

*The Paradox Of Uncertainty*

NICOLE SHAER

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*'The whole point is to not know. Most of our lives we are told what to do and how to do it. The liberty one has to afford oneself as an artist is that which says, "it's okay to not know." That uncertainty, indeterminacy and all that is part of our role as artists and we must dare to go there wholeheartedly everyday.*

- Anish Kapoor, 2011

*'The root of suffering is resisting the certainty that no matter what the circumstances, uncertainty is all we truly have.'*

- Pema Chödrön, 2004

***The Paradox of Uncertainty***

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2016

Submitted in compliance with the requirements of the MFA degree

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Proofreading: Quanta Gauld

Printing and Binding: Hot Ink

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**DATE: 5/10/2017**

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## *Introducing The Paradox of Uncertainty*

This work represents my engagement with uncertainty, as I have defined and contained it. As an artist, my research strategy has been to work with uncertainty in a felt sense, using my hands as a way to access a different sort of thinking. To this end, I have allowed, created, sustained and magnified the presence of uncertainty in my studio, as a focused, experiential study within the practice of making art.

Uncertainty might be understood in many ways, so I will begin with the common definition as that which is 'not able to be relied on; not known or definite' (OED, 2016). Psychology professor Michael Smithson characterises the Western perception of uncertainty as a predominantly negative anticipation of what cannot be known (Bammer and Smithson, 2008: 18). Such a perception of uncertainty as a threat, may encourage the use of control as a means to contain the unknown. Smithson's description reflects the prevailing attitude of my upbringing and this project represents the exploration of a different paradigm. *The Paradox of Uncertainty* alludes to the coexistence of two apparently opposing views of uncertainty, which I have sought to integrate through my art practice.

My interest in uncertainty originates in years of effort to overcome anxiety, which I understand as the physiological manifestation of a fearful relationship with uncertainty that results in a habitual psychological struggle to out-plan the future. In contrast with the prevailing medical conception of anxiety as a form of mental illness<sup>1</sup>, philosopher Martin Heidegger considers anxiety to be an 'irreducible, existential state of being[...] aris[ing] from the self-reflexive awareness of our own "potentiality-for-being"' (Gordon, 2013: 106). The existential psychologist, Rollo May (1977: 38) offers a functional link between uncertainty and anxiety, noting that 'whenever possibility is visualised by an individual, anxiety is potentially present in the same experience.' Developing May's concept of anxiety as a normal part of lived experience, psychologist Kerry Gordon (2013: 107) expands on the relationship between anxiety and creativity, saying:

Creativity, authenticity, uncertainty, anxiety—these cannot be separated. To live a creative existence means to live with uncertainty. To live an authentic existence means to live with anxiety.

<sup>1</sup> The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, a standard classification of mental disorders published by The American Psychiatric Association, defines anxiety, or generalised anxiety disorder, as 'characterized by persistent, excessive, and unrealistic worry about everyday things' (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders 5: 222).

Efforts to manage my own anxiety eventually led me to meditation and the philosophy<sup>2</sup> of Zen<sup>3</sup>, that casts intellectualism itself as a mental confinement and proposes a different view of uncertainty. According to Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki's definition, Eastern<sup>4</sup> philosophy, celebrates uncertainty, or not knowing, as an inevitable part of the natural order, and a space of possibility (Suzuki and Dixon, 1970: 21). This accepting view of uncertainty reframes the evolving present as something to be observed with interest, rather than overcome through control. Echoing this positive view of uncertainty, art historian, Sasha Grishin states that 'uncertainty is something to be harnessed and cultivated, rather than something to be feared or contained' (Bammer and Smithson, 2008: 124). Grishin's words sum up my approach, to use uncertainty in my process of making, as a practice of engaging with ideas of uncertainty, more broadly.

As mentioned in relation to anxiety, constructs of time are inextricably linked to those of uncertainty<sup>5</sup>. So during this project, I have thought about time. In my experiences of working as a doctor and as an artist, I have long grappled with internalised cultural dictates of what constitutes a valid use of time, mostly aligned to social attitudes regarding ambition (and proactivity as a form of control through action). Specifically, I have marvelled at the conflicting dissatisfaction I sometimes experienced within the practice of medicine, which is so highly esteemed, when compared with the inexplicable satisfaction occasioned during the seemingly absurd activity of making art. Failing to rationalise this 'problem' away - to make sense of it - was one form of the anxiety-provoking efforts that precipitated my interest in non-rationality and, by extension, uncertainty. In *Trying Not To Try*, professor of Asian Studies and Embodied Cognition, Edward Slingerland (2014: 6), describes the prevailing Western ideal of action:

Our excessive focus in the modern world on the power of conscious thought and the benefits of willpower and self-control causes us to overlook the pervasive importance of what might be called 'body thinking': tacit, fast, and semiautomatic behaviour that flows from the unconscious with little or no conscious interference. The result is that we too often

---

<sup>2</sup> Philosophy: 'investigation or contemplation of the nature of being' (Chambers Dictionary, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Zen: 'a Japanese school of [...] Buddhism emphasizing the value of meditation and intuition rather than ritual worship or study of scriptures' (OED, 2016). I refer to the 'philosophy of Zen', to distinguish related concepts as a limited aspect of the broader practice of Zen. Zen, rather than Buddhism, is referenced as a school of Buddhism with a simple, pared down aesthetic and approach, as well as particular emphasis on the value of uncertainty.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will use the terms 'Eastern' to denote my personal understanding of Zen philosophy and 'Western' to refer to the culture of my upbringing. Whilst acknowledging the problematic generalisations embedded in their usage, a more in depth discussion of these terms is too broad for the scope of this text.

<sup>5</sup> It might be argued that the future is no more than an imagining, which clouds the ever-changing present. Thus, considerations of time and, particularly, efforts to be present, were significant to this project.

devote ourselves to pushing harder or moving faster in areas of our life where effort and striving are, in fact, profoundly counterproductive.

In other words, rationality and control as a form of striving might be seen as self-defeating; counterintuitive to our cultural habit, there may be reward in flowing with the unexpected, honing skills of observation and working with contingency. It is suggested that embodied intelligence, proposed as a compliment to intellectual reasoning, is dulled by excessive determination.

Proposing a different cadence of action, the Taoist<sup>6</sup> concept of *wu wei*, literally translated as 'no trying' or 'no doing', refers to a 'dynamic, effortless and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective' (Slingerland, 2014: 7). Considering Taoist ideas, professor of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, Toshihiko Izutsu identifies two primary states of mind: *galloping around* or *sitting still and void*. (Izutsu in Danvers, 2012: 146). Professor of art, John Danvers<sup>7</sup> (2012: 145) defines Izutsu's *galloping around* as, 'the state of mind in which thoughts flit about, chasing phenomena or ideas, fretting about this and that, running after one idea of truth or another, changing opinions and positions.' In *sitting still and void*, the mind is 'at ease, letting-go, opening to the flow of phenomena and events, accepting the impermanent nature of reality'. Danvers identifies a connection between action and attitude, reflecting a state of mind.

