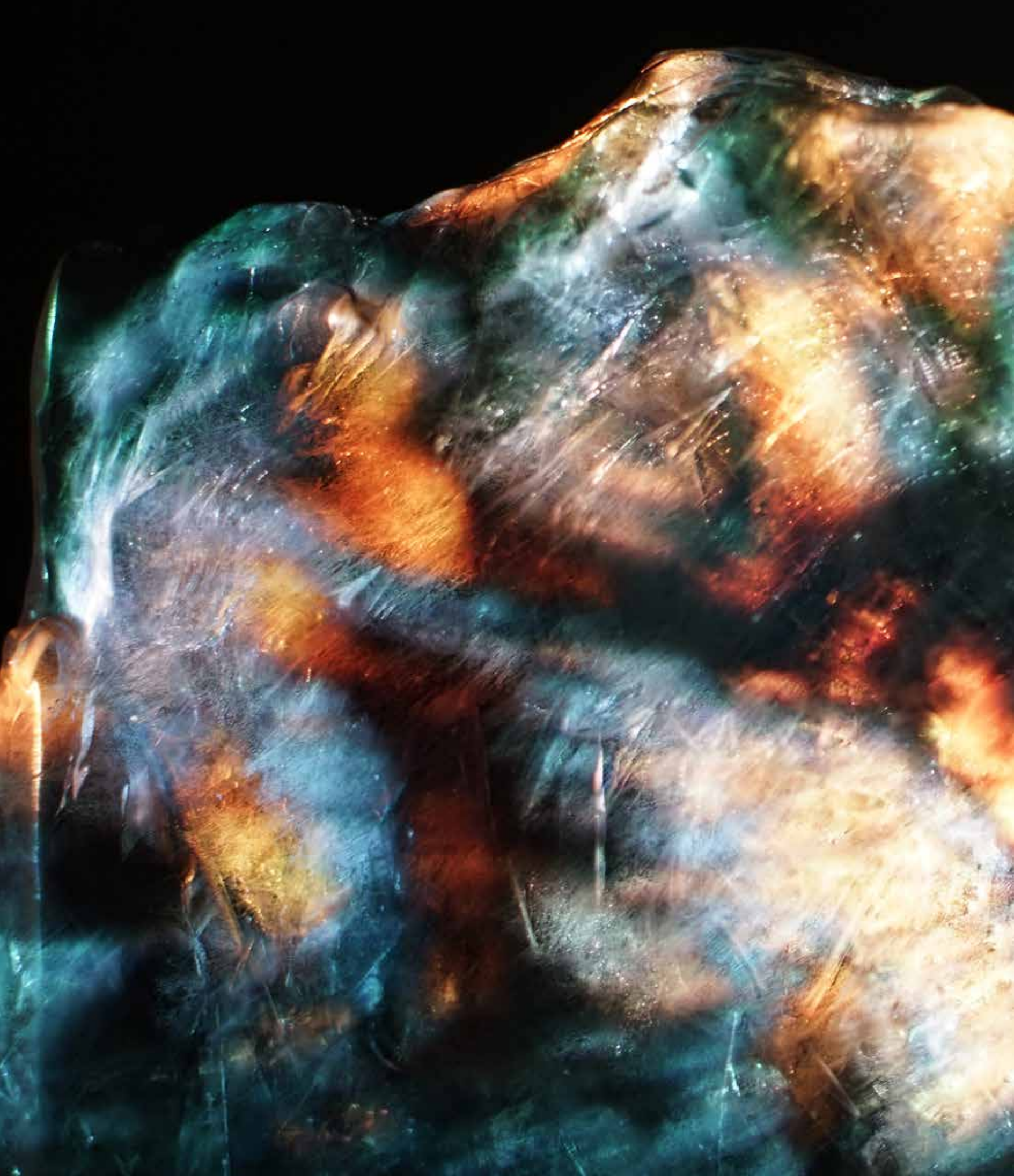


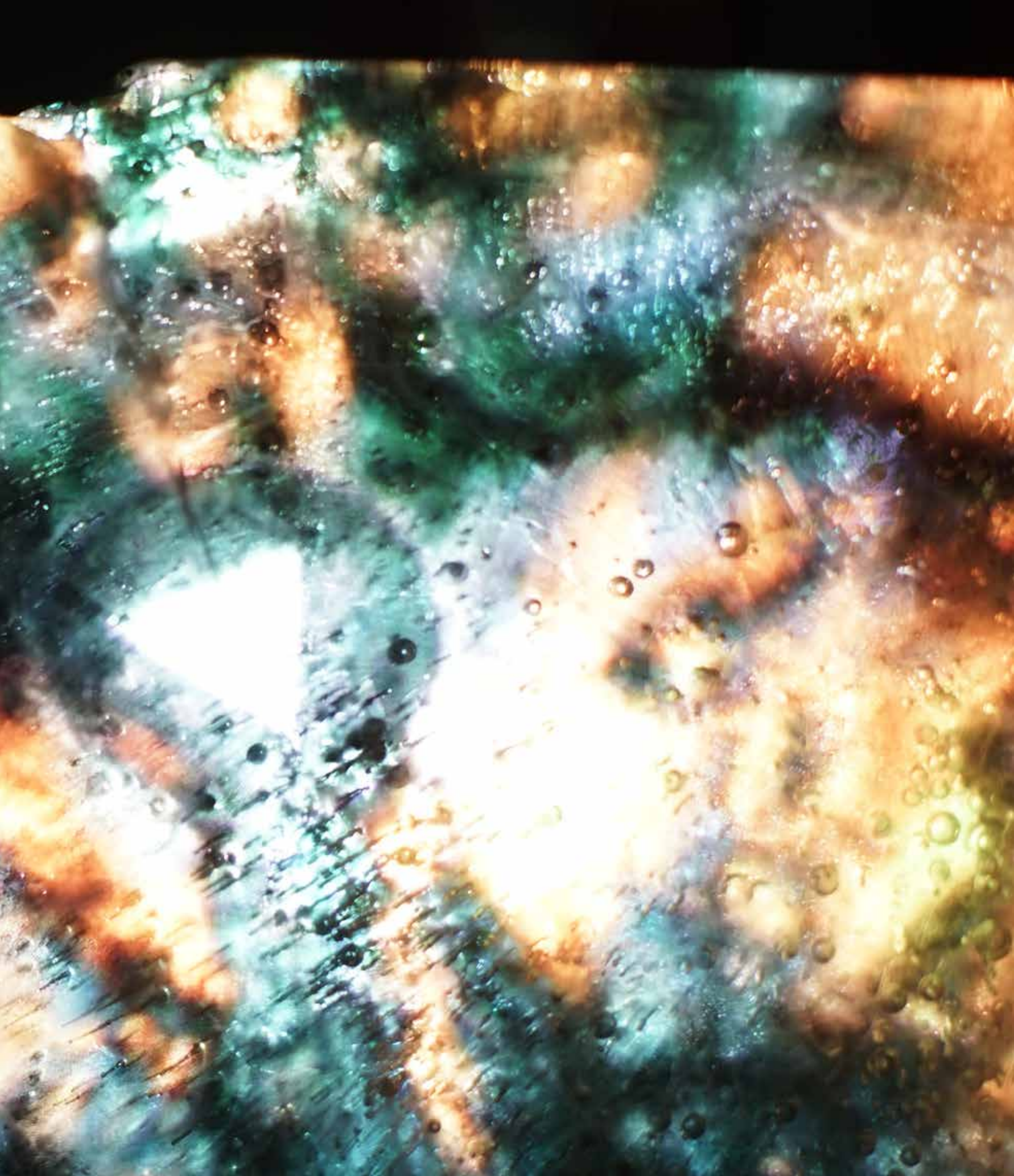










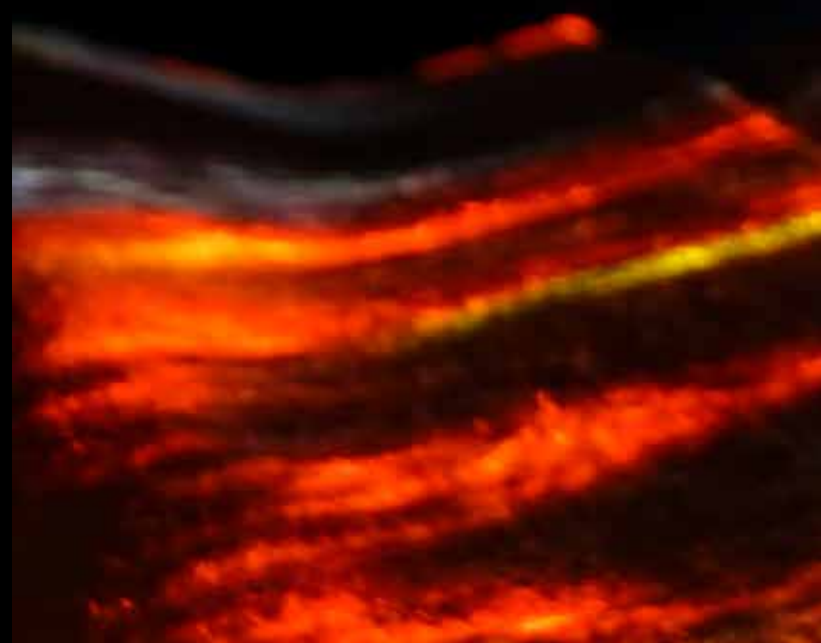














Installation view of *Ice Embers* after the ice screen melted





Time Drift

"Time, like mind, is not knowable as such. We know time only indirectly by what happens in it, by observing change and permanence, by marking the succession of events among stable settings, and by noting the contrast of varying rates of change."⁹

The material used in this artwork was an unintended by-product of the charcoal making process. Aluminium foil was used to wrap the wood as a simple solution to creating an oxygen free environment. Foil was used simply because it was readily available and could survive the burning process. During the unwrapping, I discovered that the paint or varnish on the furniture had left their mark on the foil. The destruction transformed