the distance between us Dominique Edwards

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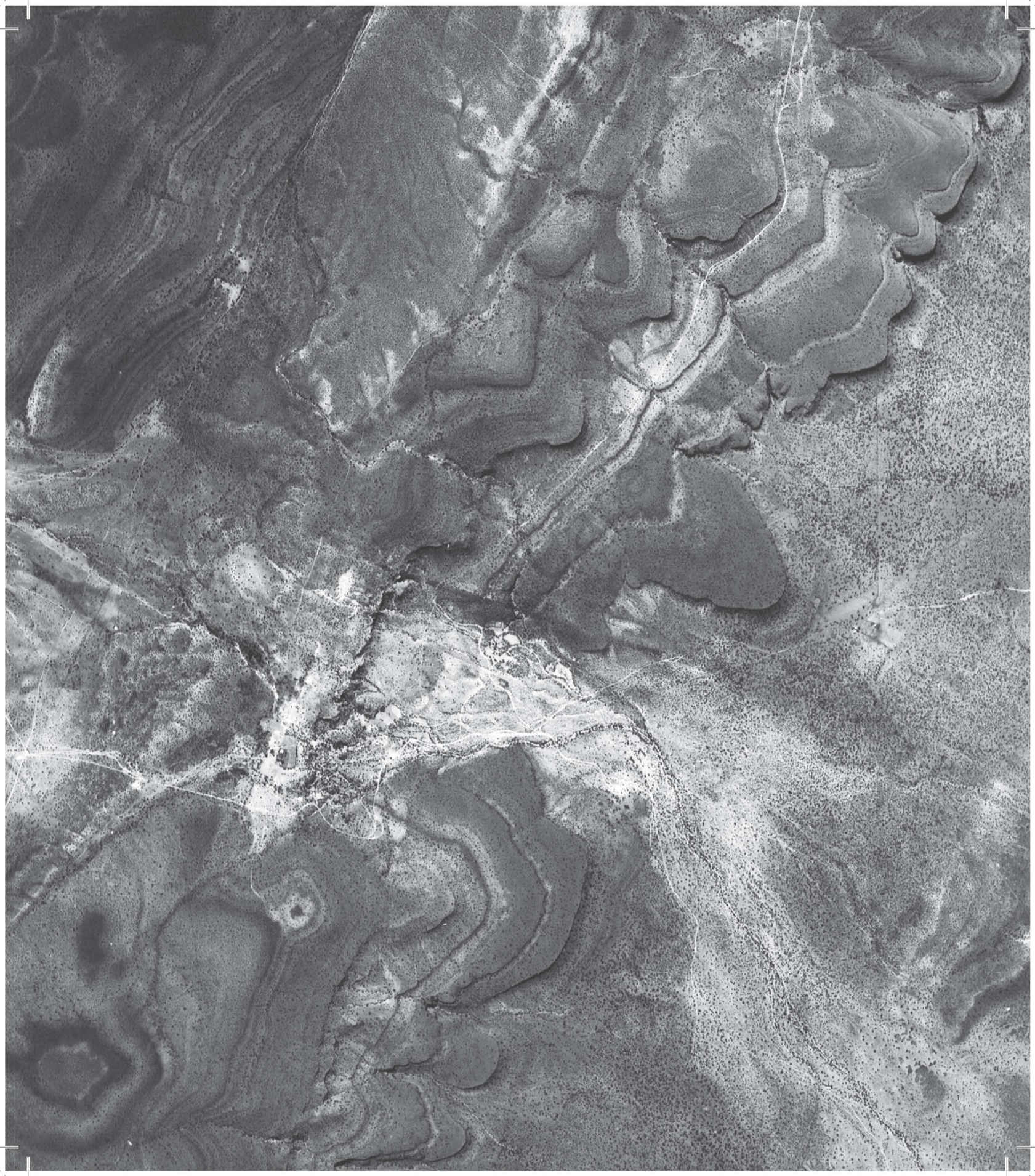

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree Master of Fine Art
Michaelis School of Fine Art
University of Cape Town
2011

DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

the distance between us

Dominique Edwards

In memory of my mother

Maria Janetta Mouton
24 November 1955 – 25 November 2009

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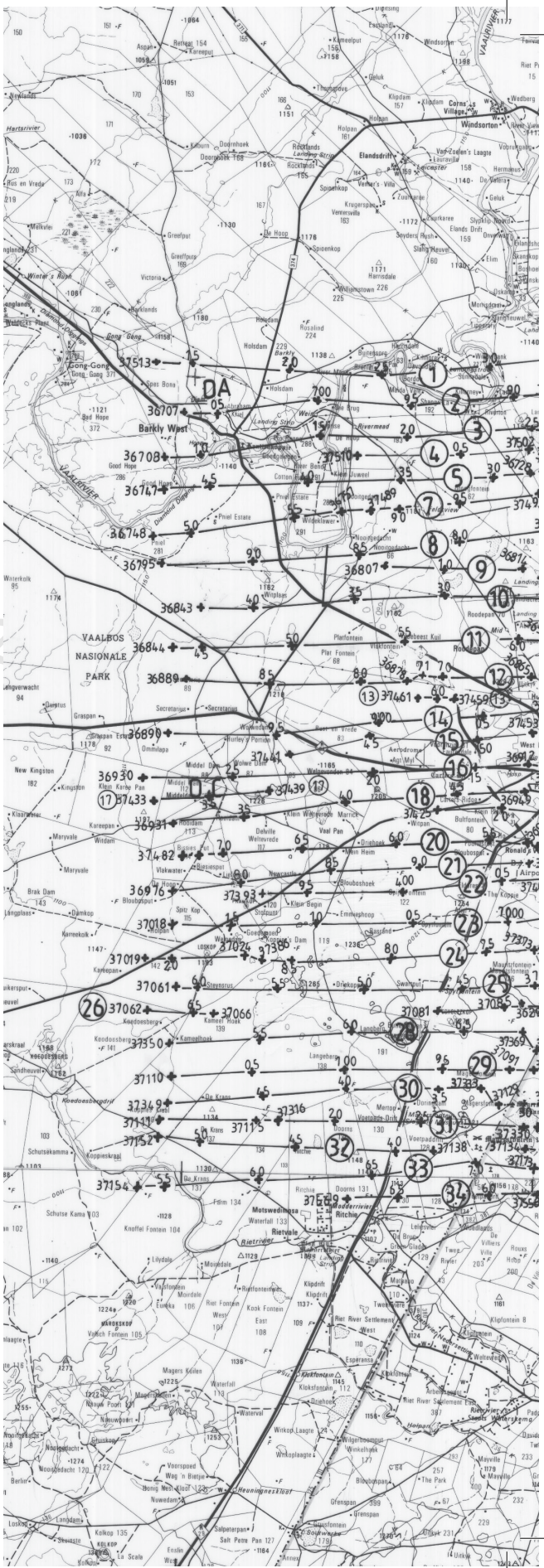
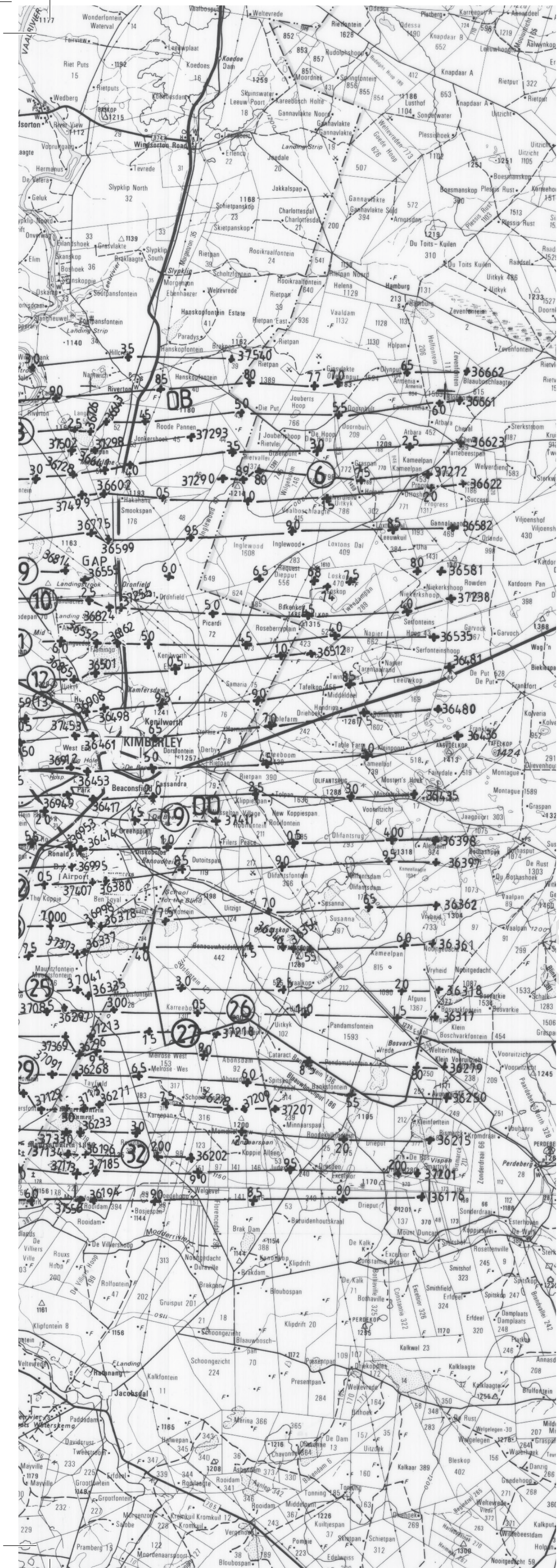
To my father, Douglas Henry Jerome Edwards, words cannot express my gratitude; I dedicate this work to you.





Contents

Figure 1. Process research material,
Job 153: A flight plan mapping the strips and spools used to document the geographic region: Kimberley, 2824DA in 1940, Geographical Services, Cartography Department.

Figure 2. From the *Scatter* series (2011),
CMYK Colour separation on Fabriano, 460mm x 660mm.

Preface
Remains

The dead like to stay close to the living…
To realise their fate and become truly dead they must first be made to disappear.

— Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*

Simon Critchley introduces his book on death, philosophy and literature, *Very Little…Almost Nothing*, with a preface titled *As my father, I have already died*, and describes his work as an act of mourning. What follows is an account of his last moments with his father who died after a long struggle with lung cancer. Critchley missed his father's death by twenty minutes:

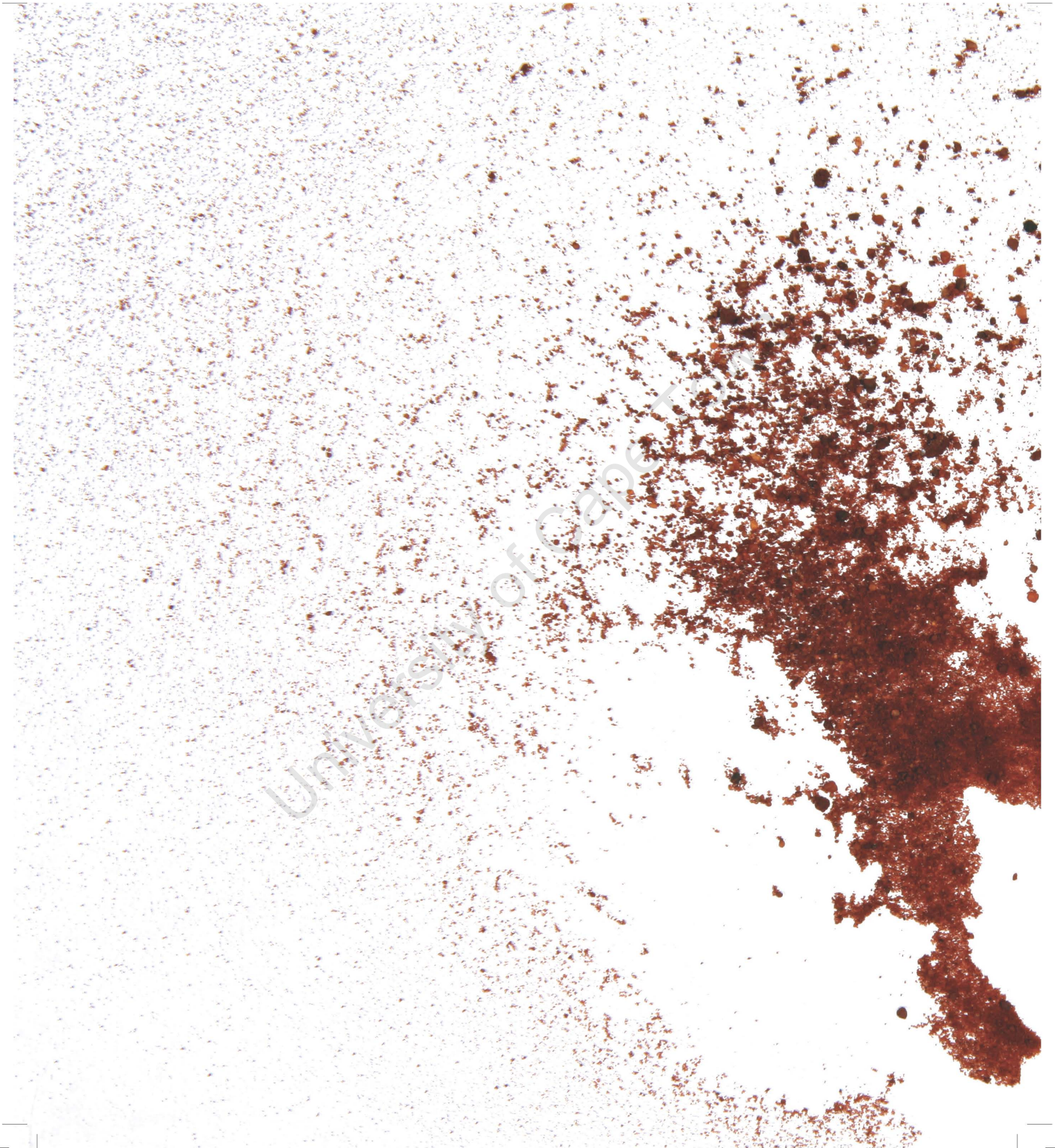
> A nurse took me to see him and then left me alone. The room was unlit and sparsely furnished. In pale winter light, he lay with a single sheet covering his corpse: tiny, withered and ravaged by cancer. I spent no more than five minutes alone with him, initially standing petrified, then sitting, and finally summoning up the courage to touch his cheek and nose and caress his forehead. It felt cool. So, this is what death looks like, I thought. This is what my death will look like (1997: xvi).

Critchley's act of mourning has manifested itself as an existential undertaking, a move towards understanding the disappointment of what he refers to as our limitedness and the finitude of our death. He explains that the kernel of his book was an attempt to make sense of those few minutes of death that he saw in his father (1997:xvi).

This exhibition, *The Distance Between Us* is also an act of mourning, albeit hesitant and uncertain – murky terrain infused with lapses into self and nothingness. I have dedicated this work to my mother, who has been in my thoughts, incessantly, since the day of her death, and whose absence has brought me to recognise my own finitude. I feel that I too can echo Critchley's words and say that *as my mother, I have already died*.

Figure 3. From the *Scatter* series (2011),
CMYK Colour separation on Fabriano, 460mm x 660mm.

Figure 4. From the *Scatter* series (2011),
CMYK Colour separation on Fabriano, 460mm x 660mm.



Introduction

An introduction to this document would be incomplete without including a brief description of the context from which it has been drawn. I would therefore like to start with Barkly West, a small town situated on the banks of the Vaal River, forty-five kilometres north-west of Kimberley.

Named after a British governor, Sir Henry Barkly, in 1871, this little town was once brimming with prospectors, diamond dealers, bandits, migrant labourers, missionaries and so many more of the characters inherent to the diamond rush. The great attraction was the river, yielding from its shallow waters the ruin and fortune of many a prospector. However, the discovery of diamonds at what later became known as The Big Hole prompted the dismantling of the temporary dwellings cluttered along the Vaal, and so began the exodus from the river banks to what would become known as Kimberley. Alluvial diggings in Barkly West continued on a small scale and the remaining inhabitants of the town eventually re-established it as a pit-stop, enroute to other, more remote mining towns.

Here the Vaal River is by no means conventionally picturesque. Its water is dull and grey and its banks have been sieved into oblivion. Barbed wire runs into the river, clearly defining private property, and cacti are grown alongside fences to deter potential trespassing. I grew up playing in its waters and serving the travellers passing through, from behind the till at our café and take-away shop.[1]

My practice has emerged from an interest in place, nurtured from as early as I can remember, sitting on the worn linoleum floor in my grandmother's scullery, by stories about our family and how it came to pass that we would end up living in a place like Barkly West. I am connected to this place, it constitutes everything that I am – and yet I fiercely resist living and being there. I continue to explore the *why* and the *how* about my complex relationship with Barkly West, and it continues to surface in the projects I pursue. Poetically, I understand Barkly to be a place of tragic endings. To die here, is to die feeling alone.

Since leaving for boarding school (in 1994), the town and my connection to it were mediated by my mother – her words, her descriptions, her handwriting and her photographs. My mother's death has constituted in many ways my loss of place, transforming my enquiry into a project emerging from an existential place, personified by the arid landscape and its

[1] My father started The Cocopan shortly after moving to Barkly West in 1977.

forlorn mounds of stone, abandoned in the pursuit of better luck.

This document functions as a reflection on my practice. My approach is explorative, rather than argumentative, and speaks of a linear process of enquiry, informed by my production and personal narrative. I start, as it were, at the beginning. Each section is dedicated to the means of my production and is subsequently titled: *Drawing, Firearms, Cotton Paper, Weather Balloons* and *Noon Gun*. I pause twice within the document to further explore emerging concepts such as place (*Introducing Place*) and the sublime (*Thresholds: Introducing the Sublime*). My core research has emerged from Simon Critchley's philosophical meditations on death in *Very Little…Almost Nothing*, Robert Pogue Harrison's work on burial in *The Dominion of the Dead*, Edward S. Casey's extensive writing on place in *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, Maurice Merleau Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* and a selection of Bill Viola's video works and installations.

Characteristic of my practice is an interest in modes of looking, more specifically an interest in embodied experience, subject to the perceptual orientation of the human body. The extended scope of my research has materialised from an acknowledgement that I am in the world because of my body, which in turn has established ideas concerning place and time, with reference to landscape, as areas of study that I return to.

I have been working with paper, precision drawing tools, firearms, weather balloons, sound, light and installation. My work has evolved from the physical activity of collecting and sampling discarded, dead, or decomposing material from Barkly West, to the firing of the Noon Gun in Cape Town. My method is informed by the materiality of the surfaces I work with and the subsequent residue or trace of the tools I incorporate into my making.