During my project, the practice of doing nothing came unexpectedly. Afloat in the relatively free form of post-graduate studies, the pain of a lost personal relationship overwhelmed me, and I found myself unable to do almost anything. Initially, the urgency of deadlines and the need to produce augmented the discomfort of inactivity. As deadlines came and went, unfulfilled, I experienced failure, shame and, eventually, indifference. Meaning no disregard towards the university, and with apologies to those individuals who bore the inconvenience of my absenteeism, I came to recognise the relative insignificance of deadlines as compared with the gravity inferred in the very terminology. Serial unmaterialised commitments punctuating my calendar demonstrated the uncertainty pervading all plans. I spent many hours in bed responding to the perceived demands of my body (rather than my usual approach of trying to override anxiety by doing more). This did not seem socially acceptable, but I

<sup>6</sup> Taoism: 'a Chinese philosophical system based on the teachings of Lao-Tzu's *Tao te Ching* (c.6c BC) and others, that advocates a life of simplicity and non-interference with the natural course of events' (Chambers Dictionary, 2016). Chan Buddhism integrated Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism, later merged with Pure Land Buddhism and ultimately became known as Zen Buddhism in Japan.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst Zen has been my own point of access to this view, Danver's book *Agents of Uncertainty: Mysticism, Scepticism, Buddhism, Art and Poetry* (2012) acknowledges a common regard for uncertainty through a broader history of mysticism, including also Christianity, Sufism, Taoism and the philosophy of scepticism.

read about the physical effects of grief - and need to rest - and it became acceptable to me. With loss, great effort is required to transform oneself to fit a new reality. I found people who believe in the value of facing struggle, rather than turning away from it. As I gradually returned to the studio, I chose to do so with consideration of my basic need to rest, spending much time just sitting there, incrementally preparing myself to return to work.<sup>8</sup>

My inability to *do* seemed to hone my ability to carefully *observe* while doing seemingly nothing. Confined to my studio space and to the materials already there, I watched the discomfort of doing nothing in an environment that, while proffering the opportunity to explore, inferred the need to produce. I considered whether merely occupying the space constituted a valid performance of a Masters in Fine Art. During this time, ideas gradually formed and inveigled their way into my non-productivity. For example, the sound piece *(I) Don't Know* was made when I renounced my ability to figure things out, aloud, over and over.



2: Still from film associated with *(I) Don't Know*: facing five blank canvases, 2015

The work is an address to the instability of uncertainty; a verbal relinquishing of control over how I might materially represent the preoccupations that consumed

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in keeping with May's idea of a relationship between possibility and anxiety, once I conceded to these limitations - seemingly existing without possibility - I experienced no anxiety. Anxiety recurred with my return to productivity.

my mind. Staring at a series of five blank canvases, I was compelled to self-soothe through a mantra of '(I) don't know'. Within five minutes and sixteen seconds, I witnessed the rapid evolution of my experience of this pronounced uncertainty, through despondency, despair, grief and acceptance, with the recording *(I) Don't Know* retaining the trace of my embodied experience.

Encouraging this practice of *non-doing*, I found that by striving less, I become open to possibility and useful chance encounters occur.

Wandering across Gardens Avenue to the studio after lunch, I offered to direct a woman who appeared lost, which I would have been less likely to do had I been wholly focused on reaching my destination. She was a tourist from Munich, a painter, who had previously worked as a translator, who told me that she had already visited various nearby galleries and had a couple of hours to fill before meeting her daughter. Our conversation meandered and she told me about the book she was reading - the autobiography of philosopher and non-denominational speaker on spirituality and psychology, Jiddu Krishnamurthi, which she called, *Reflection of The Moon in A Thousand Bowls*<sup>9</sup>. She then asked me what I painted. Astounded by the connections of our mutual interests in painting, secular spirituality, psychology and the experience of yearning to paint from within the perceived confines of another career<sup>10</sup>, I suggested that we speak no more and proceed directly to my studio. There, I showed her the painting I was working on, now entitled *Reflection of The Moon in A Thousand Bowls*.

The joyful reassurance in such serendipities increases my confidence in occupying a space of uncertainty, as if they argue the case for possibility. I can delight in these coincidental events as evidence of Jung's synchronicity<sup>11</sup>, the possibility of an underlying order beyond comprehension, even whilst aware of the illusionary - or apophenic<sup>12</sup> - quality of such connections.

<sup>9</sup> *Reflection of The Moon in A Thousand Bowls* is a direct translation from the German title of this biography by Mary Luytens, though the English edition is called *The Life and Death of Krishnamurti*. The (German) title derives from a Buddhist metaphor for compassion, 'the reflection of the moon in 100 bowls', explained by Buddhist Teacher, Chogyam Trungpa as follows: 'the symbol for compassion is one moon shining while its image is reflected in one hundred bowls of water. The moon does not demand, "if you open to me, I will do you a favour and shine on you." The moon just shines' (Trungpa and Baker, 1973).

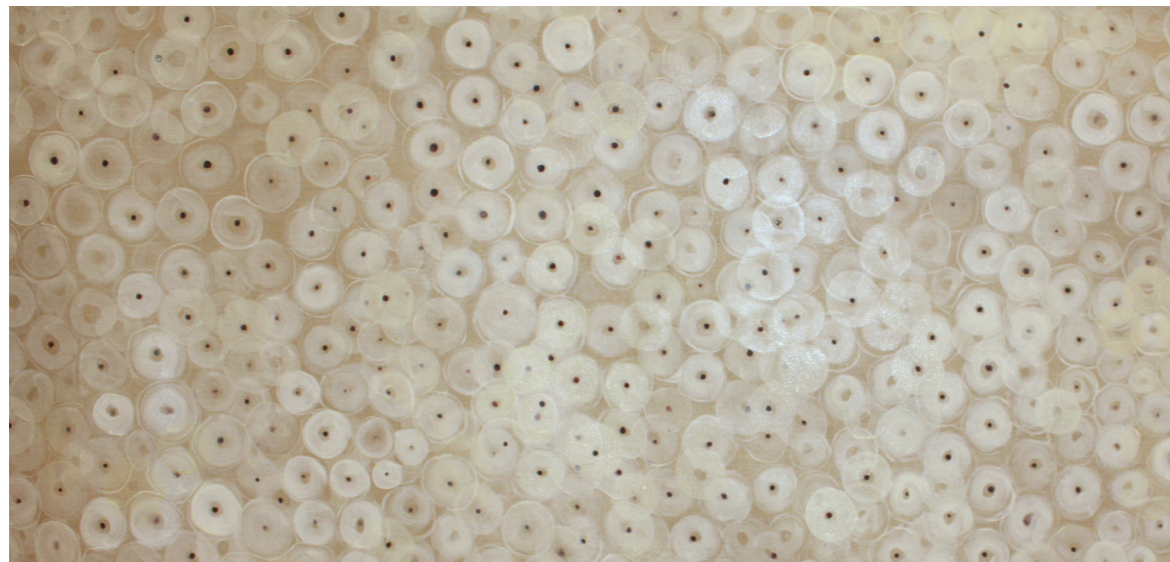
<sup>10</sup> I had been throwing cylinders or bowls on a pottery wheel in parallel to painting a painting of hundreds of circles, almost like the reflection of the moon in a thousand bowls, whilst considering the relationship between philosophy, spirituality and meditative or repetitive creative practice.

<sup>11</sup> Psychoanalyst, Carl Jung (1968: 357) described synchronicity as 'a temporally coincident occurrence of acausal events,' proposing that synchronicity opposes causality or the rationale that 'nothing can happen without being caused,' which is the basis of logical reasoning. Additionally, Jung (1968: 357) saw the existence of synchronicity as evidence of a deeper order, shifting 'a person's egocentric conscious thinking to greater wholeness,' or a sense of connectedness, as I understand it.