the coatings and left them as residues burnt into the surface of the foil. Here, by staying open to the accident, process had given me traces of time in visual form. The colours were not just browns and blacks from burning, but iridescent greens, blues and purples. The transformation had produced its own abstract images and forms.

The foil was delicate and came off the furniture in fragile pieces. It was another transformation from the shiny, straight-sided machine manufactured rolls to delicate organic shapes, it seemed as if the metal was returning to a more natural state despite human interventions either in its manufacture or the burning process.

As with the ice screens, the foil has been reconfigured in several versions. In a first display they were assembled and hung together on a wall to make one large piece. In the wall installation, each piece was loosely fixed and the edges could flutter in any draught or when people walked past. As more burnt foil has become available, the artwork has grown and developed. In later versions, the pieces are installed to hang freely from the ceiling so the artwork is three-dimensional and the individual pieces can move in any air current.

I wanted the viewer to be able to not just look at this piece but to have an effect on it. The traces on the foil invite the viewer to inspect them closely and see the traces of time. The viewer's movement will be enough to cause some gentle movement in the installation, perhaps just a flutter, so it will not be static. Time passing will be made visible in another subtle way.

9 George Kubler, "The Shape of Time," in *Time: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Amelia Groom, (Whitechapel Gallery, London and The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2013) 29.