A recurring phenomenon throughout this process is the production of a void – the black dot that seeps from the tip of a Rotring pen into a sheet of paper, or the hole produced by a bullet ripping through its surface. The work is an initial endeavour towards an exploration of liminality[2] or thresholds, unfolding as a study of the temporal and the invisible.

In my drawings, shot pieces and slow-motion bursting weather balloon video, I attempt to evoke the *missing agent*, the unknown and the transient. My approach has shifted from one

[2] The word *liminality*, derived from the Latin word, *limen*, meaning threshold, is defined in neurological psychology and anthropological theories of ritual as referring to an in-between-state (La Sure, 2005).

of isolation whilst drawing – initially invested in the compulsive establishment of my own place in this world and characterised as labour-intensive, time-consuming and conceivably meditative – to a process involving the skill and expertise of other individuals with reference to the handling of firearms, weather balloons, high speed camera equipment and the Noon Gun. Scale, distance and proximity, or intimacy, have asserted themselves as concepts not only in the making of the work, but also in my experience of viewing the exhibition as a whole, drawing consciously on the notion of a phenomenological encounter.

The Distance Between Us has materialised from, amongst other things, that which remains,[3] not specifically with regard to that which is left behind by those who die, but also that which remains within, whilst attempting to endure the lapse of an irrevocable transformation. The word I am looking for might be trauma, and includes a reference to other words like absence, loss, confine and displace. At its most extreme, I am referring to an experience of the uncanny, a sublime encounter that artist Mike Kelley describes as follows:

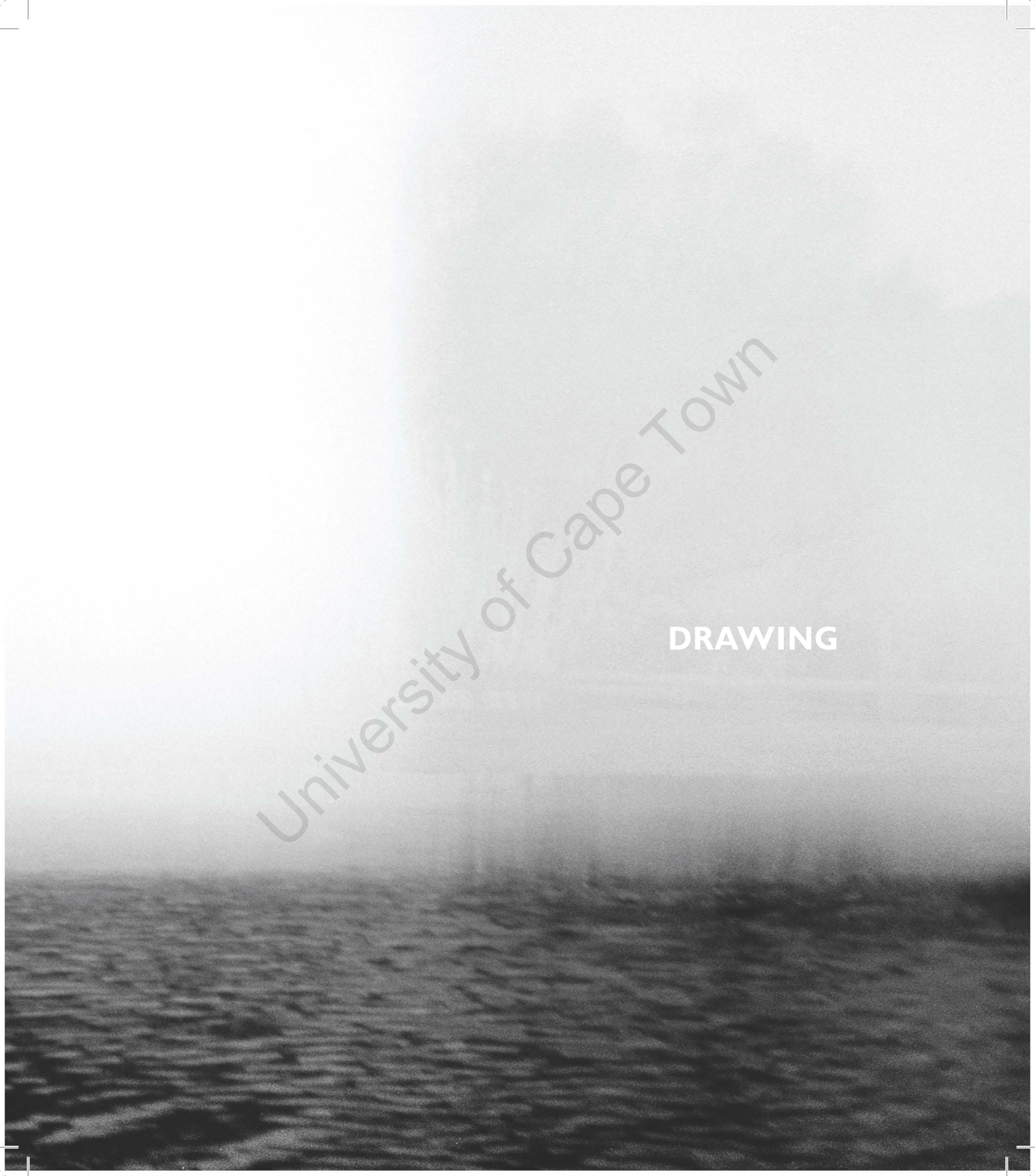
> I see the sublime as coming from the natural limitations of our knowledge; when we are confronted with something that is beyond our limits of acceptability, or that threatens to expose some repressed thing, then we have this feeling of the uncanny…It is about getting in touch with something we know and can't accept – something outside the boundaries of what we are willing to accept about ourselves (Morley, 2010: 204).

My work explores this notion of the sublime with reference to the uncanny. The work has surfaced, as it were, from the soil on the banks of the Vaal River, as a contemplation on the ephemeral nature of human life and the moment of our death.

[3] *What Remains* (2003), is also the title of artist/photographer Sally Mann's exploration of death.

Figure 6. Personal Archive, Barkly West (2009)

Figure 7. Process Work, The Vaal River (2010)



DRAWING

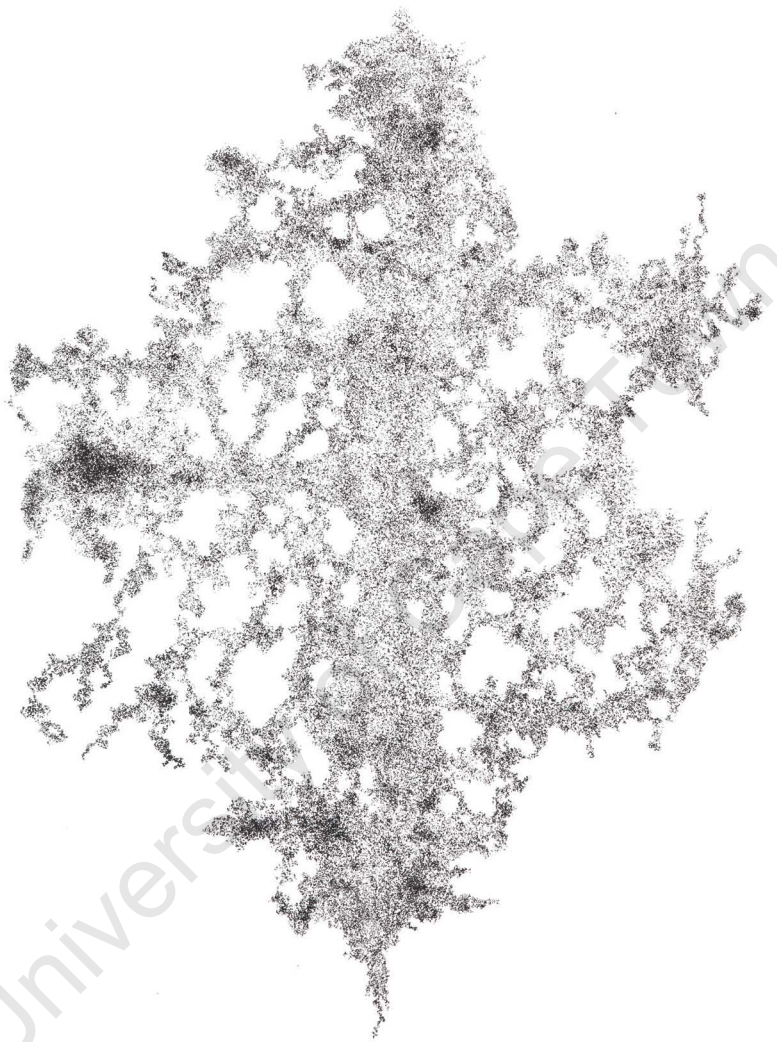


Figure 8. From *The Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series (2010),
Ink pen drawing, 700mm x 1000mm.

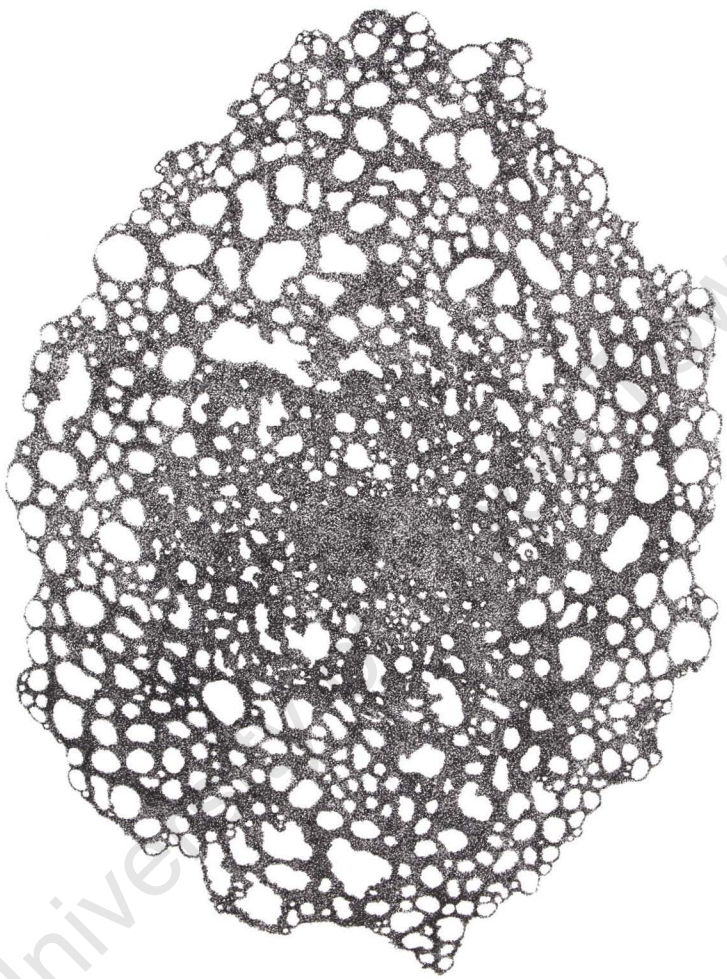


Figure 9. From *The Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series (2010),
Ink pen drawing, 700mm x 1000mm.

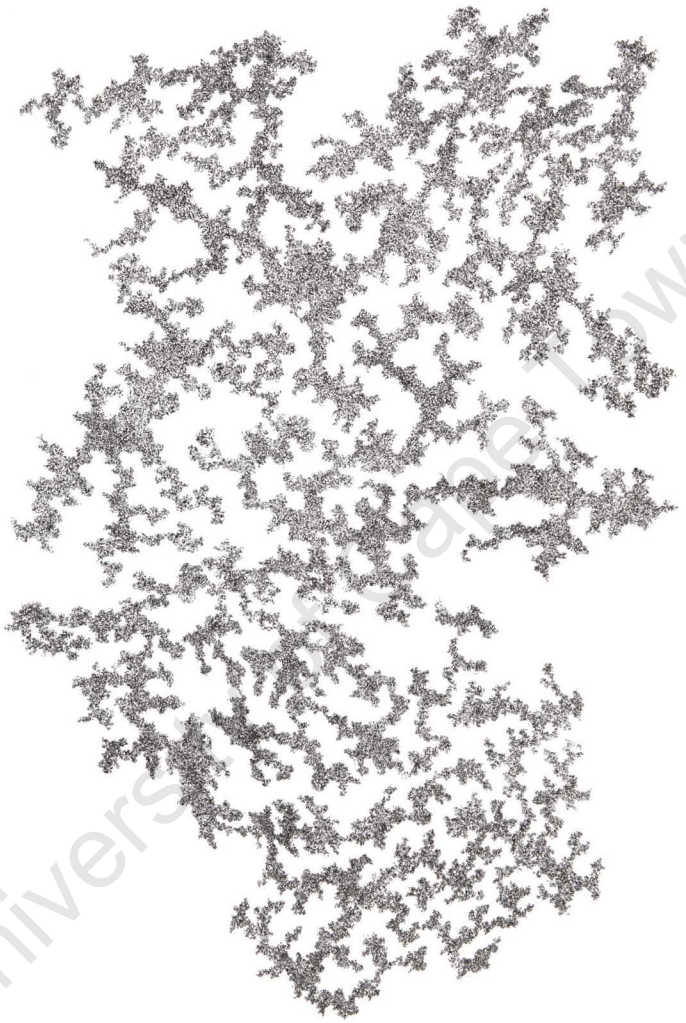


Figure 10. From *The Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series (2010),
Ink pen drawing, 700mm x 1000mm.

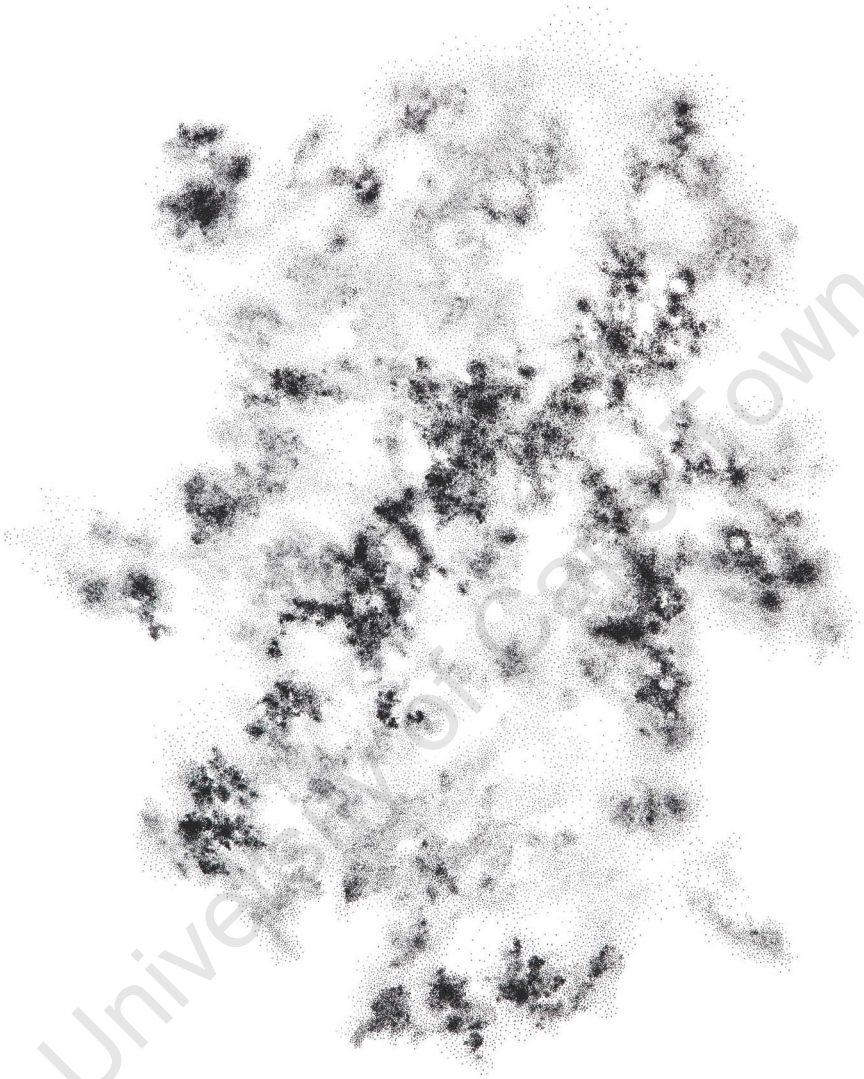


Figure 11. From *The Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series (2010),
Ink pen drawing, 700mm x 1000mm.

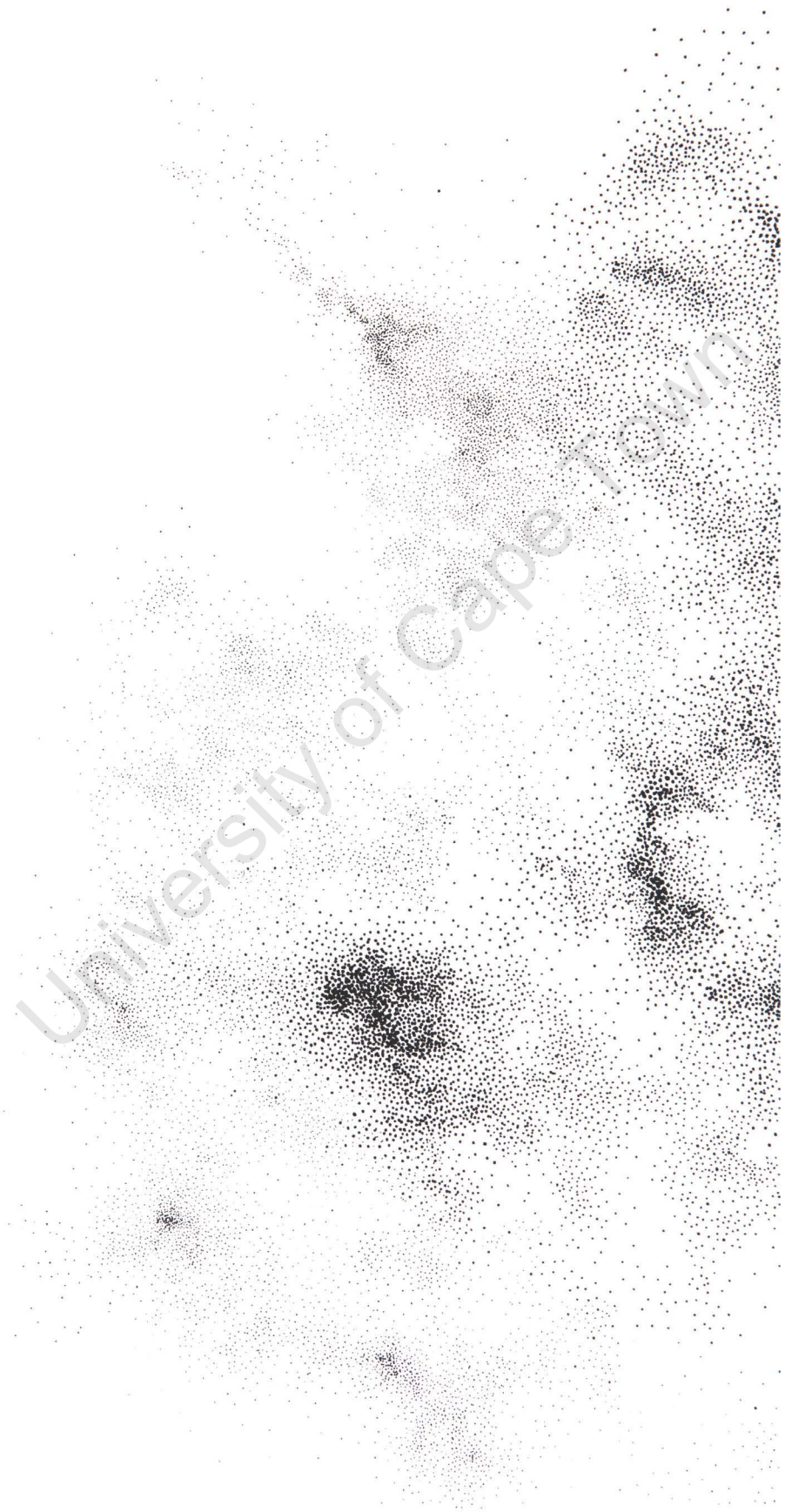


Figure 12. From *The Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series (2010), Ink pen drawing, (Detail).