<sup>12</sup> Apophenia: the finding of meaning or pattern in random data and along with confirmation and selection bias, forms an argument against the idea of synchronicity (Merriam-Webster, 2016).



3. *Reflection of The Moon in a Thousand Bowls*, 2014



4. (detail)

Paradox is defined as the coexistence of contradictory ideas within a consistent form, or as apparently conflicting statements that, on further consideration, may prove to be true (OED, 2016). By provoking doubt of an initial assumption or refuting the need to establish one certainty over another, paradox emphasises uncertainty as a fertile, dynamic state that entertains contradiction. This project actively engages contradictions, such as control and letting go and contrasts Western and Eastern philosophies to keep them in tension. In the following chapters, I consider some ways in which artists of recent history have employed uncertainty in practice, propose connections between Zen and the making and viewing of art, expand on my own studio method with reference to other contemporary artists working with uncertainty and, finally, discuss the exhibition as an extension of the creative process and a way to share this adventure into the unknown.



5. Jean (Hans) Arp  
Automatic Drawing  
(1917-18) (inscribed 1916)



6. Jean (Hans) Arp,  
Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged  
according to the Laws of Chance)  
1917



7. Hannah Hoch, Sea Serpent, 1937

## Engaged Uncertainty in Recent Art History

The exploration of uncertainty through studio practice emerged in a number of art movements since the early 20th century, including Dada, Gutai, Abstract Expressionism and Fluxus. Chance and uncertainty also provided the dominant drive in a number of individual artists' practices, the most influential of these being the musician, John Cage. These artists and movements considered art as an agent for social change, challenging societal and cultural norms with experimental ideas and methods. *The Third Mind*, an exhibition held at the New York Guggenheim in 2009, as well as the book *Nothing and Everything* (2012) by artist and writer, Ellen Pearlman, look at the influence of Zen on American artists between 1890 and 1989, including the Abstract Expressionists and Fluxus artists. Interestingly, few of these Western artists directly acknowledge the influence of Zen philosophy (and even fewer identify themselves as Buddhist).<sup>13</sup>

In a politically subversive response to the catastrophe of World War I, Dada sought to challenge the pervasive reverence for reason, overriding sense with strategies towards randomness and non-sense. With the belief that art should reflect reality, Dada artists used quotidian materials, rather than conventional art materials. Limiting the influence of rationality on creativity, Jean Arp made automatic drawings and heightened chance in his production of collages. Hannah Hoch's photomontages made whimsical images from sensible ones, and Tristan Tzara wrote poetry by jumbling the dissected words of a newspaper article in the following way:

*How To Make A Dadaist Poem, by Tristan Tzara (1920)*

Take a newspaper.  
Take a pair of scissors.  
Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.  
Cut out the article.  
Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.  
Shake it gently.  
Shake out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag  
Copy conscientiously  
The poem will be like you  
And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

Using this method, Tzara engaged chance as a means to override logic. By recognising delight in uncertainty, he playfully contested the compulsive

<sup>13</sup> A Zen indictment of certainty, 'if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him' comes to mind as justification for avoiding attribution of one's work to a philosophy that, by its nature, seeks to elude clear definition.



8. Mark Rothko, *Maroon on Red*, 1959

rationality that defined his time. Chance, as employed by Arp and Tzara (and later, artists such as John Cage and Penny Siopis) relates a form of uncertainty defined within parameters. The use of chance demonstrates a wish to relinquish control of certain aspects of process, within a defined range of possibility.

Similarly motivated to contest the primacy of reason, Abstract Expressionism started in New York during the Cold War. The Abstract Expressionists championed individual freedom, reacting to the conformity and materialistic ideals of bourgeois culture. Influenced by the automatism of Dada (and Surrealism), artists relinquished the limitations of figurative imagery, replaced traditional art media with unorthodox materials like house paint, worked with free gesture and honoured individualism. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline's action painting highlighted process and defined the completed canvas as a site of spontaneous activity. Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman's colour field paintings emerged as a division of Abstract Expressionism driven by contemplation, rather than unpremeditated physical energy. Unlike Tzara's stepwise instructions for Dadaist poetry, Rothko's strategy for uncertainty is far less instructive than its name suggests:

*Recipe for Painting*, by Mark Rothko (1958)

There must be a clear preoccupation with death . . .

Sensuality . . .

Tension. Either conflict or curbed desire.

Irony. This is the modern ingredient -- the self-effacement and examination by which a man for an instant can go on to something else.

Wit and Play . . . for the human element.

The ephemeral and chance . . . for the human element.

Hope. 10% to make the tragic concept more endurable. (Breslin, 1993: 390)

With the challenging intention of representing human emotion through abstract painting<sup>14</sup>, Rothko's method allows for uncertainty as a generative space and employs the paradoxes of seriousness and playfulness, control and chance, on the part of the painter. He considered art as 'an adventure into an unknown world of the imagination which is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense' (Rothko and Gottlieb, 1943). Reinhardt's later colour fields sought to challenge perception, though with less interest in evoking emotion. *Black Paintings*, the final series preceding his death in 1967, comprises a collection of square black colour fields. First glance suggests uniform fields of black paint, yet with further scrutiny from different distances and angles, textural and tonal shifts become apparent, so compelling the viewer to reconsider the certainty of their impression of both

<sup>14</sup> 'I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on' (Rothko in Rodman, 1957: 92)