Installation view of
Time Drift - 1st version



Burnt aluminum foil from *Before Collapse*

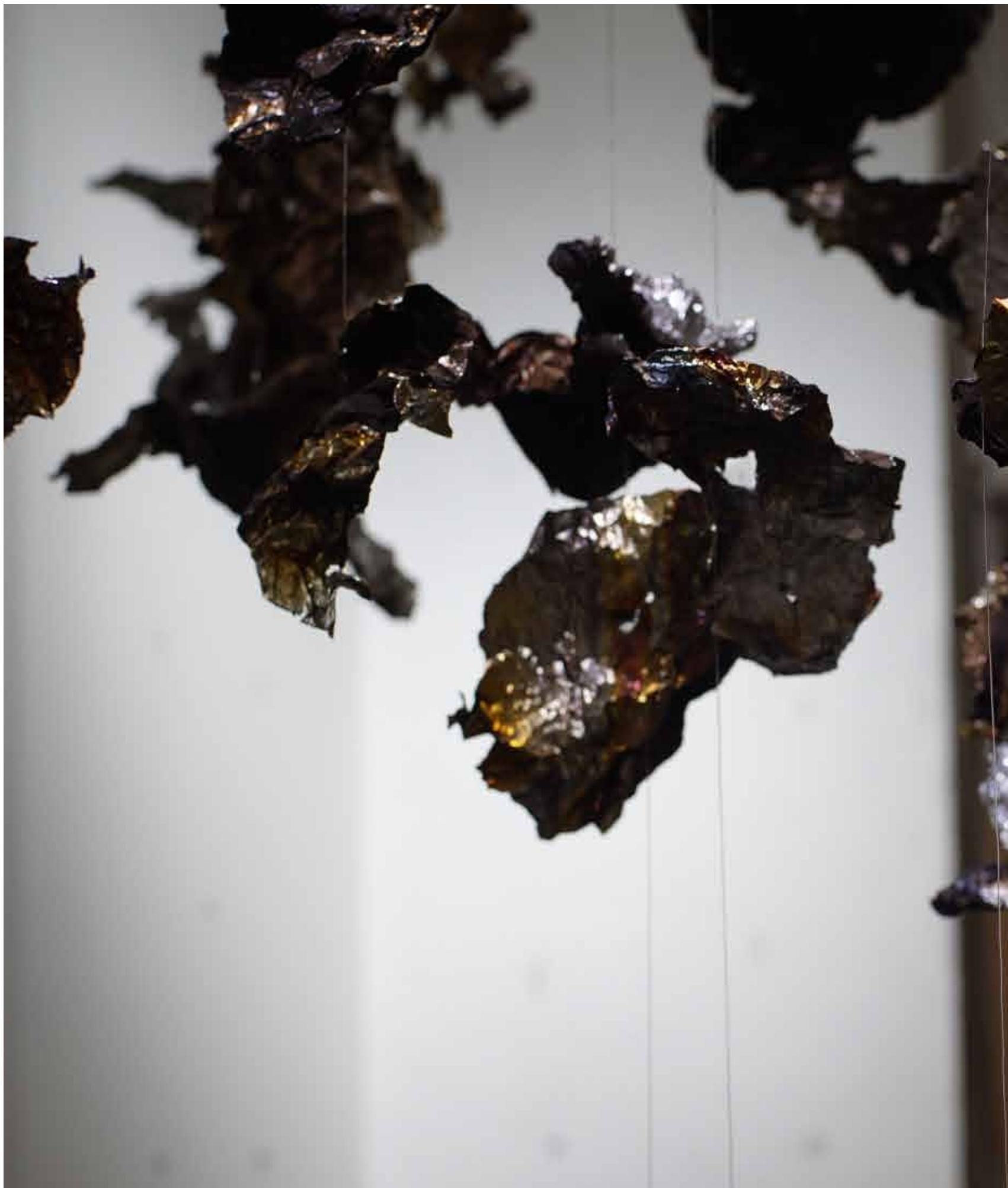


Installation view
of *Time Drift* - 2nd version



Details of *Time Drift* - 2nd version
(p.174-179)











Time Drift, 2015
installation
burnt aluminum foil
dimensions variable
(3rd version)





Installation views of
Time Drift - 3rd version





Detail of *Time Drift* - 3rd version







Black Ice Dissolve

This video artwork recorded black coloured ice melting onto and staining paper. Through a process of experimentation with different papers, size, number and placement of ice cubes, I had pre-prepared the materials for the video. The particular paper was scored in a mathematical grid format. The ice cubes were laid out in the grid as regularly as I could within a limited time and with minimal handling.

Although I controlled the set up, there was still an element of uncertainty in the process leading up to the final product. The outcome could only partially be predicted, the final image depended on the flow of melt water and the surface texture and absorbency of the paper on the day. I wanted this to capture the almost oppositional ideas of the certainty of the process (ice melting) along with the uncertainty of the final image (coloured stain patterns). The idea was to convey both the concept of uncertainty during the creative process itself, as well as the minutiae of unpredictable variables within a stable overall process of change. This could also stand as a metaphor for the human variables of change, our individual uniqueness, set in a framework of inevitability, the regenerative life cycle of which each of us is just a part.

I realised that the ink stained papers could stand as resolved artworks in their own right - another "accidental" outcome.