Drawing

Whilst drawing, I make my mark from above, looking down, assuming a bird's eye view and the position of a surveyor. The marks I make are informed by aerial photographs and topographic maps from the region of my childhood home.

My drawing tool is a precision drafting pen and the diameter of the tip is at its minimum 0.18mm. The mark I make is a dot, bleed, point, pause, moment or place on the surface of the paper; or a hover, trail, meander. The relationship between the pen and the surface is intimate and rapid. I periodically have to use a magnifying glass to see where I am drawing.

The marks are fine and delicate. They cluster together in little colonies that expand across the surface of the paper. They are made in an attempt to reaffirm for me, with every mark, my time, my labour and my presence.

The act of drawing involves meticulous preparation on my part, reminiscent to that of a surgeon or a clinical laboratory technician. My working environment needs to be clean and tidy. My drawing tools are labelled and mark-bleed-blotch-specific, the paper is carefully handled and laid onto a large drafting desk prepared with layers of protective felt sheets.

The metal tip of my Rotring pen quietly seeps a little blemish into the paper. The action is uncomplicated – remove lid, position pen at a ninety degree angle and make contact with the surface. The pen looks like a syringe – its tip, a delicate funnel that can easily snap under too much pressure. There is a forensic quality to the making of the work, surgical, procedural and patient.

The paper I use varies in scale, ranging from 950mm x 700mm sized sheets that are relatively easy to handle and store, to large 1500mm x 2000mm sheets that handle awkwardly and require great care. The handling of the paper and my interaction with it has established for me, in the context of my work, a very specific materiality.

The large sheets I work with are covered in layers of felt and tissue paper. My interaction with these large works involves an uncovering, but never of the whole sheet, only of the sections I am drawing onto or looking at. Unless suspended or mounted onto a wall, the marks on the paper are encountered at close proximity.

I seem to return to what I experience as the tangible relationship between the paper I work with on a horizontal plane whilst drawing, and my memory of the horizontal space occupied by a sleeping or dead body. The paper work has subsequently become precious to me. When transporting these large drawings, gently rolled into layers of white felt and

protective plastic, I feel as though I am carrying a hollow body, a fragile object that demands attentive dressing and a still resting place.

The act of drawing is the result of a conscientious decision-making process involving the surface of the paper and the movement of my pen across that surface; each mark is deliberately made and seen by me. The point of departure (central or peripheral) and the mode of mark-making – continuous (trailing a set of dots or marks in the wake of the pen) or intermittent (starting at various places on the surface of the paper) – determines the resulting drawing. Arguably a trace: something that has been left behind and something that can be tracked.

The drawings are monochromatic, black ink on cotton paper, and can be described as non-representational, referencing simultaneously notions of macro and micro; whilst emulating topographic maps, geographic contours, explosions, conglomerations of nebulae, doodles and cellular structures.

Presented vertically as framed or suspended pieces, these drawings function both upon the first distanced introduction as one enters the exhibition space, and upon a second, more intimate encounter, once viewed at close range. The reference to macro and micro,[4] in the experience of making and viewing the work, is where the idea of a looking device (microscope or telescope) appears in my sense-making. This contributes to my understanding of these drawings as being "other-worldly," and at a perpetual distance. I have subsequently come to title my drawings, *The Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')*,[5] referencing, amongst other things, the method of their production as a hover, and the notion of their production as bearing witness (in Afrikaans, '*tuig*' – as in '*getuig*,' to bear witness) to my existence.

[4] The Boyle Family's monumental surface studies from randomly chosen geographic co-oridinates accross the globe, were one of my first references to this concept.

[5] The broader scope of my research concerned the notion of landscape as ideology with reference to language, and within the context of Barkly West and my Afrikaans heritage, to beeldspraak. The notion of place as residing within a language and descriptively rooted in poetic imagery, though relevant with regard to my understanding of place, is however a topic I would like to explore on another occasion.

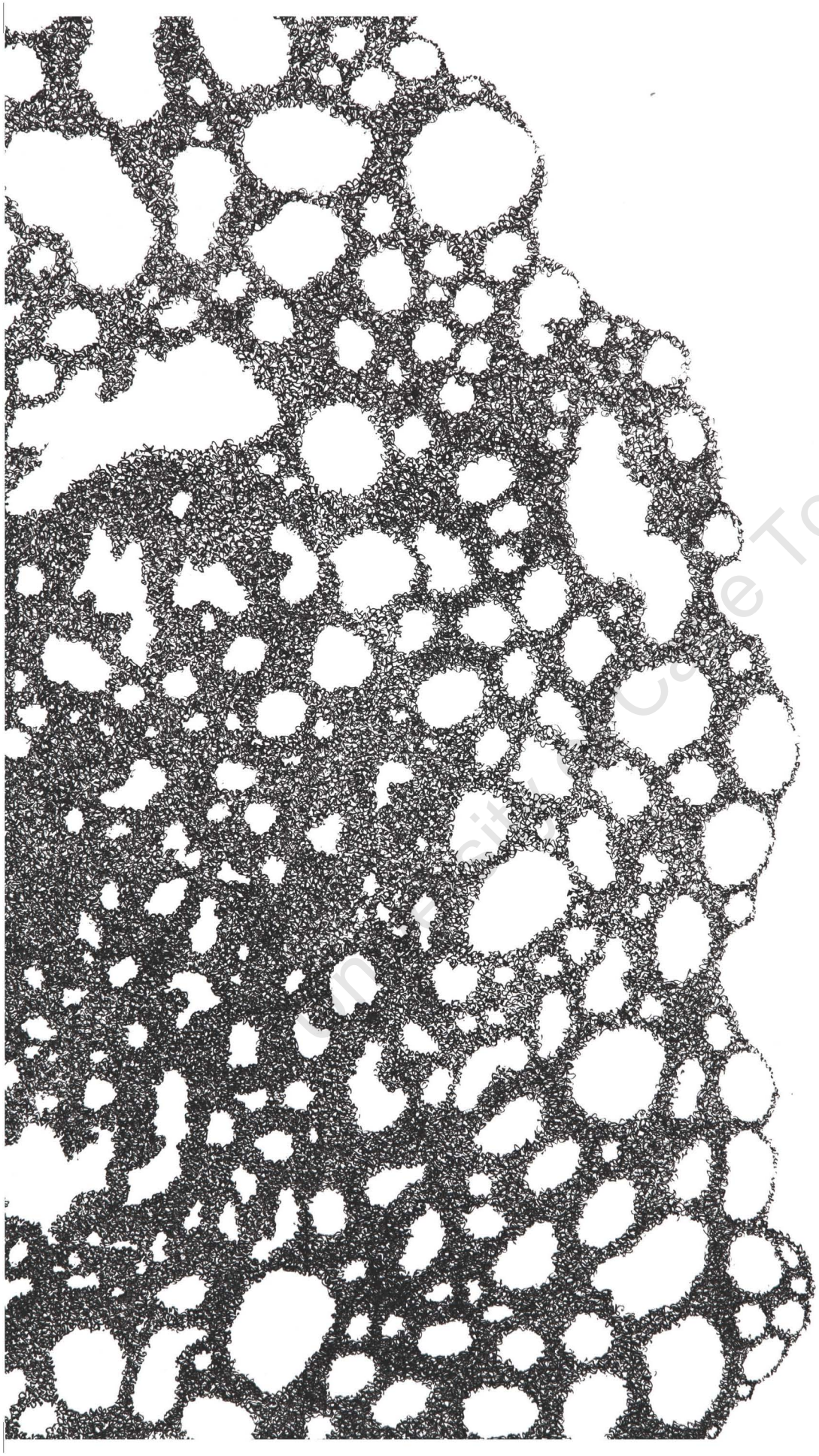


Figure 13. From *The Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series (2010), Ink pen drawing, (Detail).

Figure 14. Process Work exhibited at the 2010 MFA Show *This is Not Final* (2010).
Aerial photograph, paper explorations, photographic documentation, taxonomies of Barkly West: insect remains, dead bats, botanical references, and soil samples.

Figure 15. Process Work, Dead bats (2010).
The material I found and collected in Barkly West whilst walking included clumps of soil, dead insects, crockery fragments, acacia thorns, tyre tread, a wind pellet, the exposed bones of my grandmother's long buried dog, stones that I'd hoped were diamonds and various botanical specimens.

Introducing Place

Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over them and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced.

—Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place*

My initial explorations of surface and soil, specific to the locality of Barkly West, involved the collection of found objects or material lifted off the ground, artefacts of some sort. Growing up in an area renowned for yielding diamonds, the action of walking, looking, bending, bowing and sampling from the soil is very familiar to me. Each of the objects I bagged had occupied a place, and once removed from that site, left an imprint or an empty space.

I became an active component in the displacement of the objects I collected. The objects, in turn (dead, discarded or decaying matter), became a kind of proof of place and evidence of my activity. I realise in retrospect that this simple interaction with surface and soil established the extended scope of my research as concerned with concepts such as absence, presence, displacement and loss. The notion of place became a catalyst for the production of my work - a knot, if you will - intertwining ideas entertained by my interest in landscape and being, to those emerging from my internal processes and the production of my work.

Surfacing from my practice is an understanding of place as a tangible concept, referencing the material world, whilst poetically residing within the parameters of existential thought. This interrogation has derived from what I have been able to contextualise as a phenomenological[6] interpretation of place, resident in the physicality of the body. The human body, in both its active and inanimate state, has subsequently become the locus of my making and my thinking.

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[6] "Phenomenology involves the understanding and description of things as they are experienced by a subject. It is about the relationship between Being and Being-in-the-world. Being in the world resides in a process of objectification in which people objectify the world by setting themselves apart from it. This results in the creation of a gap, a distance in space. To be human is both to create this distance between the self and that which is beyond and to attempt to bridge this distance through a variety of means – through perception (seeing, hearing, touching), bodily actions and movements, and intentionality" (Tilley, 1994:12).

In an essay titled *Hic Jacet* (Here Lies), Robert Pogue Harrison discusses the notion of place as subject to the burial of human beings and the consequent marking of their graves. He states that "places come into being through acts of human grounding" (Harrison, 2003:18) and traces the notion of place from the grave marker to built environments.[7] Harrison subsequently describes places as rising from their "humic foundations," (buried dead), providing grounds for the emergence of ideology and investing place with meaning. Harrison asserts:

> It is, I believe, impossible to understand the institution of places on the earth independently of the institution of burial. For what is a place if not it's memory of itself – a site or locale where time reflects back on itself? (Mitchell, 2002:353).[8]

Harrison proceeds to write about the dead, buried below the surface, as being the foundation upon which the living build. He states: "It is as if we the living can stand (culturally, institutionally, economically, in other words humanly) only because the dead underlie the ground on which we stand" (Harrison, 2003:22).[9]

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard approaches place as a concept referring to the existence of an inner world, a psychic place, with the potential for topoanalysis.[10] Bachelard writes extensively about the notion of *home* and traces our sense of self and mode of

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[7] Harrison describes the marker as an important reference, indicating place due to the erection or construction of a grave marker or stone, and discusses the evolution of the grave marker into a signpost as developing into a marker of the places reserved for the living (Harrison, 2003: 20).

[8] As cited from the version of *Hic Jacet* published in W.J.T. Mitchell's *Landscape and Power* (1994).

[9] For me, Harrison's notion of physical place alludes to human activity (consciousness) and mortality. Activating soil and surface as witness and container for human life; the place we are from (ideologically) and return to (physically). This physicality or materiality of body, surface and soil, seem intertwined; rendering the soil as an active component engaged with the production of place. Harrison's discussion on place resonated with me, perhaps as a result of being familiar with mounds of earth and piles of stone (forlorn monuments to small-scale mining deposited along the river banks where I used to play as a child), or perhaps due to the recognition of my body and its' animated form as a vertical figure, bipedal, making its way, upright and autonomously, from one place to another. Residing in my memory, with the stillness and the weight of a dead body; similar to the stillness and the weight of the mounds resting by the river.

[10] "In topoanalysis, descriptive psychology, depth psychology, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, all come together in a common enterprise, one that can be defined as the systematic psychological study of the localities of our intimate lives. Less a method than an attitude, topoanalysis focuses on the placial properties of certain images" (Casey, 1998:288).

Figure 16. Process Work (2010), Paper and ink explorations.

being to our childhood home or environment. He discusses the impact of our experience of place as integral to our existence, recurring and reflecting past environments in relation to new experiences and places, and asserts (as cited by Casey):

> To come to terms with the inner life, it is not enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in narrative terms; one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced (Casey, 1998:286).[11]

Edward Casey, in his extensive study on place, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, discusses amongst other things, the phenomenological implications of our understanding of place, and refers to Kant when quoting: "this body is my body; and the place of that body is at the same time my place" (1998:202). Casey returns to the pivotal role of the lived body as the means by which place is constituted and brought into being (1998: 235), stating with reference to Merleau Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), that "the body itself is place productive, bringing forth places from its expressive and orientational movements" (1998: 236).[12]

An artist whose work for me embodies some of the texts mentioned here, is Richard Long. In an essay titled *Walking the Line* (1986), R.H. Fuchs describes Long's walking pieces as "traces of staying and passing: each marking what was at the centre of the world when he (Long) was there" (Fuchs, 1986:43).

Long's traces are not incidental; the paths he treads and re-treads are an obsessive compulsive act, to and fro. They transform our interpretation of the landscape, as they are a testimony to the presence of a human being; an affirmation of *being somewhere*. Long's paths and lines are *left behind*. They do not connect points of any distinctive value with one another and in turn create a place. They seem to float above the soil and have no particular purpose other than being there.

This creation of multiple places due to the simple act of staying and passing is an idea

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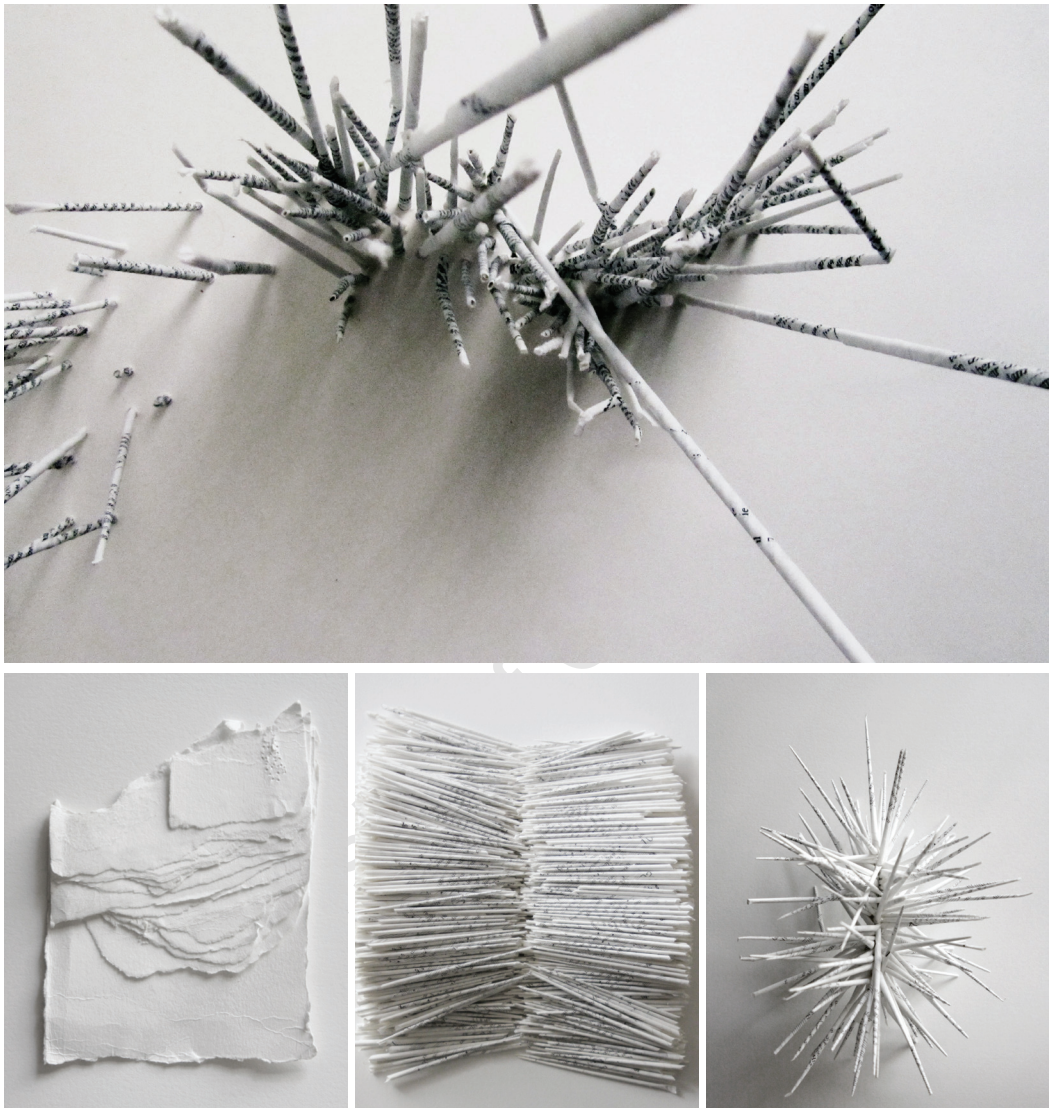
[11] The drawings that I have made can be described as a kind of topoanalysis, a metaphysical investigation concerned with the notion of place as a culmination of both ideology and phenomenology.