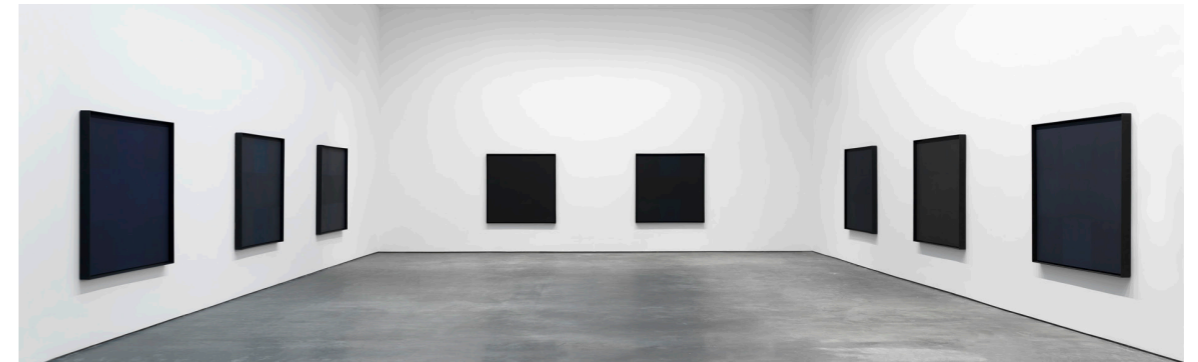


9. Kazuo Shiraga, *The artist painting with his feet*, 1956



10. Fujiko Shiraga, *White Board*, 1955

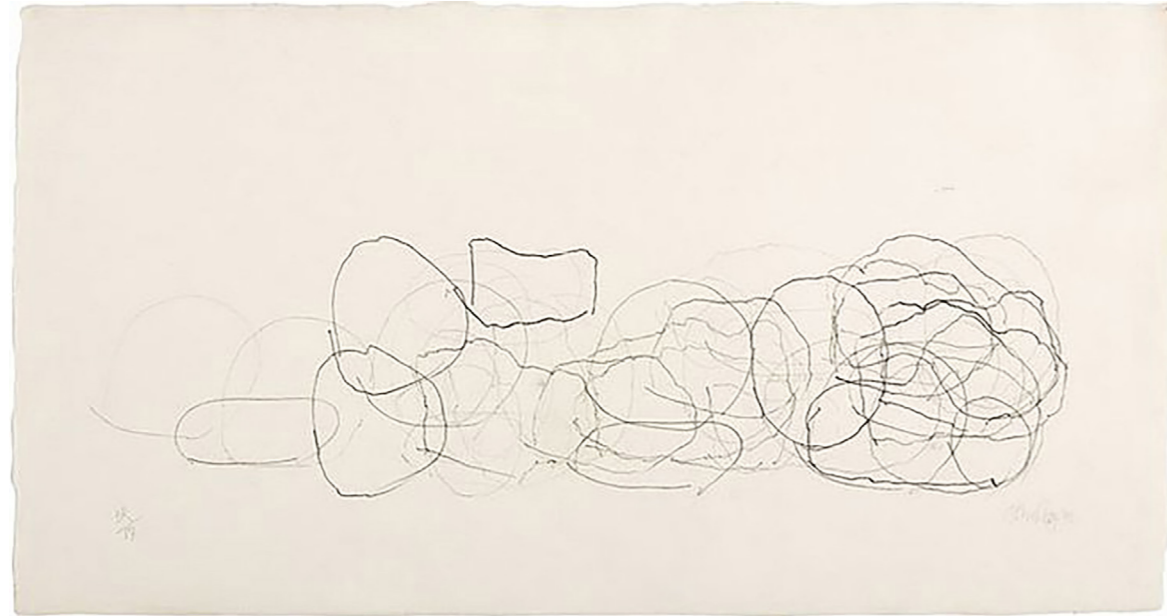
the materiality and the nature of perception. Reinhardt (1975: 89) aimed to create 'a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested painting—an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art.' In this statement, Reinhardt proclaims his intention to create artwork freed from context and maker, in the interest of bringing the viewer into direct communion with the works, with *beginner's mind*<sup>15</sup>. Reinhardt and Rothko shared an intention to use paint to create transcendent experiences, setting the viewer free from narrative certainty, into a more uncertain, embodied experience of their work.



11. Ad Reinhardt, *Black Paintings* (installation view), 1954-1967

On the other side of the world, Jiro Yoshihara founded the Gutai Art Association (1954-1972) in post-World War II Japan. Affiliated to Abstract Expressionism and sharing the influence of Dada, Gutai opposed the dictate of reason and discipline of martial rule that characterised Japanese politics at the time. Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga proclaimed, 'in politics, totalitarianism fails; in culture, that which is unfree and akin to totalitarianism must be purged' (Tiampo and Munroe, 2013: 279). In other words, art was considered a forum through which to break the certainty of totalitarianism on an institutionalised scale. The name *Gutai* combines Japanese terms *gu*, for tool or way of doing something with *tai*, body, also translated as 'concreteness' by its founder. Gutai artists employed physical experimentation focusing on innovative materiality, process and corporeality, intending to minimise certainty and maximise creativity. For example, Kazuo Shiraga swung from a rope and painted with his feet using paint poured onto the canvas by his wife and fellow artist, Fujiko. Shiraga coined the term *splendid playground* to characterise the movement's belief in art as a way to foster free thinking. To expand the influence of this free thinking, Gutai encouraged viewer participation in the work. As uncertainty was primary in the making, it was also emphasised in the viewer's embodied experience. For instance, Fujiko Shiraga's *White Board* (1955) invites viewers to walk

<sup>15</sup> *Beginner's mind*, as discussed in the next chapter, is the idea of perception uncluttered by prior knowledge.



12. John Cage, *Where R = Ryoanji (3R/17)*, 1992. Pencils on handmade Japanese paper



13. Yoko Ono performing *Cut Piece*, 1966

along a platform with a crack down the middle. The structural instability of the work is intended to evoke a felt, rather than conceptual, understanding of uncertainty.

Around the same time, Japanese Zen master DT Suzuki commenced his classes on Zen at Columbia University. John Cage was among his students and went on to incorporate DT Suzuki's philosophy, particularly his ideas on indeterminacy, into his work. In the classes Cage taught on experimental composition, he focused on process and encouraged not knowing the outcome at the start of any creative endeavor. For instance, Cage employed formulaic chance by using numbers from the *I Ching*<sup>16</sup> saying: 'I use chance operations instead of operating according to my likes and dislikes' (Cage, 1992). In the drawing series, *Where R = Ryoanji*<sup>17</sup> (1992), Cage used chance procedures to locate fifteen stones and traced around each stone a chance-determined number of times. Dissimilar to the uncertainty achieved through free movement and material experimentation in Gutai, Cage's uncertainty relied on relinquishing control through creating formulas for generating chance.

Cage was a figurehead of the Fluxus movement, founded by graphic designer George Maciunas in 1961. The ideals of this movement were anti-consumerist, communitarianist and anti-art. With sensibilities aligned to Dada and Marcel Duchamp's dictum art as life, Fluxus artworks incorporated mass-produced, everyday objects, contesting what they considered to be the elitism of Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist painting. Fluxus included performance and happenings, which were unplanned, collaborative, experiential engagements that blurred the boundaries between artist and audience. For instance, in *Cut Piece* (first performed in 1964), Yoko Ono invited viewers to cut away pieces of her clothing as she sat object-like on the stage. Ono welcomed an uncertain outcome by granting full control to the audience. This type of performance practice, where the body is the primary medium of the work, amplified the aspect of embodiment that characterised art-making in Abstract Expressionism and Gutai.

<sup>16</sup> *The I Ching*, also known as *The Book of Changes*, is an ancient Chinese text used to yield random numbers in symbolic arrangements, as a form of divination (Chambers, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> *Ryoanji* is the name of a monastery that Cage attended, with a Zen garden comprising 15 stones on white gravel.



## *On Zen and Embodiment*

The art historical engagement with uncertainty demonstrates a fluid interplay between art and philosophy. American philosopher John Dewey (1934: 290) speaks of embodied perception and thought, stating: 'In both production and enjoyed perception of works of art, knowledge is transformed; it becomes something more than knowledge because it is merged with non-intellectual elements to form an experience worthwhile as an experience.' Regarding Dewey's prioritisation of bodily sensation in relation to art, it is interesting to consider Zen meditation as a practical training in mindful awareness<sup>18</sup>. Though by no means all-inclusive, it is worth noting at the outset that many of the artists and art movements who have explored uncertainty, have been influenced by the philosophy of Zen. In her Masters of Art thesis, *Art of Nothingness*, Erin Megan Lochman (2011) demonstrates the influence of Zen and Taoism on artists associated with Zurich Dada. With a contrast that parallels the difference between Eastern and Western conceptions of uncertainty, Lochman proposes Dada's interest in the Eastern concept of emptiness (nothingness as a potential space), rather than nihilism (nothingness as meaninglessness), as was previously understood.

In my own practice, I reference Zen as a way of seeing, or being in the world. Its central practice, silent meditation<sup>19</sup>, is an education in attentiveness: observing the transient experiences of mind and body against the backdrop of stillness and silence. Wary of the limitations of intellectual understanding, Zen eschews doctrine with the instruction, 'do not establish words and letters'<sup>20</sup> and promotes the pursuit of understanding through individual practice rather than second-hand teachings. Two aspects of Zen philosophy which relate most directly to the theme and approach of my project<sup>21</sup> include:

1. Everything is transient / impermanent, so uncertainty is all pervasive.
2. Perception is clouded by certainty (or knowing). Curious, non-judgemental observation, like that of a child, is a means by which to see things more clearly, freed from the the distortions of preconception.