Black Ice Dissolve #1, 2015
video, 06:13

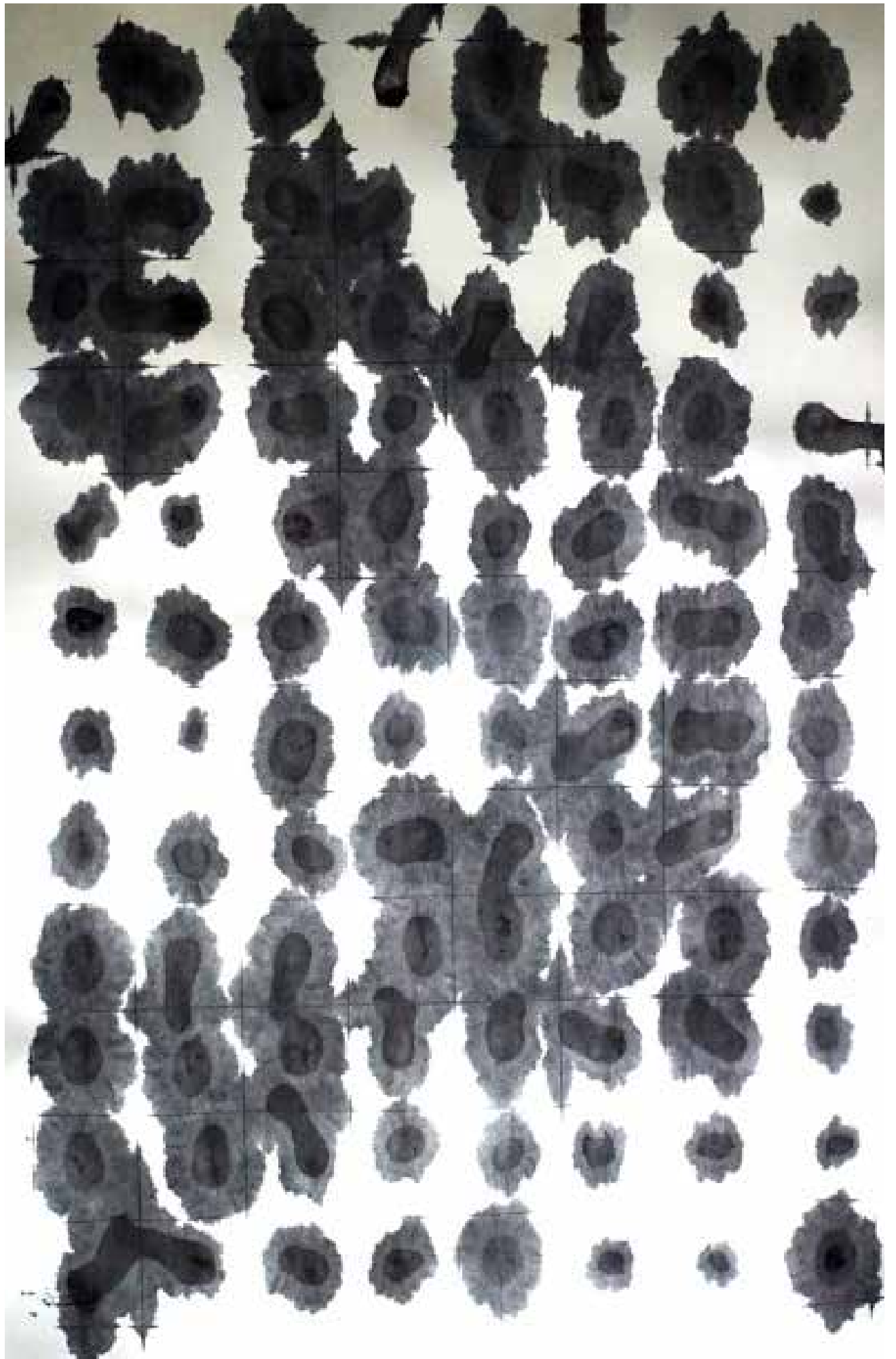




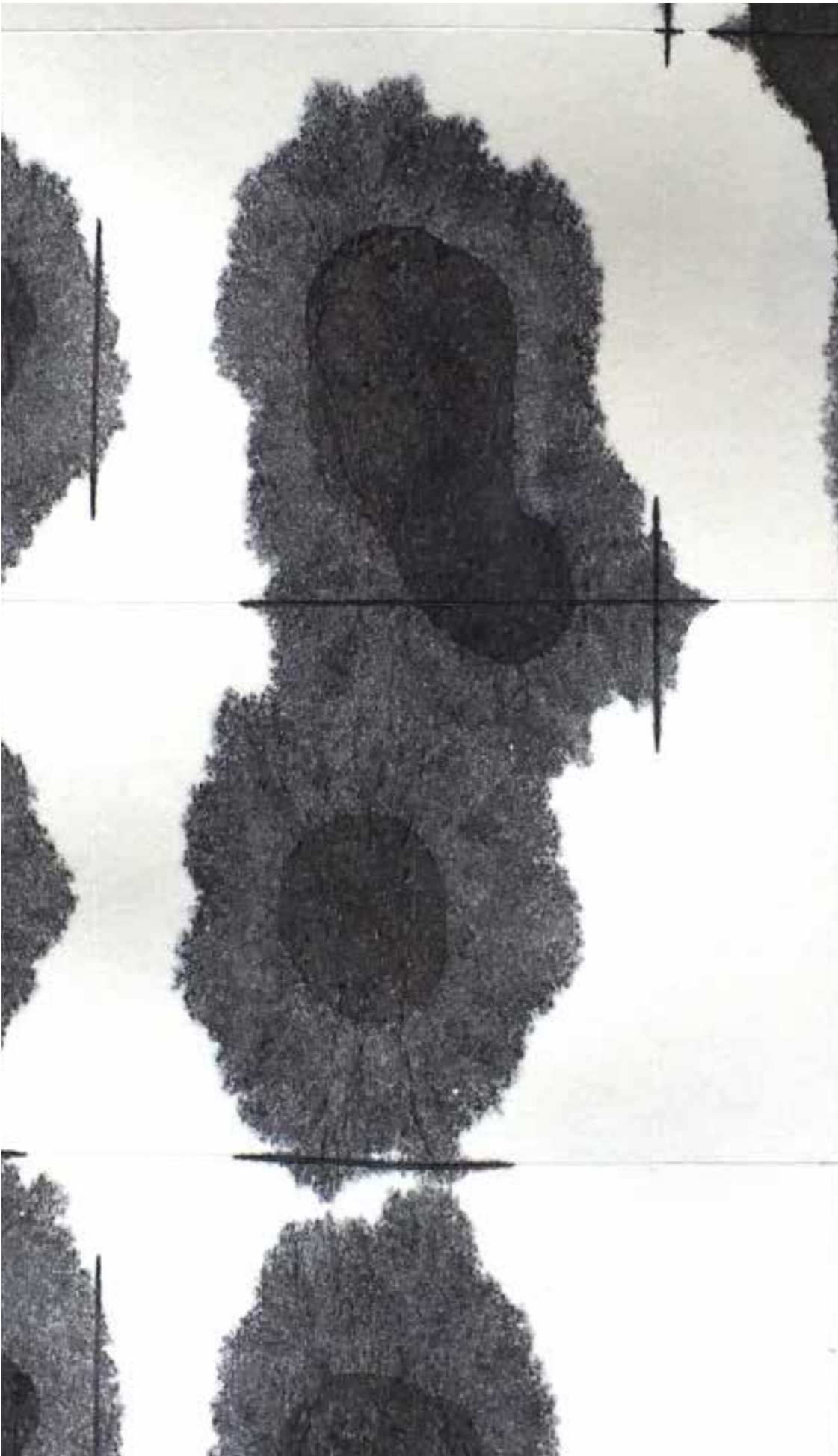


Stills from *Black Ice Dissolve #1*





Dissolved, 2015
ink on 300gms paper
116 x 66cm



Ice forest #1, 2015
ink on 300gms paper
40 x 60cm





Ice forest #2, 2015
ink on 300gms paper
40 x 60 cm





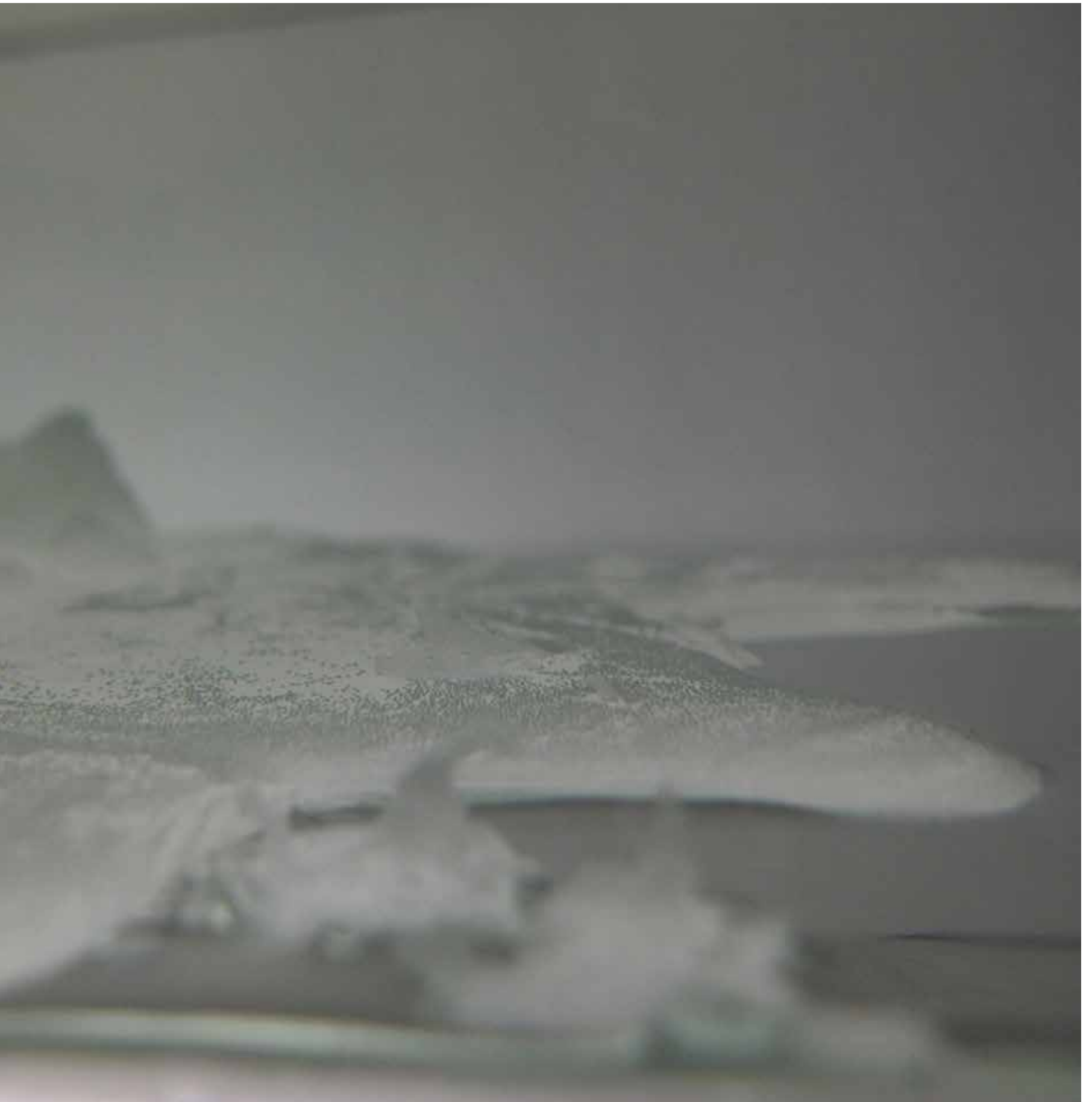
Rainy

I revisited the solidifying wax experiments. Looking back at them, it was the documentation photographs that best carried the content. The molten wax hitting water and solidifying was done in quite small quantities in a small glass tank. By isolating the forms and taking away the context, the images became more ambiguous and the sense of scale was unclear, they could have been microscopic or the size of landscapes.

In *Rainy*, the photograph is deliberately enlarged to make what was actually small seem vast. The wax is captured in the process of forming a solid structure resembling both rain clouds and a land mass. The image seems to capture an elemental process in action.

Rainy, 2015
C-type photograph
81.5 x 144cm





Hot Wind

This is another photographic resolution. This time, I went back to the documentation of the charcoal making process and realised that within the documentation there were images that could become resolved pieces. As with *Rainy*, the title *Hot Wind* was important. It indicated a natural element but clearly the image is of embers during the burning process, not wind. In fact these red hot embers are coils of wood shavings, their shape referencing pictorial representations of wind.