[12] My initial hesitation to draw a line, or commit to working with representational shapes and or forms brought my hand to hover above the surface of the paper whilst drawing. This activity in my drawing, the fleeting yet persistent contact made by my pen, determined time and time again: a dot, a marker and a place; establishing for me the act of my drawing as being place productive.



Figures 17 – 20. Process Work, Exploring materiality (2010),
Rolled pages from *Die Bybel* and torn Fabriano.

that for me links with the journey I make across my paper while drawing. Long's temporary lines bear witness to his movement and indicate place. These places are invested with his time. He was there, and just like the objects that I lifted from the soil in Barkly West, and the marks I make with my pen, he too leaves a trace.

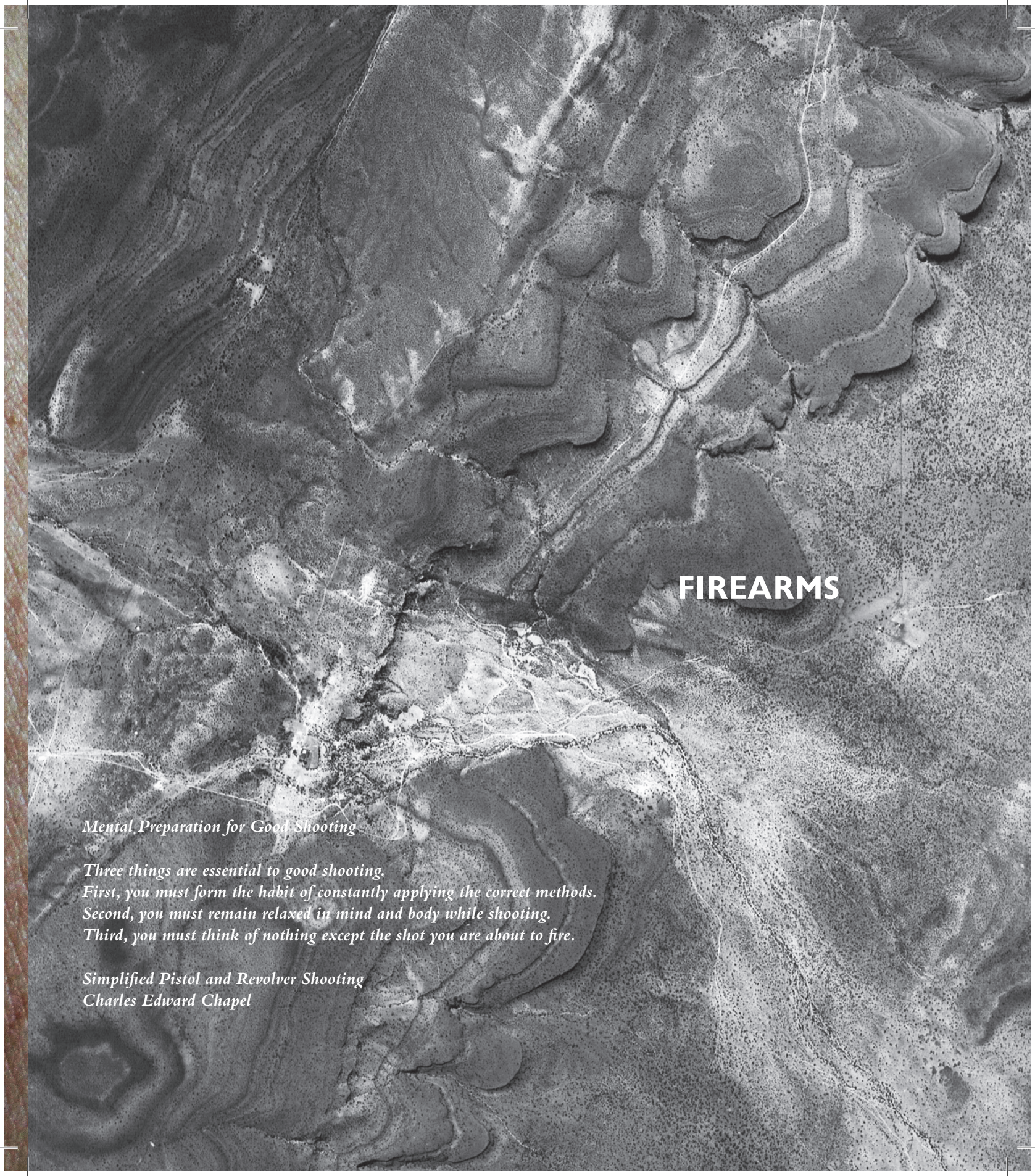
Though documented photographically and indicated on a map, this "formal proof" is of something that *was*, an event that occurred and will, due to the forces of nature or the presence of another person or people, change.

The path or line, so clearly defined and present in Long's photographs, will eventually fade. Without a marker (as discussed by Robert Pogue Harrison on page 29), his places will disappear and be assimilated into the soil; an inevitable process, inherent to the ephemeral nature of human life and indeed, all life on this planet - connecting life and death to surface and soil.

Emerging from this venture into place by means of surface and soil, was the *Scatter* series, simultaneously referencing Robert Pogue Harrison's notion on the burial of the dead as constituting place, and my drawings from the *Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series. Here, instead of using a pen, I arranged the earth I sampled from Barkly West. The red grains of sand were scattered, sifted and blown carefully accross the surface of the paper and documented from above. This work emulates the *Hovercraft ('Huiwertuig')* series and draws from the experience of looking down and my exploration of scale, proximity and distance. The red granules, though reduced to a flat two-dimensional state in their photographic format, are almost tangible on the surface of the page. The ink seeps into the paper while the red soil seemingly emerges from within.

Figure 21. Richard Long, *Dusty Boots Line* (1988), The Sahara.
Figure 22. Richard Long, *Five Paths* (2002), New Art Centre, Roche Court.
Figure 23. Richard Long, *A Circle in the Andes* (1972).

Figure 24. Process Documentation, Shotgun Bruise (2011)



FIREARMS

Mental Preparation for Good Shooting

Three things are essential to good shooting.
First, you must form the habit of constantly applying the correct methods.
Second, you must remain relaxed in mind and body while shooting.
Third, you must think of nothing except the shot you are about to fire.

Simplified Pistol and Revolver Shooting
Charles Edward Chapel

Figure 26: From the *Whole* series (2011), .22 calibre on paper, 500mm x 700mm.

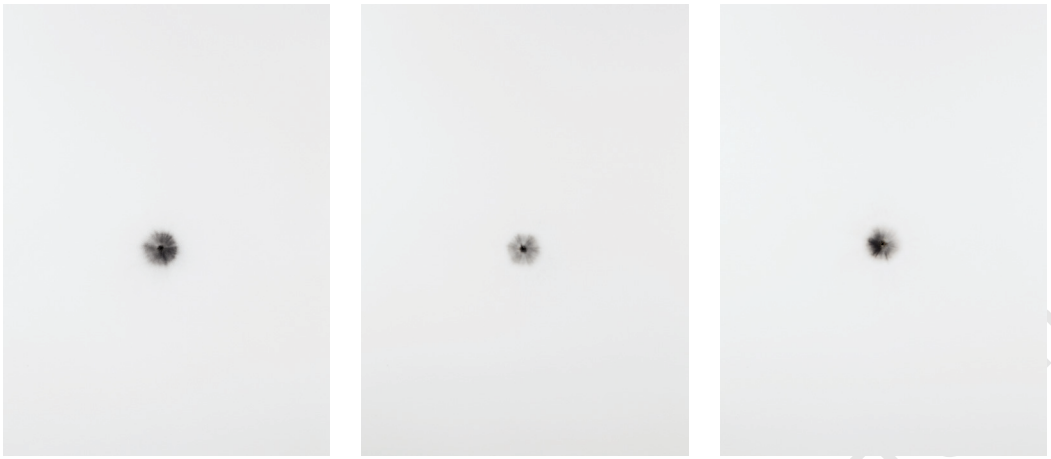


Figure 27. From the *Whole* series (2011), .22 calibre on paper, 500mm x 700mm.

Figure 28. From the *Whole* series (2011), 38 Special calibre on paper, 500mm x 700mm.

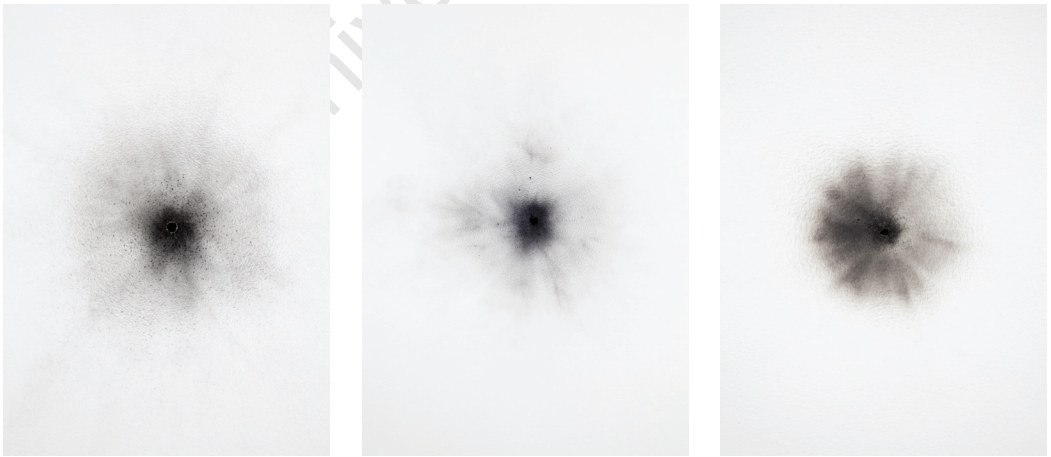


Figure 29. From the *Whole* series (2011), Detail, 500mm x 700mm.

Figure 30. From the *'Weg' (A/way)* series (2011), 38 Special calibre, 1500mm x 1800mm.

Figure 31. From *'Weg'(A/way)* series (2011), 38 Special calibre, Detail.

Figure 32. From the *'Weg' (A/way)* series (2011), Number 7 Shot, 12 guage shotgun on paper, 1500mm x 1800mm.

Figure 33. From the *'Weg' (A/way)* series (2011), Number 7 Shot, 12 guage shotgun on paper, Detail.

Figure 34. From the *Whole* series (2011), 38 Special calibre on paper, 500mm x 700mm.

Firearms

The double barrel of the shotgun rests at its nape in my left hand, pulling the firearm towards me. The gun explodes into my body when I squeeze the trigger, bursting the surface veins in my shoulder whilst launching a raid of metal clusters into the paper. I seldom hold onto anything so tight and upon the blast, the tension is released, the gun sags from my shoulder and an empty shell is coughed up.

My father introduced us to shooting at a very young age. Our family of four would drive to a shooting range outside Kimberley on a Sunday morning. All the men at the firing line would ceremoniously stand with the barrels of their shotguns bowed safely, dangling like broken necks from their elbows. At individual turns, the gun would be clipped into position, tucked into their bodies and after the anticipated cry: "pull," a brief aim and pan – burst fire. My father taught us how to shoot. We learnt about the weight and feel of a shotgun and the nasty bite of a revolver.

The ink dot I had been drawing subsequently became a hole, and the precision drawing tool I had been working with was replaced by a shotgun and then a revolver. My firearm works were a radical departure from the silent clusters of dots I had been seeping into paper. When considering the marks I had been making and the method involved with their production, the ink drawings seem to have pooled and preserved the time I spent making them, while the shot pieces, like photographs, seemed to present a moment.

The firearm works that I have made are paper works, and range in size from manageable 500mm x700mm formats to large 1800mm x 1500mm pieces. Contrary to what one might assume to be an effortless mode of image making, firing into paper is an endeavour characterised by its own challenges. These include gaining access to the use of a variety of firearms, experimenting with and determining the working distance between the firearm and the paper, test-firing into an assortment of cotton based papers (with reference to surface-texture and density) and developing a system for managing and handling very large sheets of paper in perilous outdoor conditions.

The smaller works consist of singular moments, a hole shot into the centre of the page, defined by a contained shroud of gunpowder. These works are created at what would be termed *close range*. The nature of the gunpowder residue, a trace – similar in many ways to the bleed of my Rotring pen, is calibre- and subsequently force- or impact-specific. Each round produces a mark consequent to the distance between the paper and the muzzle and influenced by the position of my body with regard to the direction of the wind.

The use of firearms contributed to a shift in my practice, introducing the notion of

embodiment and the production of my work as a performance on my part.[13] Emerging from this process, as if incarnated, were recurring ideas related to absence, time, place and distance.

Though my firearm works require me to be as accurate as possible, they are not about the target, my skill or the objective of killing or destroying something. I am interested in the rip, the blast, the displacement of the material, and, in the case of the revolver, the residue.

The large works *(Weg)* are reminiscent of maps for me. Echoing the Rotring pen drawings, the bullet holes function as markers of some sort, exploring geographic place and alluding to the materiality of the paper and its surface, each work embodying this in a slightly different manner.

The .38 special[14] produces a violent slap, smacking into the paper at anything between fifteen and twenty five centimetres from the revolver's muzzle – an action that requires me to stand firmly, with my arms stretched forward and both hands supporting the revolver. The shotgun[15] puts me at anything between seven and ten metres from my paper and produces clusters of comparatively small pellet holes, scattered amidst the larger gaps made by the projectile of the shell's cap.[16]

Suspended in the gallery space from the ceiling and illuminated by a single light source, these works *(Weg)* function as objects for me; sculptural pieces that cast shadows and allow light to pool through their holes and fall onto the floor or the wall. Though silent, they are witness to my time and my activity – quiet manifestations of the violent explosions that produced them.

The smaller, single-shot works *(Whole)*, in all their simplicity, have become *dwelling pieces* for me, demanding that I relentlessly return to think about the method of their production, and their subsequent existence. My initial thoughts with reference to the *Whole* series

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[13] A shift from studio-based drawing activities as a result of a seated body and the slight movement of a hand – to the physical activity of loading a gun, walking away from the target and employing my whole body in the production of a single action.

[14] A handgun (revolver) equipped with a revolving cylinder into which a specific calibre cartridge will be loaded. Most cylinders carry six slugs. As the trigger is squeezed, the cylinder rotates and positions the next bullet for firing purposes. When firing a revolver it is safe practice to use the weapon in a double action; manually cocking the hammer, followed by a gentle squeeze of the trigger.

[15] The shotgun is a shoulder arm, designed to fire multiple pellets (small projectiles) at the pull of a trigger. Depending on the model and make, between two and eight cartridges can be loaded and fired consecutively.

[16] The distance between the barrel of the firearm and the paper I am shooting onto varies and is determined amongst other things by the resilience of the paper.

concerned their seemingly ambiguous allusion to a moment in time.

I experienced the works – little breaths, signifying moments, past and present – (whilst simultaneously terrifying and violent) – as meditations on a sense of *now*, an affirmation of life, enduring and fiercely coming into being. Each shot I fired was an awakening, demanding me to be attentive, in the here and the now.[17]

I understood this experience as a moment suspended in time. A moment crucial to the activity of looking at a target and waiting for just the right instant to squeeze the trigger. A brief anticipation of that moment occurs, followed by the recognition of the explosion in your hand, the recoil, the smell of the gunpowder and the accompanying blast (a deafening bang muffled into a light pop by the protective ear-cups).

My thoughts regarding this experience are of an acknowledgement that human beings are mortally bound to the passing of time, something Robert Pogue Harrison refers to as *mortal time* (Harrison, 2003:2) and a concept Bill Viola repeatedly draws on in his work, employing time as an active component to the making and experience of his video pieces:

> Human beings, as all living things, are essentially creatures of time. However it is human beings through their higher consciousness who have been given the knowledge of time, the ability to extend the self into time with the capacity to anticipate and to recall. For the individual, the two finalities at either end of these extensions are the great subjective poles of birth and death (Viola, 1995: 278)

The single-shot works, initially referencing a moment in time, have become an existential reference to the simultaneous occurrence of life and death, an exploration of *mortal time*. The bullet passing through the paper leaves a gaping hole, functioning as a premonition of our inevitable passing, an unknown certainty.

Whilst exploring this concept, I came across the work of German photographer Walter Schels and his partner Beate Lakotta. In 2003 Schels and Lakotta embarked on a project titled

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[17] In an essay titled *The Weather Forecast and Now*: Olafur Eliasson, Danish-Icelandic artist, discusses the contemporary notion of *now* as extended time:

> 'Now' has been stretched to last longer and longer. Unlike most animals, we (the human race) have the ability to link one moment to the next, creating our sensation of presence. Time flows continuously in a single motion, so to speak with each moment naturally relating to the next. Edmund Husserl added that our expectations of the coming moment and the memory of the one just passed are all part of our sense on 'now' (Morley 2009:123).

Life Before Death (2004). In a little more than a year, they had photographed and interviewed twenty six terminally ill patients at various hospices in Germany. The project involved the recording of a person before and after their death.

The images are black and white photographs of faces. Presented in pairs, they read left to right as alive and dead. The photographs are accompanied by excerpts; paragraphs composed by Lakotta from conversations with the individuals taking part in their project, expressing their feelings, hopes and fear of dying.

Schels and Lakotta discuss the work as emerging from a recognition of their own mortality, and for Schels in particular, his fear of death. In an interview for the UK Guardian Online (Moorhead, 2008), Schels describes his encounter with the people he photographed as follows:

> What I was used to, was people who smiled for the camera. It's usually an automatic response. But these people never smiled. They were incredibly serious; and more than that, they weren't pretending anything anymore. People are almost always pretending something, but these people had lost that need. I felt it enabled me as a photographer to get as close as it's possible to the core of a person; when you're facing the end, everything that's not real is stripped away. You're the most real you'll ever be, more real than you've ever been before (Moorhead, 2008).

The people in Schels' photographs were waiting to die. His images are not mere representations of people before and after their death, they are representations of people contemplating the immanence of their death. The unknowable and as Simon Critchley suggests, the unrepresentable:

> In phenomenological terms, death is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act…Death is ungraspable and exceeds both intentionality and the correlative structures of phenomenology, whether the latter is understood in its Hegelian, Hussurlian or Heideggerian senses…there can be no phenomenology of death because it is a state of affairs about which I can find neither an adequate intention nor intuitive fulfilment. Death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are mis-representations, or rather representations of an absence (Critchley, 1997:13).