In *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* (Suzuki and Dixon, 1970: 21) Shunryu Suzuki advocates *don't know mind* or *beginner's mind*, saying 'in the beginner's mind there are many

<sup>18</sup> Mindful awareness: paying attention to present moment experiences with openness, curiosity and a willingness to be with what is (MARC, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Meditation: '[...] a conscious attempt to focus attention in a non-analytical way, and an attempt not to discuss on discursive, ruminating thought' (Shapiro, 1980). Zen meditation, or zazen is a practice of silent sitting meditation, intended towards understanding one's true nature through physical and mental experience of the transient quality of all things.

<sup>20</sup> This quotation is attributed to Boddhidharma, a 5-6th Chan Buddhist Monk (Heine and Wright, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> I do not call myself a Buddhist and my practice of meditation is erratic, yet the ideas and approach that I describe in this text have been gleaned through direct practice of meditation and in application of these lessons to daily life.

possibilities, but in the expert's, there are few.' In practice, to employ beginner's mind means to see as if for the first time<sup>22</sup>. This quality of careful observation is central to my art making, particularly with a theme so rooted in perception as the exploration of uncertainty. Zen is a practicable philosophy of acute awareness: a training in observation aligned to art making, as opposed to a set of fixed beliefs. Prioritising openness to experience over logic and argument, phenomenological philosophy constitutes a comparable approach (South, 2014). Founded by German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, phenomenology<sup>23</sup> counters the Cartesian pursuit of certainty through rational thinking, favouring 'the study of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view' (Smith, 2003). Philosophers Martin Heidegger<sup>24</sup> and Marcel Merleau-Ponty specifically consider a phenomenological approach to art and aesthetics. Highlighting embodiment as a fundamental component of phenomenology and opposing Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' which defines the mind as the primary site of being, Merleau-Ponty (1945: 475) notes:

Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.

This concern with the relationship between body and mind, physicality and consciousness, doing and thinking, underpins my approach to art making.

### A Note on Spirituality

It is necessary to identify relevant links between spirituality and art before leaving this theme behind. I use the term spirituality to relate to considerations concerning the human spirit, without necessarily involving doctrine or faith, so differentiated from religion<sup>25</sup>. The spiritual practice of Zen is defined within the direct experience of the body and bears little relation to faith in a deity or otherworldly beliefs. This facility of an intensely focused, embodied experience of life on earth links the spirituality of Zen with spirituality in art. Associations between art and spirituality have run through contemporary art history, as exemplified in the writings of Wassily Kandisky, Mark

<sup>22</sup> To illustrate this sort of attention, consider experimental composer, John Cage's *4'33"*, a 'performance' of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. The piece propositioned that the audience might reconsider the incidental, commonplace sounds punctuating the silence as music, as a way of listening without preconception. (Pearlman, 2012: 28)

<sup>23</sup> Whilst acknowledging an equivalence between the Eastern philosophy of Zen and Phenomenology of Western art theory, I will mostly refer to Zen as an arena of personal experience, rather than Phenomenology, of which I have only read.

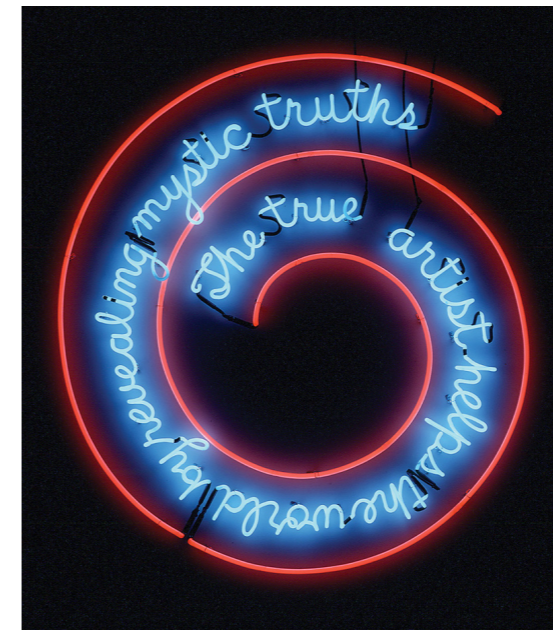
<sup>24</sup> The connection between Zen and Phenomenology was confirmed at source, when Heidegger commented on *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, by DT Suzuki, saying: 'If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings' (Suzuki and Barrett, 1956: xii).

<sup>25</sup> Religion: 'The belief in and worship of a superhuman, controlling power, especially a personal God' (OED, 2016).

Rothko and Joseph Beuys and wryly iconified in Bruce Naumann's *The True Artist Helps The World By Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967). Discussing this piece, Naumann demonstrates his use of paradox in creating a thought-provoking dynamic between the

work and the viewer, saying, 'Once written down, I could see that the statement [...] was on the one hand a totally silly idea and yet, on the other hand, I believed it. It's true and not true at the same time.' (Richardson and Naumann, 1983: 20).

In an effort to dissociate a spiritual experience from religious doctrine, South Korean artist and writer Jungu Yoon (2010) introduces the term *numinous*. After discussing various linguistic roots, Yoon settles on a hybrid definition of numinous which incorporates psychiatrist Carl Jung's 'alteration of consciousness involving an experience of spiritual power,' the Taoist notion of the numinous as 'not dependent on the existence of a deity' and religious scholar Ninian Smart's idea of 'evoking



15. Bruce Nauman  
*The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*  
Neon and clear glass tubing, suspension supports  
159.86 x 139.7 x 5.08cm  
1967

a loving dependence on the other' (Yoon, 2010: 25-30). In this compound definition, Yoon characterises the numinous as a conscious experience of connection to a spiritual force that is specifically not a god figure.

Both creative and meditation practice can elicit an encounter with the numinous or perhaps as a feeling of *flow*<sup>26</sup>. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow describes a mental state of full, focused immersion in a task with resultant feelings of joy and a loss of sense of time and self (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). This concept proposes another paradox: the co-existence of absolute, focused attention and apparent dissociation (the sense of the numinous) within the same experience. Comparable to meditation, the power of art to instil a sense of the numinous resides in its potential to command full, multi-sensory attention. The following explores how this embodied experience can transform the way we see and feel about the world and ourselves.

<sup>26</sup> The theory of flow was initially inspired by a composer's report of his creative experience and likened to descriptions of the meditative state in Eastern practice. Qualities of flow experience (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2001: 90):

- 1) Intense and focused concentration on the present moment
- 2) Merging of action and awareness
- 3) A loss of reflective self-consciousness
- 4) A sense of personal control or agency over the situation or activity
- 5) A distortion of temporal experience, ones subjective experience of time is altered
- 6) Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, also referred to as autotelic experience.



16. *Do Think Do Think Do* (still), 2014

## Art As A Thinking Process<sup>27</sup>

I use the studio as a zendo<sup>28</sup> or laboratory, where the former is a space for meditation or study of mental formations and the latter a place for material experimentation. Both activities are intended to advance understanding and both environments welcome recurrent failure as integral to discovery. In contrast to a place prioritising only production, the studio is a contemplative space where cognition and process are esteemed alongside material outcome.