In this and the previous photograph, I am interested in capturing a frozen moment in time where a transformation is taking place. A few seconds before or after and the image would be very different. In *Hot Wind*, the flames have just died away, but moments later the wisps of wood will be reduced to ash and collapse. I wanted to show how elemental forces of nature can be found in our environment, in processes that we might initiate but do not control.

Hot Wind, 2015
C-type photograph
81.5 x 140cm





Burning Steps

This large format photograph shows one of the cast pairs of charcoal feet in the process of being burned. The image captures the point at which they are so hot they are cracking apart and the red hot core can be seen: transformative energy made visible. Again it looks like something elementally natural, perhaps lava flows erupting from the earth's core. In this image I saw a metaphor for human transience and a return to the earth from which we came.

Burning Steps, 2015
C-type photograph
120 x 120cm



Burnt

This photograph shows a later stage in the burning of the charcoal feet in *Burning Steps*. Here they are reduced to grey ash. The vitality and energy shown in the previous image has dissipated. Now they have reached a lifeless stage. The ash is still just holding its original shape but it would crumble to dust at the slightest touch. It can be seen as a metaphor for the traces of memory.

Burnt, 2015
C-type photograph
120 x 120cm



Conclusion

Decay and ruins make us look back but also forward; ruins “are freighted with possibility, even with utopian promise.”¹⁰ In the remnants of the past we may reflect on how our time will also pass; how everything we see now will decay or fade over time, whether that is our human bodies, societies, civilizations, the built environment, even the climate as we know it. However, the changes that affect us are situated within longer natural cycles of regeneration. So although our individual experience of change as time passes may be fleeting and increasingly melancholy, it need not be pessimistic.

In my artwork I attempt to express ideas about transformation and the human condition through materials, process and the documentation of altering states. I did not set out with a fixed idea of what to create or what form the resolved artworks would take. Instead, through continual experimentation with a range of materials, combined with “an open minded availability to chance”¹¹ I was able to uncover unexpected and poetic ways to represent my concerns.

The resolved artworks shown here are outcomes that came about through experimentation. They are resolved, but not final outcomes as they will no doubt continue to evolve, change and throw up new possibilities of representation. These artworks are perhaps better considered as moments in an ongoing space of experimentation during which the material or the process of transformation the material was undergoing carried the content I was striving to convey. Sometimes I led the process and sometimes the process led me.

My methodology was cyclical, and in my working process of making, noticing, following unexpected outcomes, remaking and unmaking, my methodology became one with my intended content. The process often became the content, with outcomes carrying both the physical traces as well as metaphorical representations of transformation, decay and regeneration.

10 Brian Dillon, “Introduction: A Short History of Decay,” in *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Brian Dillon (Whitechapel Gallery London and The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2011), 18.

11 Roger Malbert, postscript to *An Aside: Works Selected by Tacita Dean*, (Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2005), 69.

It is important to recognize the nature of changes. When we see or encounter situations where objects are decaying or collapsing, this does not mean that those objects are coming to an end and their existence will cease. Rather, the processes may reflect human or natural intervention, preparing the objects to evolve into the next stage of existence. Hence, changes to us and changes around us are meaningful and provide opportunities for us to reflect on who, where and what we are. By respecting changes and reflecting on them, we can see our lives in a clearer perspective and consider how we should behave and interact with other human beings and nature.

In my art practice I have found ways to metaphorically represent the passage of time and human life experience through the transformation of material states. In doing so, the materials, processes and documentation of the transformation involved has come to represent the cyclical nature of both personal, short term histories and longer societal histories but sited both within an even more fundamental geological time span.

Appendix

DVD of video experiments and artworks

1. *Erase*, 2014, video 00:55
2. *The Drawing Body*, 2014, video 01:10
3. *Wax figures Melting*, 2014, video, 00:24
4. *View through bus window*, 2014, video, 05:00
5. *Distortion #1*, 2014, video, 00:45
6. *Distortion #2*, 2014, video, 01:14
7. *Distortion #3*, 2014, video, 02:01
8. *Burning over water*, 2014, video, 01:51
9. *3D animation of Endless*, animation, 00:10
10. *Projection in Ice Embers*, video, 01:19
11. *Black Ice Dissolve #1*, 2015, video, 06:13

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