Heiner Schmitz
age: 52
born: 26th November 1951
first portrait taken: 19th November 2003
died: 14th December 2003

Heiner Schmitz saw the affected area in the MRI scan of his brain. He realised immediately that he didn't have much time left. Schmitz is a fast talker, highly articulate, quick-witted, but not without depth. He works in advertising. Everyone has to be on top form – on the ball. Normally. Heiner's friends don't want him to be sad. They try to take his mind off things. At the hospice, they watch football with him just like they used to do. Beers, cigarettes, a bit of a party in the room. The girls from the agency bring him flowers. Many of them come in twos, because they don't want to be alone with him. What do you talk about with someone who has been sentenced to death? Some of them even say 'get well soon' as they're leaving. 'Hope you're soon back on track, mate!'
'No one asks me how I feel,' says Heiner Schmitz. 'Because they're all shit scared. I find it really upsetting the way they desperately avoid the subject, talking about all sorts of other things. Don't they get it? I'm going to die! That's all I think about, every second when I'm on my own.'

Figure 35. Walter Schels, From the *Life Before Death* series, *Heiner Schmitz* (2003).

A substantial amount of the thinking I have been doing has revolved around this un-representational state of being: the threshold between life and death and the moment that it would occur. The single-shot works, I find, reference that threshold, simultaneously representing that which is present and that which is absent. In retrospect, a little echo of Schels' work.

The contemplation of our death in lieu of our imminent passing, whether it be due to terminal illness, old age, random acts of violence, murder, warfare or our own hand is a terrifying experience, similarly resistant to representation. My encounter with the representation of this kind of contemplation has been largely informed by prose and poetry.[18] Within the scope of the visual, I feel that the single-shot works are also an attempt at describing this terror, or representing the unrepresentable.

As self-emptying, singular moments, they seem to spill into their holes, folding into themselves as if they were voids, singularities referencing the unknown and the unknowable, a psychic place of indwelling.[19] Ben Okri has written an uncanny description of this experience:

> He stood in the darkness for a long time. Slowly, he became aware that he could no longer see himself. His physical presence had succumbed to the darkness. He had disappeared. For a moment he too was invisible to himself. He nearly screamed. The darkness dissolved his existence. After a while he was no longer sure if he was there or not. He wasn't even sure if he was standing on solid ground or floating above an abyss. He felt himself floating. He felt parts of himself being obliterated by the darkness. His mind became empty. It too was invaded by the complete blackness. Then he became conscious of the silence. The silence and the blackness cancelled him out completely. Soon he was adrift in an empty universe, without light and without sound. He might as well have died (1996:127).

When looking at the gunpowder residue works as a series, they seem to repeatedly function as a tide of white that ebbs to and from the centre of each sheet; suggesting that in

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[18] The works of T.S Eliot, Philip Larkin, Samuel Beckett and N.P van Wyk Louw, to name but a few.

[19] In conversation with Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton (1990) Anish Kapoor discusses his thoughts regarding the void in relation to one of his works titled *Void* (1991). Kapoor describes the void as a state within, embellished with fear and darkness and elaborates on this darkness by asserting: "There is nothing so black as the black within. No blackness is as black as that." (Morley 2009: 91).

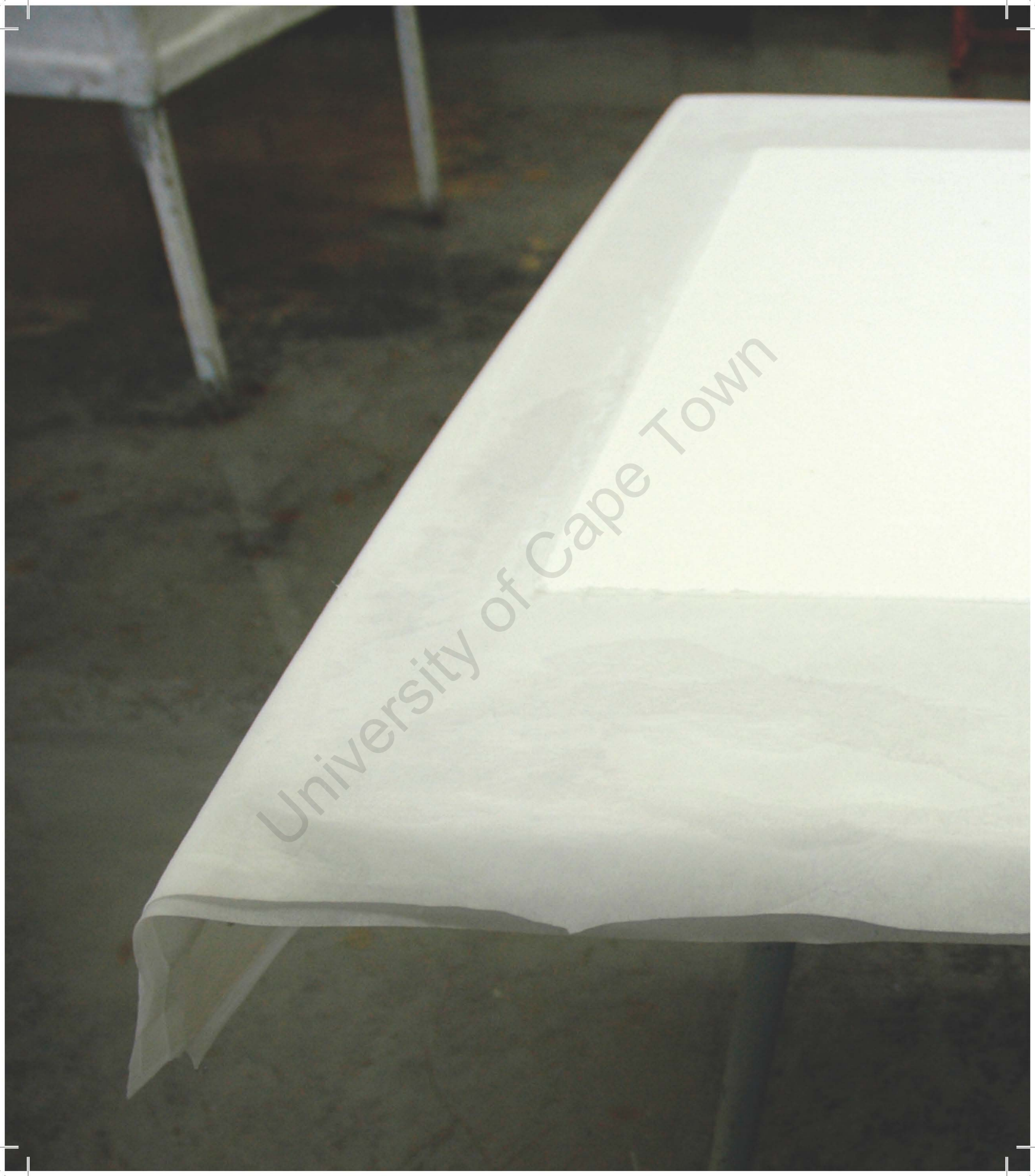
Figure 36. From the *Whole* series (2011), 38 Special calibre on paper, 500mm x 700mm.

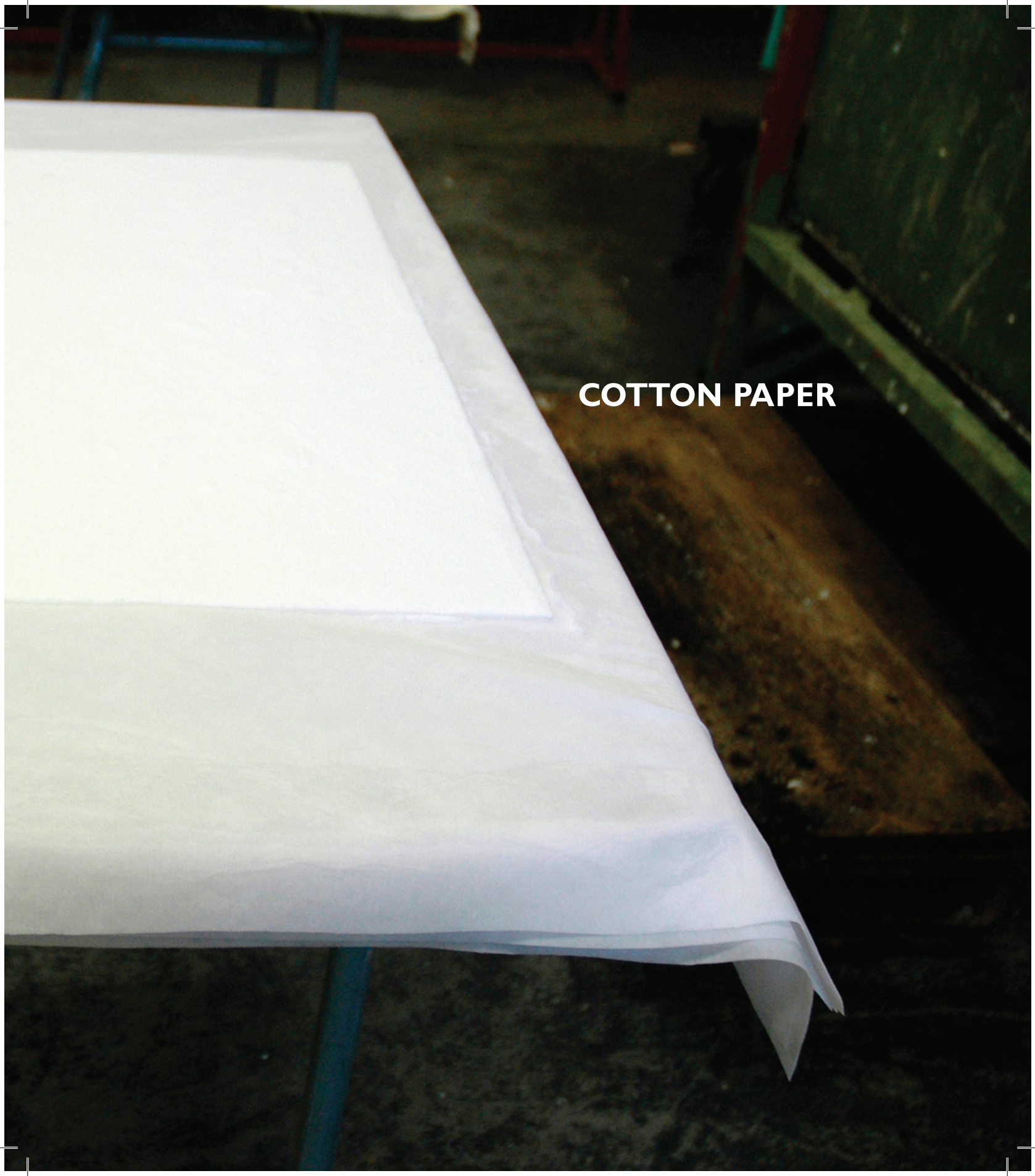
fact it is not the residue that lies on the paper, but rather the paper that rests on the powder. This relationship between form and content, a strange inversion of how I understand surfaces and mark making to function, gesture in some way to an internal world, a psychic place.

Undoubtedly murky terrain, subject to arduous monologues, this is a nihilistic place where the self contemplates its existence and, as Okri explores, is unable to scream.

Bill Viola, with reference to a work of his titled, *Anthem* (1983), describes the scream as the will to live, the expression of the body in the face of an overwhelming emotion, and refers to Jean Genet when mentioning that "violence and life are virtually synonymous" (Viola, 1988:13). Though silent or muted, the single-shot works seem for me to describe this struggle, a muted scream.

I return to Robert Pogue Harrison with reference to this internal world and his interest in our *humic foundations* (Harrison, 2003: x). In his preface to *The Dominion of the Dead*, Harrison writes: "If humans dwell, the dead, as it were, indwell – and very often in the same space" (2003:x). I have been very curious about this idea in conjunction with the work that I have been doing, specifically regarding the single-shot works. Though Harrison's reference is to a more collective place of indwelling, I recognise this place of indwelling as one of memory, mourning and loss, a place that resides inside us. A place where the dead are invoked, remembered and encountered.




COTTON PAPER

Cotton Paper

Amidst organizing my mother's cremation and her memorial service, we needed to identify her body at the Kimberley police morgue for the purpose of acquiring a death certificate. She had been laid onto a stainless steel table, waist high, covered in a white sheet. Her body was whole, her skin, a shade of pearl. This was my mother; I knew her face, her arms and her hands.

The first step to making paper from cotton garments involves the systematic stripping of the fabric; removal of buttons, stitching and or embroidery, seams and tags. The remaining cloth is cut into small fragments (roughly two centimetres in length and width) and pulverised for two to three hours, separating the woven fibres from one another and reducing the garment into a fine, white, liquid pulp.

The pulp is poured into a deep basin, waist high, and diluted with water. The paper is made by delving a large sieve frame into the pulp, scooping it deeply, at an angle, whilst skilfully bringing the frame to rest in a horizontal position, allowing the water to drain from the sieve and the cotton fibres to remain on its surface.

Next, the frame is turned upside down onto a wet sheet of white felt. The paper maker systematically transfers pressure onto its supporting structure as the sheet of wet cotton paper is relocated from the frame onto the felt.

Once the cotton fibre pulp has been exhausted and the maximum number of paper sheets has been produced, the wet felt sheets are layered onto one another and placed into a press, removing the excess water.

Finally the sheets are separated from one another with dry layers of felt and corrugated board and tightly stacked and weighted above and below one another, in a drying cabinet.

Figure 38 - 40. Documentation of working process, Making paper at Phumani Paper, Johannesburg (2011).

Figure 41. *Keep* (2011),
Cotton Paper, 430mm x 600mm.

Keep

Three sheets of white cotton paper (425mm x 595mm) made from my mother's garments are presented on exhibition plinths, tailor made in width and length to the format of the paper, a little more than one metre off the ground and displayed as precious objects.

The paper seems to hover above the stand and is separated five centimetres from the surface of the plinth at a discreet elevation. The exhibition plinths are placed close to one another and each sheet of paper is lit directly from above with a dedicated light source.

Need I describe the hideous face brick buildings that line the streets of downtown Kimberley?

After identifying my mother's body in one of these buildings, our little group of three (my father, my sister and I) made our way up a plated metal staircase to an administration office. Here we were asked questions about the 'deceased,' her address, age, marrital status, occupation and so on. The printed document read: "Cause of death: Unnatural."

Every page in her ID book was stamped:
DECEASED,
DECEASED,
DECEASED.

This was the start of her disappearance. The official blotted her out, fixed the word across her photograph, and photocopied the document four times: a copy for each of us, and one for the record. Her face is unrecognisable in the photocopy that I received.

I made contact with Phumani Paper, an archival paper mill in Johannesburg that was willing to produce paper from cotton garments for me. I selected from my mother's white cotton garments the clothing that I could bear to part with, sent the parcel to Johannesburg and a little more than a month later received fifteen beautiful sheets of pristinely white paper.

I initially had the paper made as a surface to work onto. Upon opening the parcel, I could not imagine making a mark onto it; the paper already seemed so finite, so still. I resolved to use it, as is.

Whilst moving house in January, I lost all fifteen sheets.

I returned to the three remaining pieces of clothing that I had intended to keep, and, concerned for their safe arrival in Johannesburg, decided to make the journey myself. After almost a year's correspondence, I met with Amanda Coppes who introduced me to Nkosinathi Ndlandla. We made my mother's paper together. I now have nine sheets of paper unexpectedly containing trace elements of my mother's hair in places. They are finished works *(Keep)*, separate and different to the drawings and shot paper works that contain the mark or the residue that I have made, and speak to me of my mother's absence.

We saved samples of the pulp from various beating stages. To preserve the samples, they had to be frozen. I returned to Cape Town with the frozen pulp samples in a cooler-bag. I wanted to animate these remnants and watch them move. They became the pulp video works *(Waking)* on show.

Figure 42. From the *Waking* series (2011), Video.

Figure 43. From the *Waking* series (2011), Video.

Waking – Video

Waking comprises three video works of the pulp, fabricated from my mother's clothing. The pulp, consisting of white fibres and small fragments of cotton garment intertwined and submerged in water, is seen as a sediment of white, sequentially animated – moving slowly at first, as if waking or lulled by a gentle tide.

The large mass of fibrous white evolves as it is systematically swept from its resting place into a vertical rise, ascending gently at first and gradually becoming more erratic in its spiral movement. The frame of the camera functions as the container in which the pulp moves. Once the remains are virtually completely dispersed and displaced, they slowly sink and return to their initial resting place. This cycle continues indefinitely.

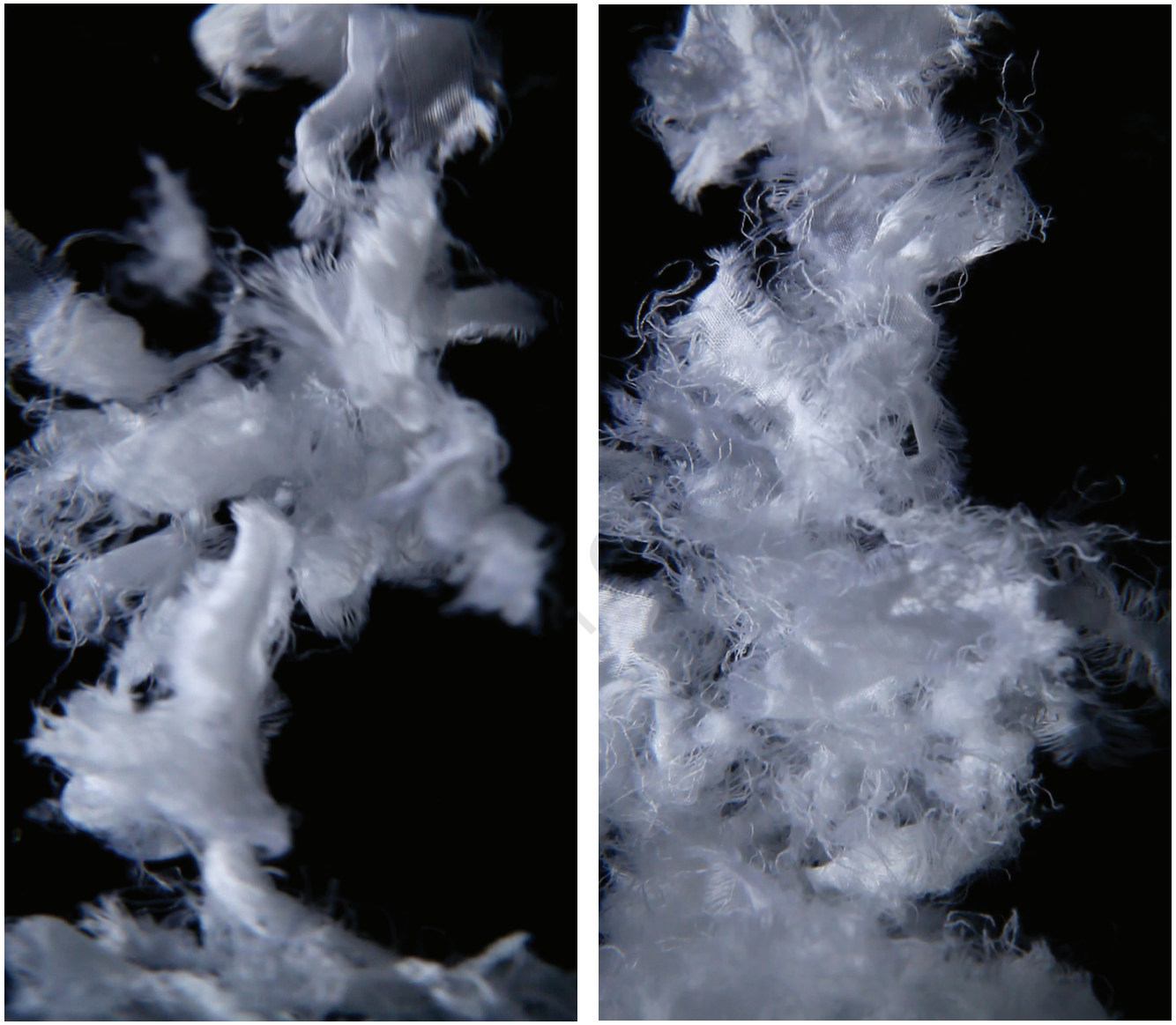


Figure 44 - 45. From the *Waking* series (2011), Video.