Artist William Kentridge promotes this concept of practical epistemology and identifies freedom to fail as a necessary part of the creative process. Kentridge expounds his ideas on uncertainty – including doubt, possibility, failure and chance – in his visual art, discussions and formal lectures. He calls the studio a ‘safe space for stupidity’<sup>29</sup> that makes ‘space for uncertainty, for giving an impulse, an object, a material the benefit of the doubt’ (Kentridge, 2012). In other words, the studio allows for playful experimentation and invention, free from the constraint of judgement. In his work, the internal critic is frequently visualised as a personification of self-doubt. For example, Stills from *Invisible Mending* (2003) show Kentridge working on a life-sized self-portrait. Though skilfully wrought, the drawing is being attacked by a scribble, a visual declaration of dissatisfaction with himself as both a drawing and an artist. Kentridge alludes to a complexity of uncertainty, acknowledging the role of error yet responding to imperfections with frustration. Kentridge first began using incomplete erasure as evidence of change in his early charcoal animations when he found it impossible to completely erase the marks of his developing drawings. As such, Kentridge accepts and foregrounds the acceptability of alteration and error in his process. (Kentridge and Breidebach, 2006: 38).

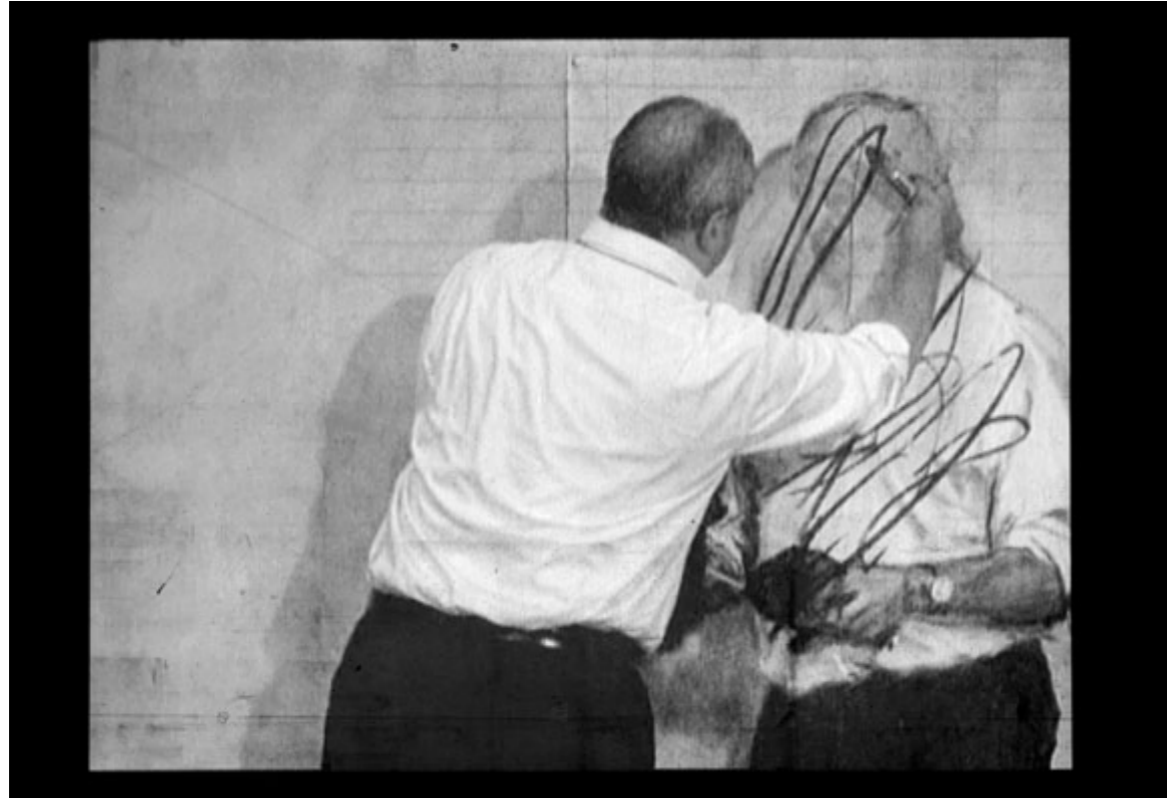


17. William Kentridge, Stills from *Invisible Mending*, 2003

<sup>27</sup> *Art As A Thinking Process* was the title of a conference held at Luav University in Venice in 2013, which considered visual forms of knowledge production with regards to fine art and education.

<sup>28</sup> Zendo: a room designated for Zen meditation .

<sup>29</sup> William Kentridge champions the role of doubt in the studio and describes *The Making Of A Safe Space for Stupidity* in the fourth of six Norton Lectures, *Practical Epistemology: A Life In The Studio*, presented at Harvard in 2012.



18. William Kentridge  
Still From *Invisible Mending* from *7 Fragments for Georges Melies*  
Animated film transferred to video, 1:20 min  
2003

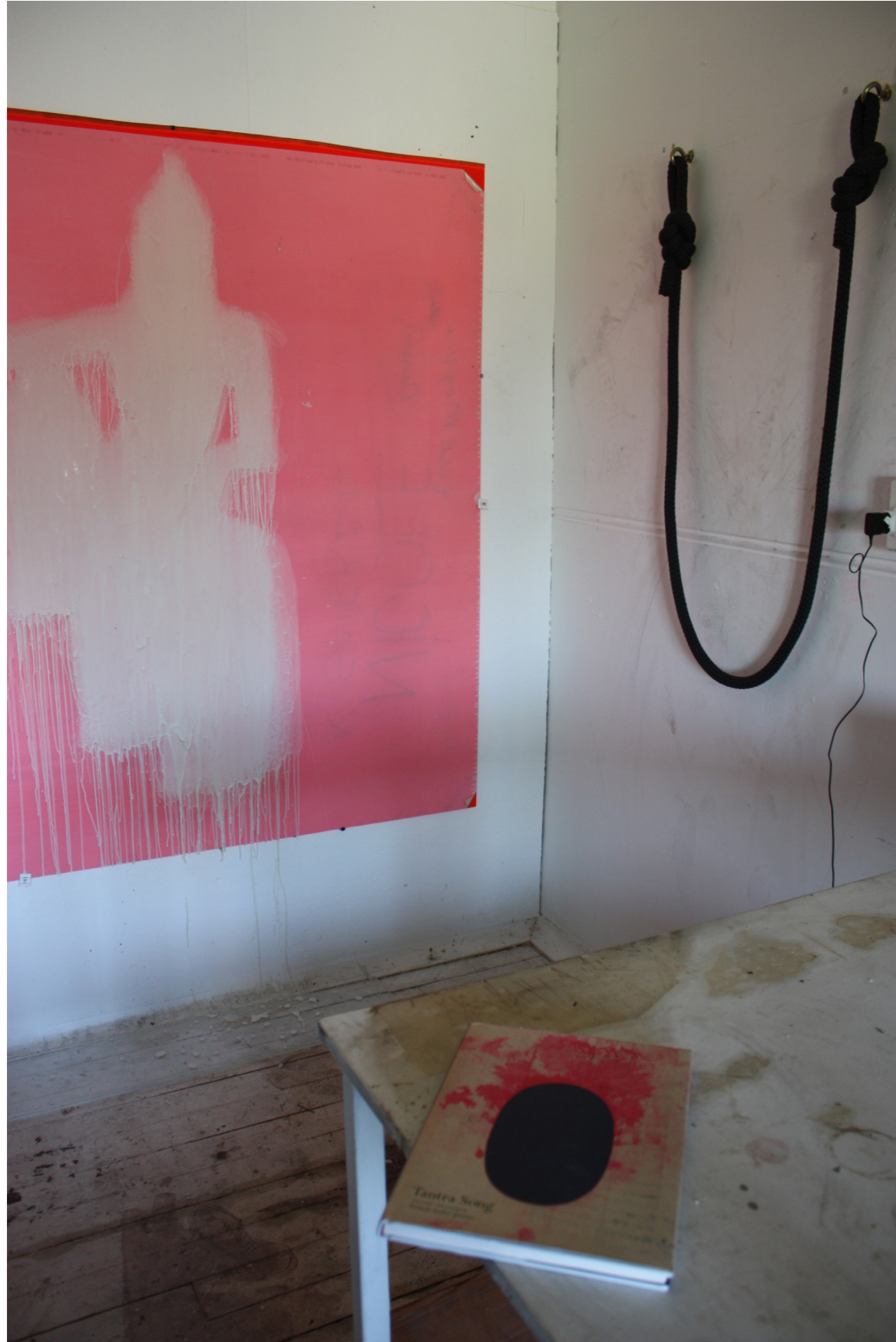
Preceding Kentridge, philosopher John Dewey broke down the mechanics of practical epistemology or learning-by-doing in a five-step process that highlights the interplay between sensation and cognition. Curator Mary Jane Jacob (2006: 102) considers Dewey's statement that 'thinking occurs when things are uncertain or doubtful or problematic,' noting:

The path of inquiry toward knowledge is uncertain. There are murky periods on the way to true discovery. As the process unfolds, Dewey observed, it passes through a disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused state. Yet it is in this very state that thinking happens....thus, in order to think we need to cultivate the capacity to sustain the 'rhythm of loss of integration with environment and recovery of union' in order to arrive at new knowledge.

In other words, knowledge production relies on a dissolution and reconfiguration of pre-existing certainties through new associations that characterise experimental (art) making. It may be argued that Dewey's *rhythm of loss of integration* considers a necessary chaos in metamorphosis. Endorsing this idea of growth through struggle, Jacob emphasises embracing the discomfort of uncertainty as essential to unleashing its creative potential. The subject of struggle as a process of transformation is one attended in my work.

As one way to make sense of the activity of art making, embracing a full range of emotional experience amidst the drama of playful experimentation, psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971: 70) explains play as an expression of creativity at the interface of internal and external worlds<sup>30</sup>. In this incarnation, the artist's studio is a physical and psychic location representing the interface between subject and object, neither exposed to the prohibitions of social life nor entirely imaginary. As such, I practice deliberately engaging with a felt sense of uncertainty in the studio to see if this might alter my own relationship with uncertainty beyond the studio. Winnicott's notion of play as a protected trial version of life, of freedom to experiment within boundaries, provides a foil to fear that may arise if one feels uncontained. Further considering the relationship between art and containment, philosopher Herbert Marcuse refers to art as 'a designated imaginative space where the experience of freedom is recreated' (Becker, 1996: 41). Yet with freedom, comes fear, according to philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, when he refers to anxiety as *the dizziness of freedom* (Kierkegaard et al, 1980: 61). This sentiment is echoed in *The Paradox of Choice*, written by psychologist Barry Schwartz (2004) when he suggests that limiting or eliminating choice might reduce anxiety.

<sup>30</sup> Donald Winnicott was an English pediatrician and psychoanalyst whose interest in object-relations and theories on play have been widely considered in relation to art theory.



19. A view of the studio, with *Tantra Song* (book), *Quan Pink* and *My Rope, Your Knots*

In my own life, I have rushed towards what felt like freedom, towards making art, often to find myself overwhelmed by Kierkegaard's anxiety. At such times, I am inclined to shut down the productive potential of uncertainty through planning, or resorting to familiar methods, as a way to reduce this discomfort. For this project, I devised a framework to create a sense of security within uncertainty, a paradox in and of itself. Like agreeing on the rules of a game, the framework was intended to define the safe arena: limited freedom for optimal play. The following section serves to elaborate on certain aspects of my studio methodology in relation to my work and that of other contemporary artists engaging with uncertainty.

## Studio Methodology: Principles of Practice

### Uncertainty in Action

As discussed in the previous section, the relationship between uncertainty and innovation is extensively considered by Dewey as described by Jacob, who notes that 'artists care in a peculiar way for this uncomfortable, uncertain phase of experience [...] In the creative process, artists employ unclear moments for the potential held by these periods of not knowing to bring to consciousness something new' (Jacob in Ambrožič and Vettese, 2013: 102).

To promote uncertainty, I considered ways to limit control and retain curiosity during making and other ways to disrupt certainty in the viewing of the final works. Like Rothko's *Recipe for Painting*, my methodology constitutes an orientation rather than a step-by-step, reproducible method. The primary approach I used, was to limit planning and remain open to what presented itself. This applied to themes, choices of material, techniques and display. In this method, I embarked with no destination in mind, taking cue from what I encountered, found, thought, did or felt along the way as a guide for actions. In American installation artist and former painter, Robert Irwin's biography, *Seeing Is Forgetting The Name of The Thing One Sees*<sup>31</sup>, Irwin describes his point of departure from studio practice as a *project of peripatetic availability*. Defining himself as *available in response*, Irwin responds to invitations to speak or make installation works without premeditation (Weschler, 2008: 163). His talks took the form of spontaneous dialogue and his art works were conceived there-

and-then, both as direct reactions to people and places. To be available in response, is to be undistracted by plans or preoccupation, to be mindfully aware. Though Irwin declared this strategy for work outside the studio, it echoes the acute attention entailed in producing his *Late Line Paintings* in the studio, just looking, 'for hours, for days, for weeks', or when spray painting twenty coats to achieve a perfect finish on his '39 Ford (Weschler, 2008: 164). So, Irwin's artistic practice demonstrated the enactment of his broader philosophy. When institutions challenged Irwin's unconventional approach, he defended inherent uncertainty as a place of creative possibility, stating simply 'I don't know' (Weschler, 2008: 164).



21. Irwin looking at a *Late Line Painting*

### Studio Methodology: The Paradox of Uncertainty

#### Principles: Promoting Practical Uncertainty

##### Materials

##### Processes

##### Disrupting Certain Perception

#### Materials:

Unfamiliar materials to reduce control and maintain curiosity

Inexpensive materials to reduce preciousness

Found materials, including colours, for the suggestions these introduce

#### Methods to Reduce Thinking / Planning:

In my experience, when one feels uncertain or insecure, the natural reaction is to think up a plan to eradicate this discomfort. To reduce this, I use Processes to reduce thinking / planning:

Practice of being present: work with themes of life and materials that present themselves

Ritual and repetition

Collage / Assemblage

Limited Palette: yellow, white, neutrals plus...?