WEATHER BALLOONS

Weather Balloons

Weather balloons are launched twice daily at airports across the globe to aid meteorologists with their observation and measurement of atmospheric pressure, humidity, temperature and wind speed. The retrieved data is used for weather forecasting, aviation purposes and other specialist research activities. Data is transmitted from radiosondes, transmitting instruments housed in a light box attached to the balloon with a cord.

The data is received by a satellite, tracking the position of the balloon as it ascends to an altitude of approximately 35000 feet, where it will eventually rupture due to diminishing air pressure. The balloon ascends rapidly as it soars into the stratosphere. Whilst ascending, it increases in size, expanding until it reaches a threshold, bursts and falls back to earth. The instruments on board are for obvious reasons seldom retrieved and, for all intents and purposes, disappear.

Tested for the first time in 1892, French meteorologist, Léon Teisserenc de Bort's large, encumbered balloons were the first human made vessels to venture into the sky, discovering the tropopause and the stratosphere. Today, regardless of the availability of weather satellites and radar, balloons are still essential observational vehicles. Across the globe, hundreds of men and women daily walk a large balloon to a launch pad at approximately 0000 and then again at 1200 Coodinated Universal Time, communicate via radio to air traffic control for clearance, and release these temporal vessels into the sky.

Figure 47. Process Work (2011), Cyanotype.

I first became interested in weather balloons while in pursuit of a vehicle for exploring the sky as an area of interest, referencing the liminal and the sublime. I launched my first weather balloon at the South African Weather Service into the dark just after one o'clock on a Thursday morning. The experience of holding onto and releasing something so incredibly large into the night sky, knowing that an object handled by me would rise to approximately 35000 feet above, was exhilarating. The night was clear and we (I was assisted by meteorologist, Johan Singleton) watched the balloon, illuminated by the moon, rapidly climb away from us until it was a speck equal in size to the stars.

Prior to the launch, we waited for the tracking satellite to register the signal of our radio transmitting instruments. As the balloon was launched, the satellite activated and tilted its dish in response to the ascent. I found the relationship between the satellite and the balloon to be stoically poetic; the animated head of the satellite peering after the balloon, tracking its ascent, receiving its transmission and finally bowing its head in the direction of the eventual plummet.

The weather balloons that I have been using are made from latex and vary in size depending on their cubic metre volume. The first balloon I acquired was a 350 gram (defect) balloon from the South African Weather Service; cool, soft, delicate and inflated to a diameter of one and a half metres. A balloon like this, filled with hydrogen (or helium), will increase to approximately the size of a double decker bus whilst ascending and burst once the latex expands beyond its limits.

Curious about understanding the magnitude and inherent structure of such a rupture I started bursting these large balloons by inflating them beyond their capacity with air. My project subsequently started relying considerably more on the participation of other people with specialist knowledge specific to film industry lighting, high speed camera work and post production editing. The set-up, execution and documentation of a shoot like this required the assistance and input of additional persons and became quite an event.

Due to the hardware limitations of our high speed camera, we could only start recording the balloon a fraction of a second before it burst. This demanded an accurate trigger response from our camera operator, a difficult task considering that we had no way of estimating when that burst would occur. Needless to say, the burst of the balloon became a much anticipated moment, an aspect that I would draw from when editing the final sequence for the video piece on show.

Bursting weather balloons are a rare sight. To witness such an event, apart from

having access to a powerful telescope, a range of atmospheric variables also need to fall into place.[20] The work that I have been doing with bursting weather balloons has been in studio conditions. The burst, though anticipated, was an unexpectedly violent explosion.

Weather balloons, if observed through a telescope at high altitudes, burst without a perceivable sound; a distant, invisible and mute action. The balloons I had been working with burst as if they were a gunshot or a blast.

The contemplation of the burst gave rise to further explorations with reference to the inherently violent sound and its perceived absence. Hearing the balloon burst asserted for me that the burst had in fact occurred and that something had been altered. One is however only able to witness and experience that sound when you are close to it. Similar to firing a revolver or a shotgun, I experienced waiting for the balloon to burst and anticipating the *bang* as a suspended moment, reverberating through one's body as an affirmation of one's presence.

The balloon works that I have been making are however silent. The balloons expand, burst and fall in silence. Slow, gentle movements, suspended in time, they seem to echo the waking pulp footage, the firearm works and the drawings in pen.

[20] Footage that I have come across online reveals a distant, small white weather balloon hovering in a blue sky, enclosed by the circular format of a telescope, bursting into a contained expansion of white.

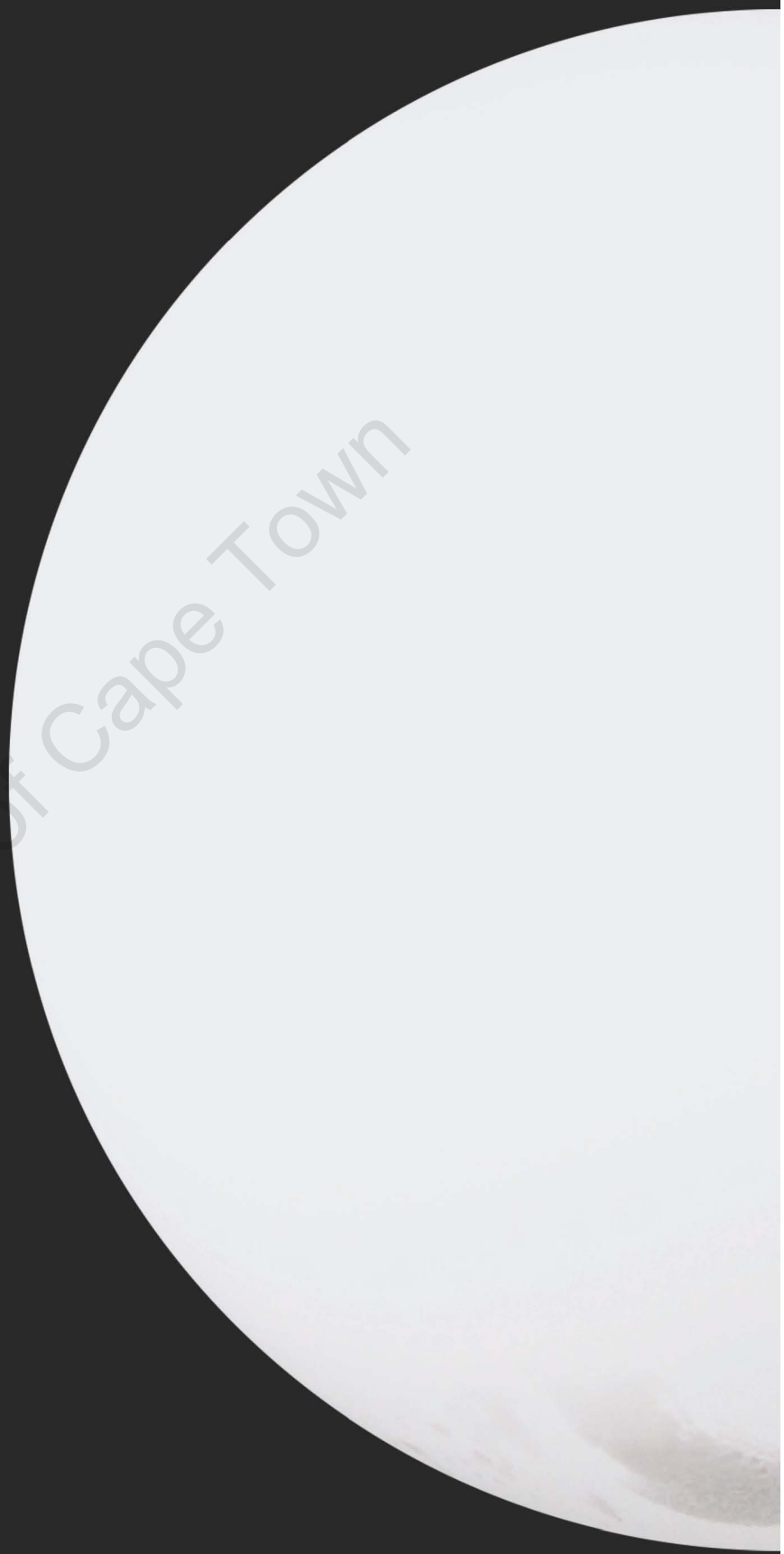
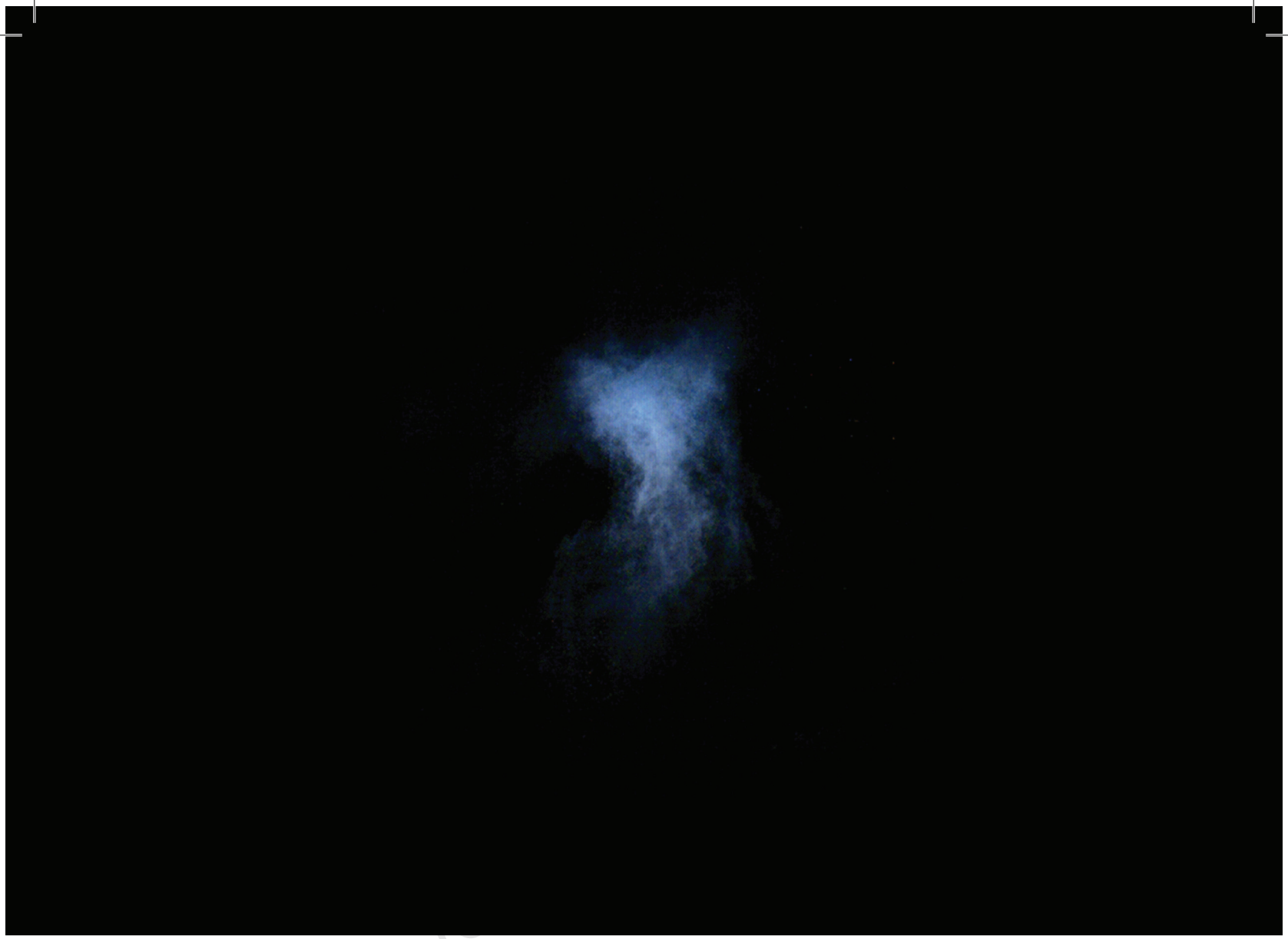


Figure 48. Process Documentation, A weather balloon photographed in studio conditions shortly before its burst (2011).

Figure 49 – 50. *Burst* (2011), Video.

Burst – Video

Burst is projected onto a large screen, suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space and reveals three silent bursting balloon sequences. Each sequence fades in from black to reveal a large white weather balloon extending across the projection format. The balloon remains still for anything between fifteen seconds and one full minute. The burst, though anticipated, occurs unexpectedly, slowly revealing the structure of the balloon burst as reminiscent of a chest cavity or a ribcage.



The shards gently make their way out of the frame, taciturn as if choreographed, and exit into the darkness, seeming to fall into the space itself. Each burst is different and produces a soft white powder residue that rises, falls and fades into the background.

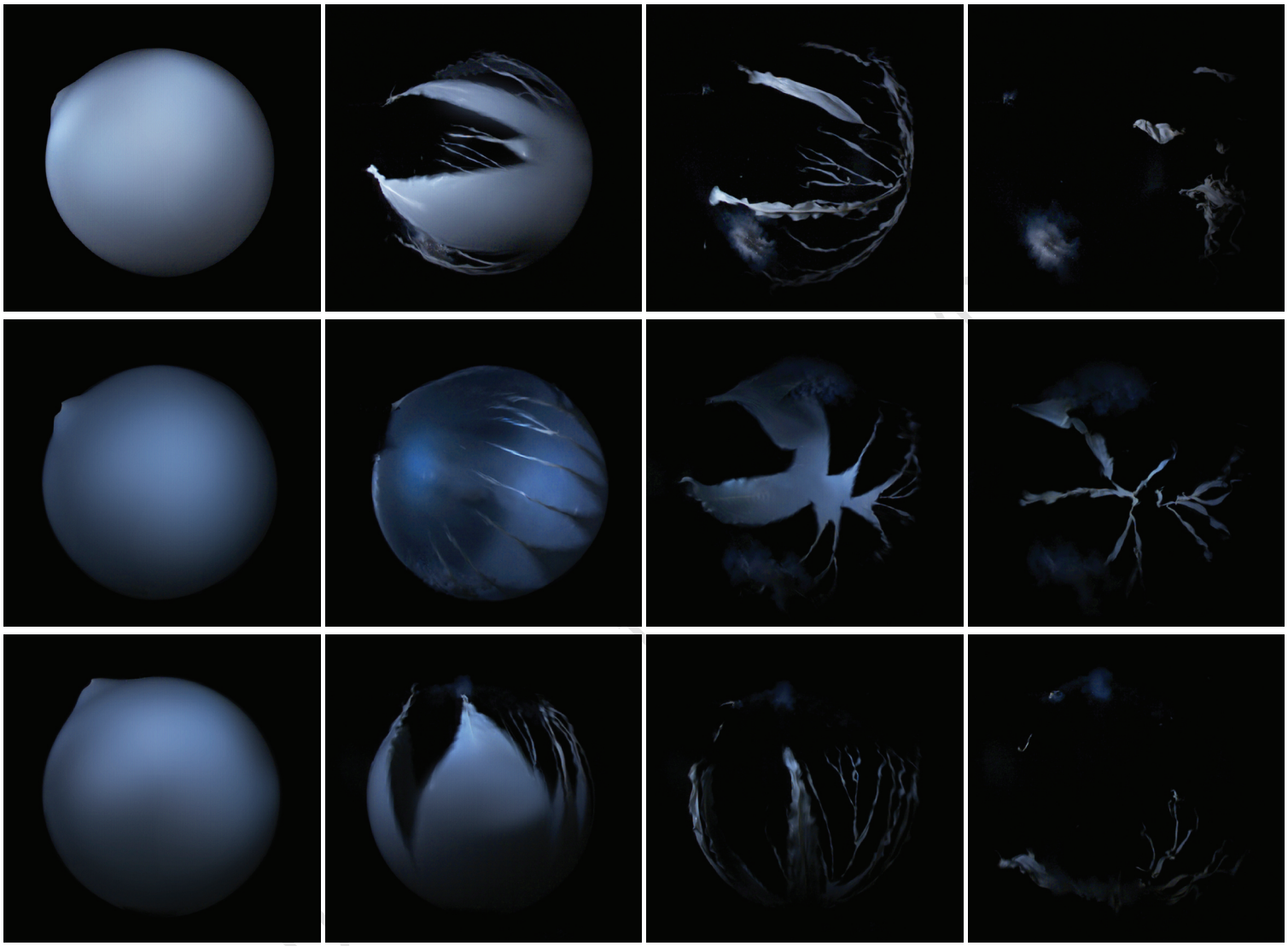
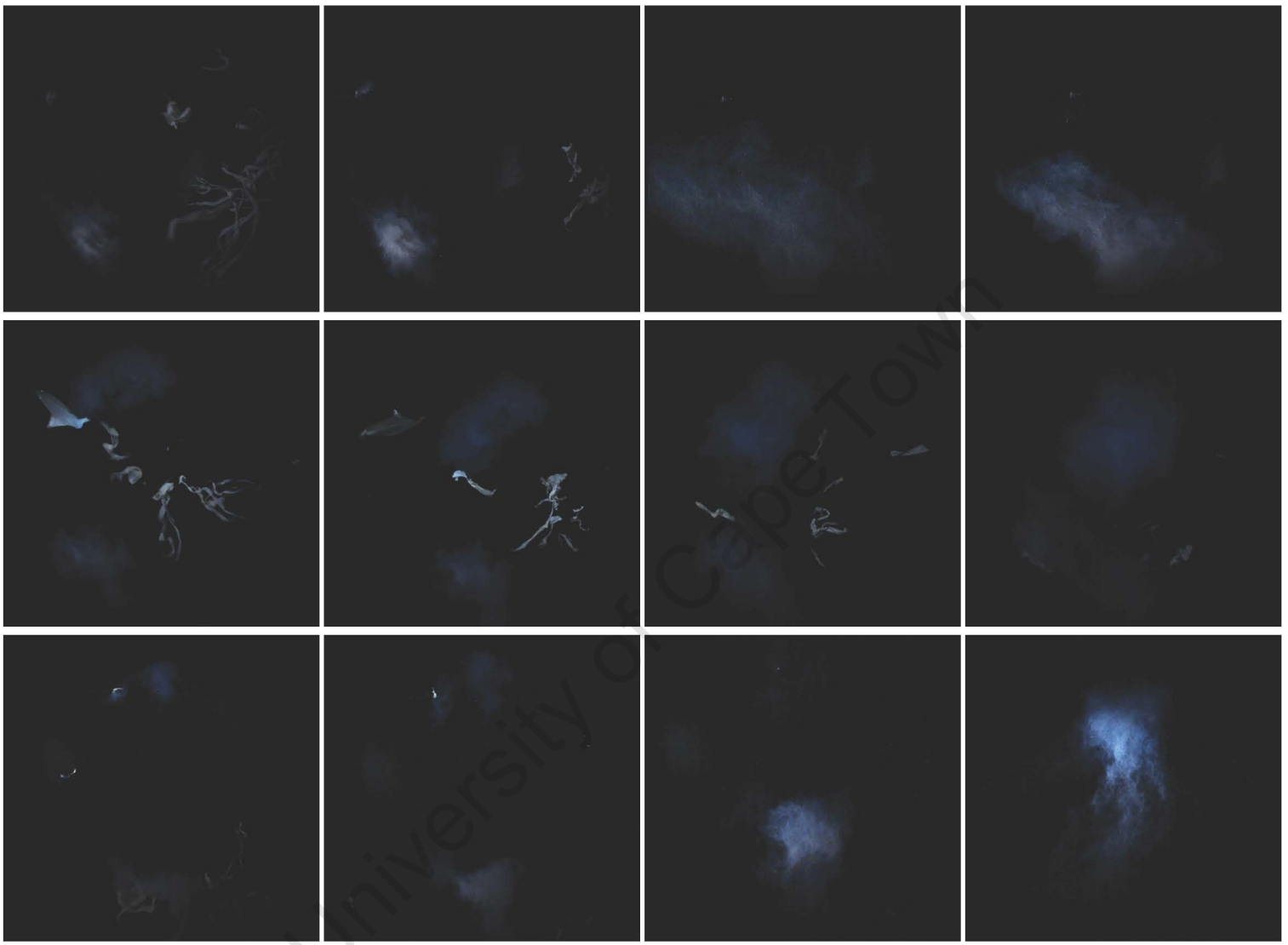


Figure 51 – 53. Stills from *Burst* sequences (2011).



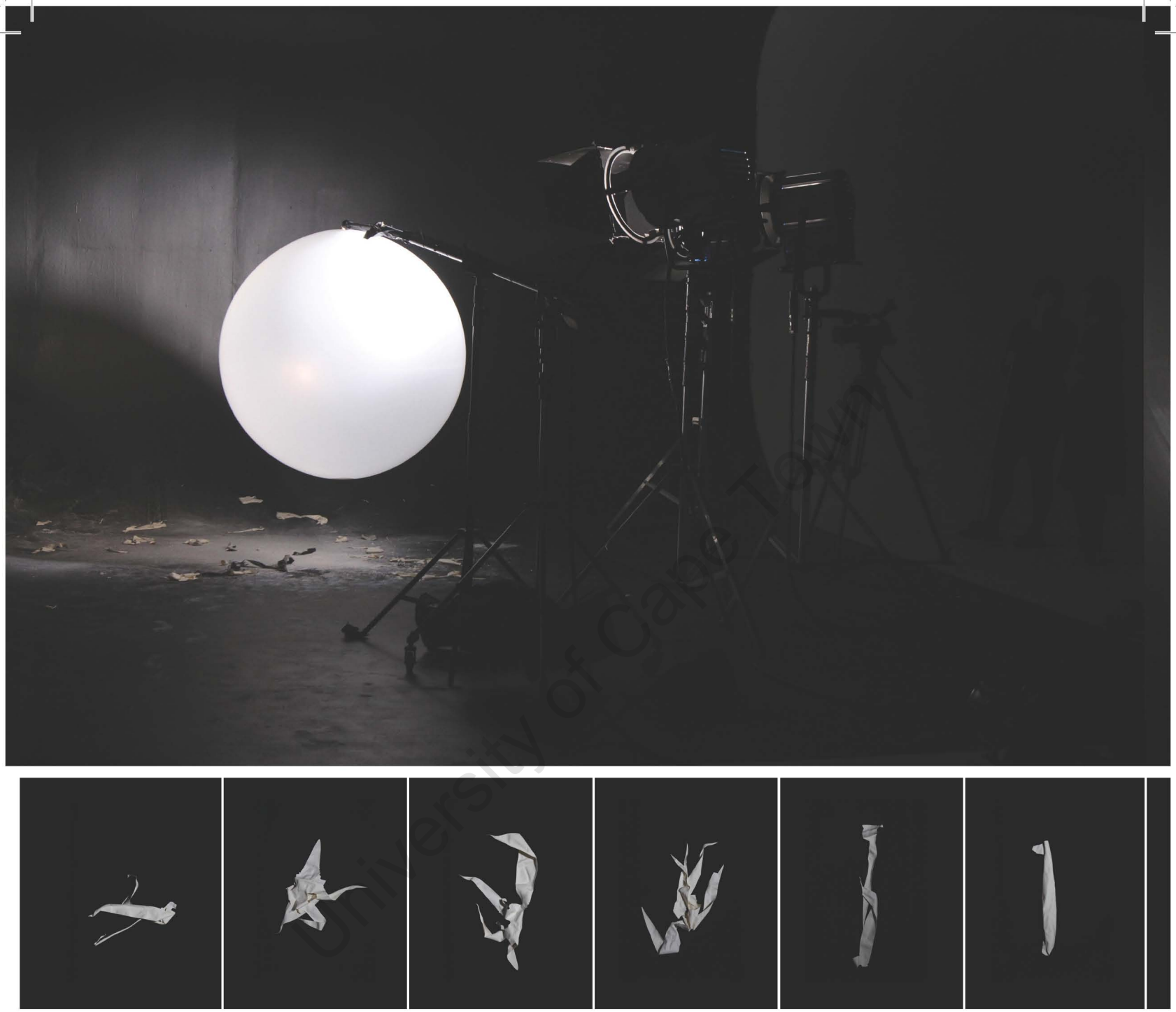
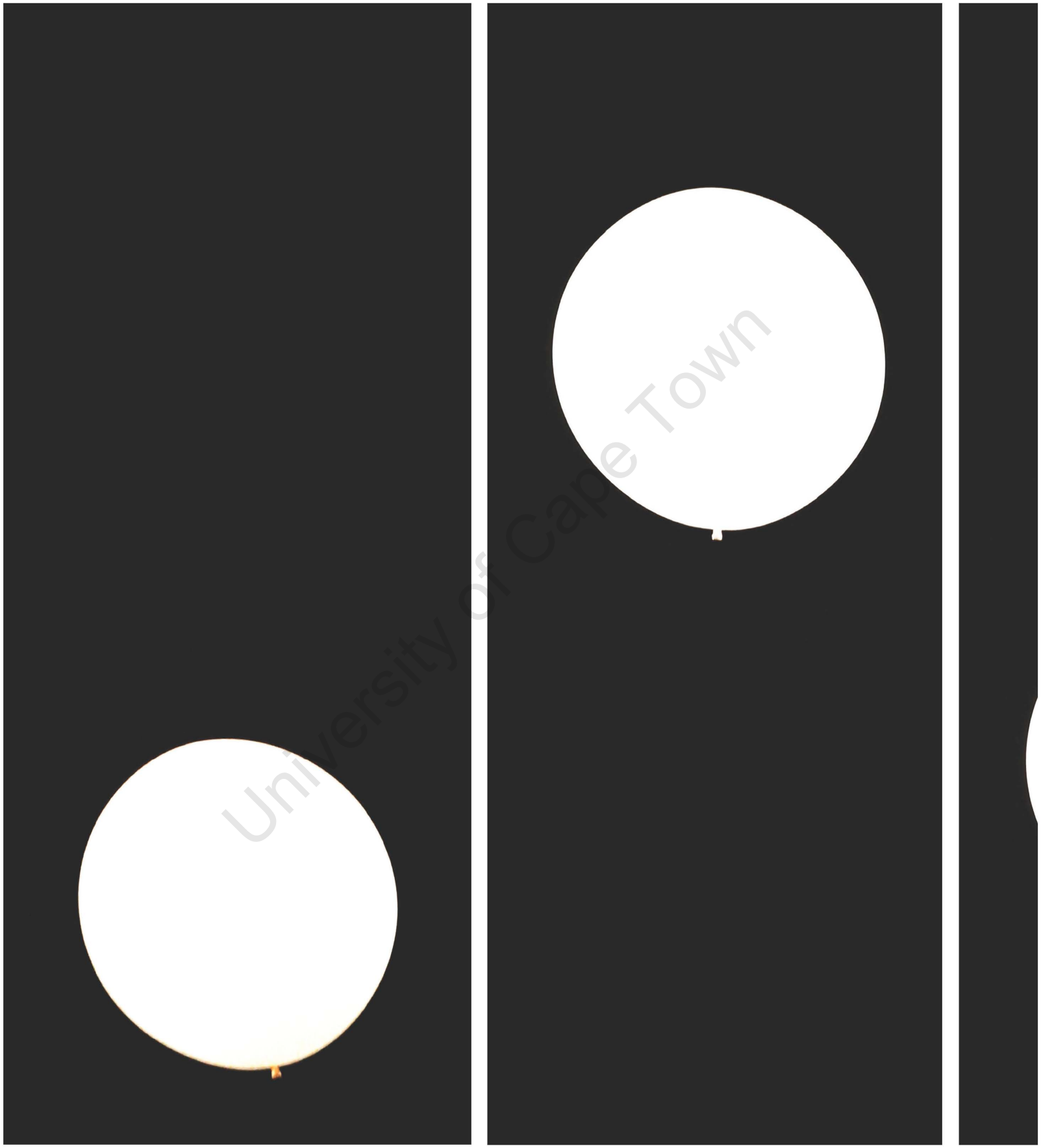
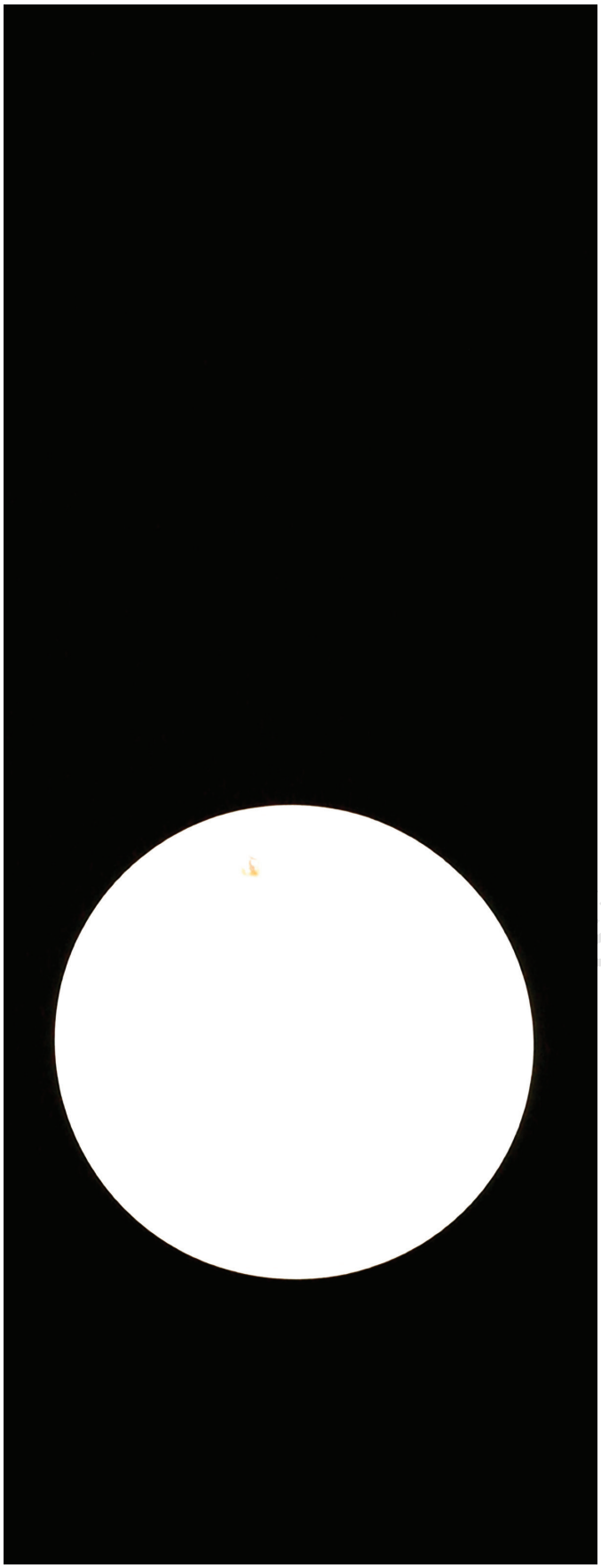


Figure 54. Process Documentation, *Burst* (2011),
The weather balloon is attached to the tip of a boom and strapped to a hose fitting. The balloon is inflated by means of an air compressor.

Figure 55. Process Documentation, *Burst* (2011),
Weather balloon shards.

Figure 56. Process Documentation, *Burst* (2011), Weather balloon burst.

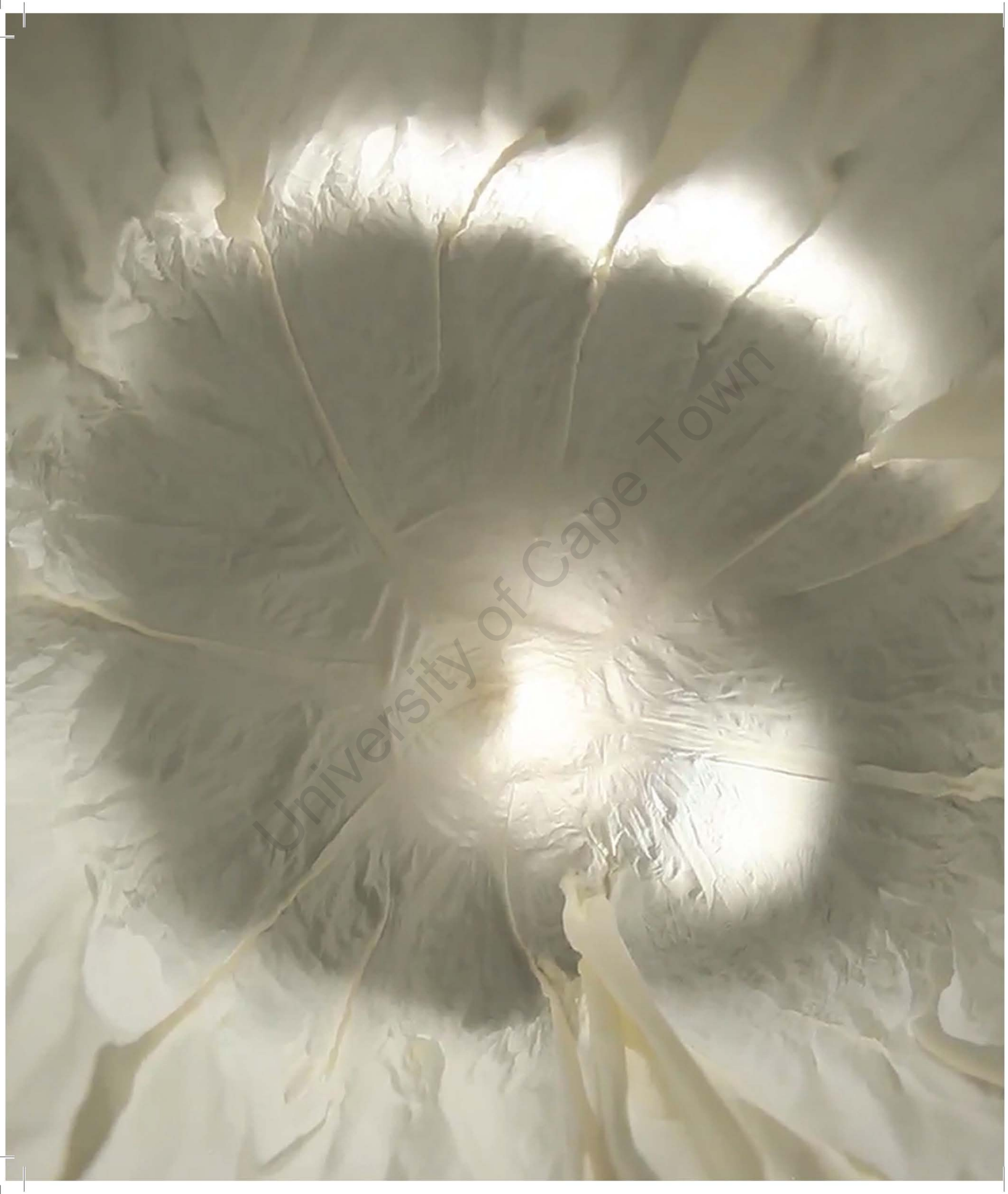


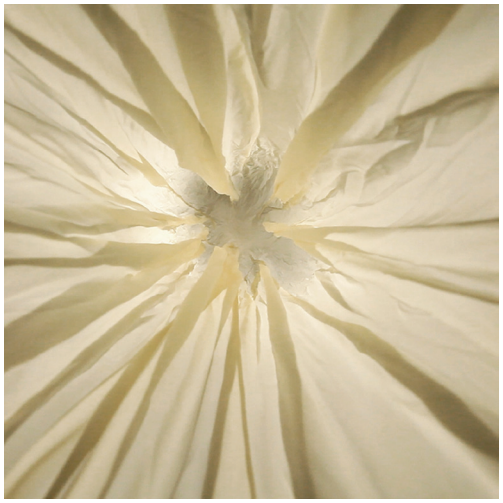


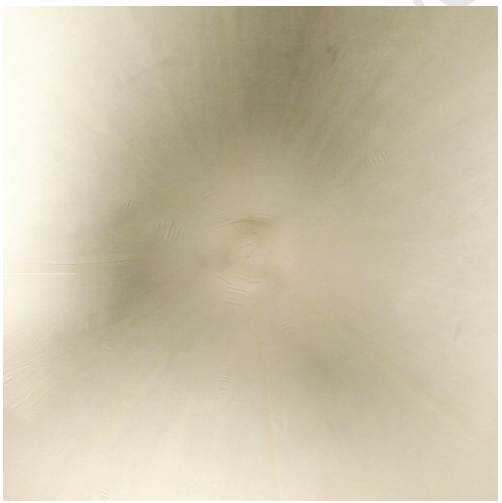
Falling – Video

Extending from the floor to the ceiling in portrait format, the projected footage reveals a large white weather balloon falling and rising. The balloon falls up; the footage is presented upside down, leaving the balloon to gravitate toward the ceiling. This vertical movement becomes a temporal source of light in the exhibition space. Functioning as a beacon, the balloon indicates place by temporarily illuminating the space. The timing of the appearance of the balloon hinges on my experience of the anticipation involved with waiting for a balloon to burst; consequently varying the time sequence between the rise and fall and leaving the space in darkness for short periods of time.

Figure 57. *Falling* (2011), Video.







'Weer Lug' (Lightning, Weer: weather, again, Lug/Lig: Air/lift,light) – Video

Filmed under studio lighting conditions with a camera mounted inside a weather balloon, the footage reveals the interior of a weather balloon whilst inflating into an oblivion of white.

The activity is perpetual, slowly eliminating the folds of the balloon whilst expanding, quivering in places, as the folds of the balloon are gradually assimilated into an expanse of white and eventually reintroduced as the balloon deflates.

Figure 58 - 61. *'Weer Lug'* (2011), Video.

Figure 62 – 64. Francis Alÿs, *Tornado* (2010), Video.

Thresholds

Introducing the Sublime

In *Tornado* (2010), a video piece by Francis Alÿs,[21] we see the artist waiting in anticipation for, chasing after and running into tornadoes, or as they are also referred to in Mexico, dust devils.

Tornado (2010) includes hand-held clips of Alÿs' feet whilst walking, waiting and running across harvested fields and a second camera filming the encounter from afar. The footage rapidly switches between the horizon, and his collision with the mound of swirling dust and soil particles.

Intermitted by the periodical wipe of the speckled lens, and accompanied by the sound of Alÿs running, breathing and the gyre of the whirling wind, the experience of watching the footage is corporeal, drawing on the physicality of one's own body and leaving you disorientated.

The tornado becomes simultaneously a vessel, place, void, and phenomenon – conjured from the harvested soil, it is almost an apparition: temporal, erratic and mysterious. Alÿs persistently pursues these giants, a stubborn and poetic act, bravely attempting to seemingly understand this other dimension. As he enters the mound of swirling dust and is engulfed by its darkness for a split second, we hear the wind from within, and for only a moment, the stillness. The tornado spills over and through Alÿs, leaving him in its wake only to pursue it again and again.

Tornado (2010) resides for me within the extended scope of my research as an encounter with a threshold, a liminal state, potentially sublime. In his book, *The Sublime,* Simon Morley characterises the experience of a sublime encounter: "The sublime experience is fundamentally transformative, and is about the relationship between disorder and order and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space" (2009:12).

Morley contextualises the experience of the sublime as understood to be about a form of immanent transcendence (Morley 2009:18), or, "the possibility of some kind of authentic experience of self-transcendence" (Morley, 2009: 18) nestled within our sense of the here

[21] Belgian born, Francis Alÿs has lived and worked in Mexico since 1986. Central to his creative process is the work preceding the action; the aphorisms, ideograms, drawings, planning and research, noted in his journals and exhibited alongside documentation of the action itself. His work is generated by his own physicality and recognises the specificity of time and place to the action.

He creates interventions that rely on the full capacity of an action, labour or human energy – an unequal relationship of input vs. output: requiring maximum input on the part of the human contributor, mostly physically taxing, and resulting in a seemingly insignificant or temporal state of change.

and the now.

In an extract from *HanD HearD/Liminal Objects*, George Quasha and Charles Stein deliberate this form of transcendence with reference to the threshold, as occurring in a state of liminality. Referring to the Latin context of the word *limen* as a threshold (Morley, 2009: 214), Quasha and Stein suggest that a liminal state exists "anywhere that something is about to undergo a phase transition or turn into something else" (Morley, 2009: 214).

This transition, as the result of an overwhelming experience or event, leaves us profoundly altered and probes at how we understand ourselves to exist in the world. Potentially uncanny, terrifying and awe inspiring, Morley describes the experience of the sublime as ultimately attributed to "moments of mute encounter with all that exceeds our comprehension" (Morley, 2009:12).

In *Ocean Without a Shore*, a video work presented in 2007 at the Church of San Gallo for the Venice Biennale, Bill Viola presents an exploration of a threshold. From three church altars emerge, at varied time intervals, large projections of human figures. Each figure appears at first as an apparition, a faint and distant gesture as it makes its way from an indiscernible vanishing point through an invisible water threshold into the church. As the figures pass through this transparent wall of water they undergo a transformation.

The process of their transformation is compelling; we encounter a fully clothed human tentatively moving through a water threshold. Each individual navigates the water slightly differently; interrupting the even, invisible fall and consequently producing a shroud of some sorts, cascading from their bodies and illuminating their form.

Upon their encounter with the water, the figures walk towards us and before stepping into the space as it were, they stop or pause. As they move through the water they transform from their state as black and white video footage and veiled or distanced figures, into full colour, high definition, and larger than life bodies. Wet and peering into the church space. Viola discusses this work as a contemplation of our mortality in an issue of *Bloomberg Tate Shots* (Tate, 2008) with reference to the threshold between life and death: "The borderline between life and death is actually not a hard wall, it's not to be opened with a lock and key, it's actually very fragile, very tenuous and you can cross it, like that, in an instant" (Tate, 2008).

Here Viola extends that instant with the placid movement of his human subjects through the water, and in so doing creates a suspended moment. The instant of our passing is performed as a slow movement on the part of the figures in the work, illustrating our passing

Figure 65 – 66. Bill Viola, *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), Video.

as an in-between state, something Viola refers to as a kind of *bardo*.[22]

This in-between-state, informing Viola's approach to the contemplation of our passing, resides for me in our experience of loss and mourning. Robert Pogue Harrison describes this relationship with the dead in anticipation of their disappearance: "The dead like to stay close to the living…To realise their fate and become truly dead, they must first be made to disappear" (2003:1).

Viola's figures appear as if summoned and make their way into the space returning through their threshold to another place. Folded into this work is a contemplation on our mortality; in light of the corporeal nature of our bodies, the fragility of our existence, and our experience of loss. This jolt can potentially alter how we exist in the world: uncanny, terrifying, awe inspiring and arguably, sublime.

In searching for a visual language to speak of the sublime, I have explored the weather balloon and the Noon Gun. The balloon as vessel, container and phenomena, sacrificially released each day, moves up and rapidly towards the place of its burst. An event occurring out of sight and without sound; the remains of the balloon fall to the ground or into the sea and, unless required for research purposes, are not retrieved.

The work that I have been doing with weather balloons has been inspired by the balloon as a poetic device. In *Falling*, the balloon escapes its demise, perpetually thrown from above towards the ground, the balloon continues to hover between the place of its burst and the surface that will receive its remains. This hesitation or hover, echoing in some distant manner the hover of my pen above the paper whilst drawing, is further explored in *Weer Lug.* Here, instead of expanding beyond the threshold of its capacity, the balloon emulates the activity of breathing. A long, slow breath of air pours into the balloon. While expanding, it seems as though the camera moves up, towards the centre of the balloon, an illuminated place, only to retreat upon the exhale. Filmed between two thousand and five thousand frames per second, *Burst* reveals the skeletal structure of a burst, the dispersal of its debris and the balloon's disappearance. I wanted to explore the burst as a threshold, a suspended moment of transformation – an attempt to make visible, the invisible.

The work that I have done with weather balloons seems to echo my drawing activity.

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[22] "The bardo in Tibetan Buddhism is the region that the spirit traverses between the time of bodily death and that of spiritual settling. It is a time of vulnerability, one during which those who care about the dead person stand vigil, praying to accompany the sprit safely" (Zeitlin, 1995:53).

Figure 67 – 68. Bill Viola, *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), Video.

A methodology informed by references to macro and micro and a phenomenological interest in how we encounter the world. Merleau Ponty's work on phenomenology made a lasting impression on me. Merleau Ponty asserts that "to see, is always to see from somewhere" (Langer, 1989: 24) and discusses the body as the locus of our experience determining how we understand ourselves to be in the world. In reading Merleau Ponty's work on perception I recalled something John Berger mentioned about seeing, "it is seeing which establishes our place in the world," (Berger, 1972:7) and a little later: "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" (Berger, 1972:7). My balloon works are perhaps an attempt at settling that relationship, or at least exploring it.

Figure 69. Process Documentation (2011), These are the remains of a sheet of cotton put directly in line with the blast of the Noon Gun.


NOON GUN

Figure 70 – 73. Process Documentation (2011).
Stills from video footage documenting the impact of the blast into a sheet of cotton fabric.

Noon Gun

Six days a week at exactly 12h00, 1½ kg of gunpowder that has been placed in the bellow of a 217 year old cannon is ignited via a Telkom line from the Astronomical Observatory in Cape Town. The signal electronically triggers a detonator that fires into the basin of the cannon. This in turn ignites the gunpowder which erupts at an incredible force into a flame extending more than a metre from the barrel of the gun. The cannon is momentarily shrouded in white smoke, reminiscent in structure to that of a cumulus cloud, obscuring the horizon and settling into a rancid sulphurous odour emitted from the hollow. The intense heat generated by the explosion inside the iron structure subjects the hull to condensation, coating the whole interior with moisture.

Relocated to the Lion Battery on Signal Hill on 4 August 1902, the Noon Gun is one of two Single Bore Muzzle Loading guns, alternatively fired Mondays to Saturdays. The gun is loaded and maintained by a naval officer boarding at the site. Designed in 1786 by Capt. Thomas Blomefield and cast by Walker & Company in 1794, what we recognise today as the Noon Gun was first proof fired in Woolwich, UK, the year in which it was cast. The gun was subsequently adopted by the Royal Navy as the standard naval gun and made its way to the Cape in 1795. Once mounted at Imhoff Battery at the Castle, the Noon Gun has been indicating time since 1806, the cloud of smoke performing as an invaluable seafaring time signal, and a temporary marker.

The firing of the Noon Gun, a public event echoing through the city bowl, seemed the appropriate means by which to embody the mute burst of a weather balloon occurring 35 000 feet above the earth. The balloon and the gun, affiliated time vessels responsible for providing the means by which planes or ships (historically) would navigate, seemed to be intertwined; gateways into other worlds and a means of exploring the sublime.

The Noon Gun works consist of explosions onto paper and cotton. The force of the gun shatters anything within two metres from its barrel, and is indeed a very challenging tool to work with. My early attempts consisted of shattered mounds of cloth and charred fragments of paper, in contrast to the precision pen drawings, and were produced by placing the surfaces I wanted to work onto directly in line with the blast. My more recent attempts, damp cotton fabric wrapped around the bore of the gun, are sheets of white, each containing the impact of the blast as a charred rip.

My work with the gun produced *remains*, the shattered results of an immense impact scattered onto the ground. I have subsequently returned to thinking about the balloon shards produced as a result of working on the bursting sequence, the physicality of my mothers' body and the material I collected in Barkly West, and seem in many ways to have come full circle, once again gathering and lifting things off the ground.

Figure 74. *Oblivion* (2011),
Noon Gun and paper, fragments of varying size.

Figure 75. *Oblivion* (2011),
Noon Gun and paper, fragments of varying size.

Epilogue

We are all see creatures, under the skin
Images appear before us, but we see them within…

— David Levi Straus, *Between the Eyes*

Words are such malleable things, able to fix, translate, veil and transform how we understand the concepts they are employed to describe or explain. Due to the personal narrative so specifically informing my work, finding a language in which to articulate my thoughts and the development of my ideas has been a challenging task. I realise that my MFA was quietly dedicated to trying to find a middle ground between the intimacy of the private, unravelled through the act of making, and the declarative nature of assigning words to it.

Throughout this process, I have been very aware of the relationship between form and content and of allowing the production of my work to be informed by the material I was working with and attempting to find the solutions to each work or process by engaging with its materiality.

I am intrigued by how things exist in the world, particularly objects. When working with them, I tend to take them apart and re-assemble them in another way, playing with how they are perceived. I consider myself to be a maker of objects, three dimensional things that occupy space. Working with paper has been an unanticipated development for me.

There is however something very familiar and intimate about a sheet of paper. The proximity of its surface to one's hand and ultimately one's thoughts renders the surface of white as a container for our most private marks. Though easily erased, shredded, torn or burnt, the concept of the page, as perpetually available and effortlessly replaced with another, is infinite. This reincarnated surface, seemingly immortal and timeless, has become the means by which I have explored notions of absence, loss, time, place and being.

My paper works embody soil and surface as a reference to place, whilst bearing witness to my activity and introducing the notion of *mortal time* in conjunction with the activity on the surface of the paper. My drawings are unfinished; the compulsive action of making a dot or mark onto the paper could potentially continue indefinitely – until the dots bleed into one another, disappear and read as one large black mass (a collection of multiple places left in the wake of my pen and absorbed into the activity of their creation as a potential inversion of place and time).

The paper I made from my mother's clothing is different. The sheets retain for me her absence,

whilst simultaneously referencing her remains. Precious objects obtained from once making contact with her skin, containing her figure and folding into her gestures. My thoughts regarding this paper draw on Harrison's description of the humic foundation upon which the living structure their worlds.

My mother's body became a place that I returned to in my thoughts. She has occupied a place of indwelling (Harrison, 2003: x), rendering what used to be approximately nine hundred kilometres between us, to nil. *The Distance Between Us* emerged from this place of indwelling, bringing me in contemplation of her death, closer to understanding her disappearance and simultaneously affirming the inevitability of my own death.

Transpiring from this introspective place, perhaps in an attempt to distance myself from it, was the weather balloon, a poetic device introducing the notion of the sublime with reference to a form of immanent transcendence. The balloon was also an alternative interpretation of the threshold, introduced into my practice by working with firearms, and gave way to my explorations with the Noon Gun.

My work has become about violent embodiment, thresholds and liminal spaces, the transformation of things from one state of being into another. Though very much occupied with death, grief and loss, I seem to be making work in response to the phenomenon of existing, being alive and being aware.

I feel as though I have just started understanding the complexity of what I might be doing and consider the works I have made for my MFA to be a beginning. I hope to return to the Noon Gun, the weather balloon and my firearms, and to further pursue the ideas that have developed here.

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List of Illustrations

process: Making paper (2011). **Figure 38** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of working process: Making paper (2011). **Figure 39** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of working process: Making paper (2011). **Figure 40** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of working process: Making paper (2011). **Figure 41** Dominique Edwards. *Keep* (2011). **Figure 42** Dominique Edwards. From the *Waking* series (2011) Video. **Figure 43** Dominique Edwards. From the *Waking* series (2011) Video. **Figure 44** Dominique Edwards. From the *Waking* series (2011) Video. **Figure 45** Dominique Edwards. From the *Waking* series (2011) Video. **Figure 46** Dominique Edwards, Process Work: *The Sky in Barkly West* (2010) **Figure 47** Dominique Edwards. Process Work: Weather Balloon, Cyanotype (2011). **Figure 48** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process work (2011). **Figure 49** Dominique Edwards. *Burst* (2011). **Figure 50** Dominique Edwards. *Burst* (2011). **Figure 51** Dominique Edwards. *Burst* (2011). **Figure 52** Dominique Edwards. *Burst* (2011). **Figure 53** Dominique Edwards. *Burst* (2011). **Figure 54** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process: *Burst* (2011). Photo credit: Jorina Kriel **Figure 55** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process: Balloon Shards (2011). **Figure 56** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process: Burst (2011). Photo credit: Jorina Kriel **Figure 57** Dominique Edwards. *Falling* (2011). **Figure 58** Dominique Edwards. *Falling* (2011). **Figure 59** Dominique Edwards. *'Weer Lug'* (2011). **Figure 60** Dominique Edwards. *'Weer Lug'* (2011). **Figure 61** Dominique Edwards. *'Weer Lug'* (2011). **Figure 62** Francis Alÿs. *Tornado* (2010). Source: jennahanks1.2010. YouTube. Francis Alÿs [Video online] Available: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd2RLddUfh4 [12 July 2011] **Figure 63** Francis Alÿs. *Tornado* (2010). Source: Personal footage, *Sao Paulo Biennale 2010*. **Figure 64** Francis Alÿs. *Tornado* (2010). Source: Personal footage, *Sao Paulo Biennale 2010*. **Figure 65** Bill Viola. *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007). Source: Bill Viola. 2011. Bill Viola. [Online] Available: http://www.billviola.com/ [06 November 2011]. **Figure 66** Bill Viola. *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007). Source: Debora Puette (2011). *Get Inspired by Bill Viola*. [Online] Available: http://deborahpuette.blogspot.com/2011/04/get-inspired-by-bill-viola.html [06 November 2011] **Figure 67** Bill Viola. *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007). Source: *The Age, Entertainemnt*. (2009). *Bill Viola, Ocean Without a Shore.* [Online] Available: http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/arts-reviews/bill-viola-ocean-without-a-shore/2009/03/05/1235842563670.html [06 November 2011] **Figure 68** Bill Viola. *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007). Source: Petra van der Meijden & Hans Pronk. 2011. *Over Ons: Ocan Without a Shore van Bill Viola*. [Online] Available: http://www.pvdm.org/2007/10/ocean-without-a.html [06 November] **Figure 69** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process work: *The Noon Gun* (2011). **Figure 70** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process work: *The Noon Gun* (2011). **Figure 71** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process work: *The Noon Gun* (2011). **Figure 72** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process work: *The Noon Gun* (2011). **Figure 73** Dominique Edwards. Documentation of process work: *The Noon Gun* (2011). **Figure 74** Dominique Edwards. *Oblivion* (2011). **Figure 75** Dominique Edwards. *Oblivion* (2011).