#### Methods to Disrupt Certainty:

Abstraction

Obscuration: Layering

Veiling

Transparency, translucency, opacity

Illegible writing

Foreign script

Paradox: Natural vs artificial materials

Abstraction through patterning to figuration

Compound references (Hinduism, Zen, Christian Mysticism)

#### Inviting Contemplation:

Serene environment: Lighting

Colour harmony

Balance

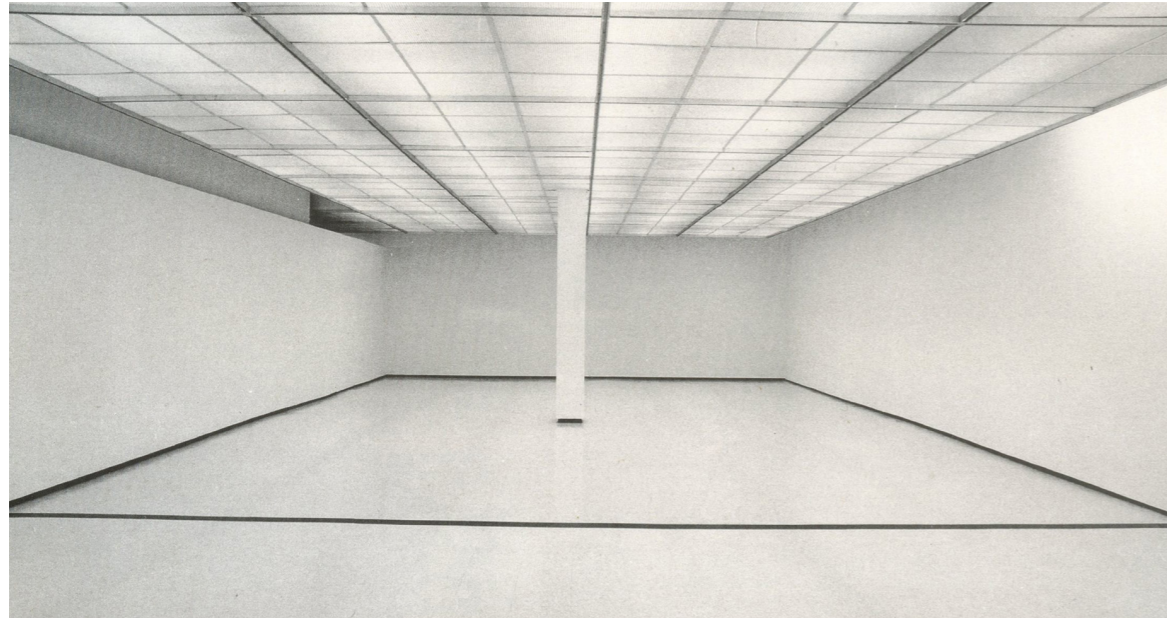
Flow

Fields

Titles / Instructions

20. Studio methodology reference sheet on studio wall

31 'Seeing is the forgetting the name of the thing one sees' is a quotation of French poet and philosopher, Paul Valery.



22. Robert Irwin, *Black Line Volume*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1975

In his architectural installations of the early 1970s, Irwin encouraged attention to detail by subtly exaggerating elements such as light and form. In *Black Line Volume*, he used a single line of black tape to emphasise the shape of the space and the shadow at the walls' edges, drawing full attention to what was already there (Weschler, 2008: 173). Through his practice, Irwin works at developing his own receptivity and seeks to encourage a similarly heightened perception in the viewer.

In relation to Irwin's approach, I intended for my studio methodology to prompt a focused presence and responsiveness to a felt experience of uncertainty. A deliberate effort towards non-action underscored my use of found materials, found colour and the subject matter of my immediate day-to-day experiences. Exemplifying this approach, *To Be Held* is the culminating work of the process initiated by the sound piece, *(I) Don't Know*<sup>32</sup>. Seeking to represent paradoxes I was struggling with in my romantic relationship, the work consists of five suspended panels painted as meditations on insoluble contemplations. The viewer is invited to enter into a holding space created by the five suspended panels, that is simultaneously safe and claustrophobic, public and private. The work evolved from series of seemingly 'fortunate' and 'unfortunate' developments. According to Zen, A significant part of the practice of being present, is to limit judgement, to try to see things as they are without assigning either positive or negative values that result in desire or rejection, and have associated musings that take one out of the present experience and into one's thoughts.

*To Be Held* started with the set of five 'found' canvases, which had been lying in the wood workshop for years and were given to me by my supervisor (fortunate?).

32 I made this work before reading Irwin's biography, as a subconscious, practical enactment of 'don't know mind', also known as *beginner's mind*, as described earlier.

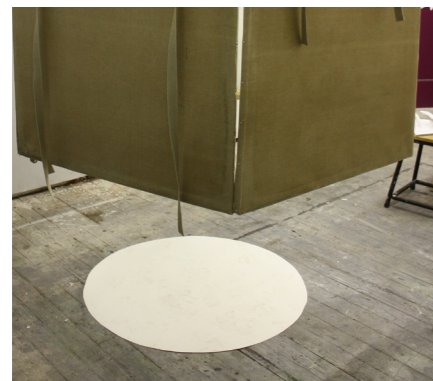
The head of the old household brush with which I painted, came away in my hand when lifted by the bristles (unfortunate?). As such, it was used as an extension of my arm, allowing for the movement of my entire body, which would have otherwise been limited by the handle (fortunate?). The linen elastic by which the canvases are suspended was an end-of-range sale item found at a leather supply store (fortunate?) when the leather I intended to buy was prohibitively expensive (unfortunate?). The perfect set of five wires used to suspend the elastics were found, taut across the stairwell of the painting building, where they had been left by another student, two years previously (fortunate?). Stan from the school wood workshop helped me suspend the piece, installing the wires across my studio (fortunate?). He pointed out how extremely frustrated I become when I do not understand what exactly is being done (unfortunate?). The circular mirror that forms the platform beneath the suspended pentagon on which the viewer stands was an off-cut (of precisely the same dimensions as my template cut a year prior) found at an automotive glass supplier I visited (fortunate?) to have my damaged car wing mirror repaired (unfortunate?).<sup>33</sup>

This story demonstrates numerous apparent coincidences that contributed to this one complete work. This sense of orientation through synchronicity, is one of the tools I use to navigate uncertainty. I term this amorphous medium of connectedness *the magic stream* which, in my imagination, always runs parallel to life and is accessed through a release from the narrow focus of compulsive plans. Flowing with the magic stream, results in a less fearful sense that things are as they should be. Despite my terminology, I do not really believe any magic to imbue this series of synchronicities, but rather the remarkable, though ordinary, realm of possibility experienced when my own grip on control is loosened. In sharing such work and associated narratives, I hope to entice the viewer to experiment with letting go, as a different way of moving in the world.



33 The use of (fortunate?) and (unfortunate?) in the following paragraph references *The Stone Cutter*, a Taoist parable about a man, his son and some wild horses, which demonstrates the value of suspending judgement, by illustrating how what might seem favourable may result in subsequent disappointment and vice versa. For example, in this story, the son breaks his leg falling from a horse, which subsequently saves his life as he is unfit to be drafted to war (Hoff and Shepard, 1982: 118-9).

LOVE vs LONGING  
 COMPROMISE vs SACRIFICE  
 HOPE vs SELF-DECEPTION  
 (~~COMMITMENT~~ vs ~~OBLIGATION~~)  
 COURAGE vs SELF-DESTRUCTION  
  
 DUALITY: DIFFERENT AND THE SAME  
  
 POSSESSIVE (ROMANTIC) LOVE vs UNIVERSAL (SELF) LOVE



- 23. Finding the mirror at a glass auto-repair shop (previous page)
- 24. Some considerations
- 25. *To Be Held*, Phase I: painting action
- 26. The handleless brush
- 27. *To Be Held*, Phase III: Inverting canvases
- 28. The cardboard template for mirror placement
- 29. Finding the suspension wires above the stairwell

30. *To Be Held*, 2015 (installation view)

## Some Ideas About Material Qualities

As I aim to invoke philosophical concerns through process, it is interesting to consider material qualities as signifiers of underlying beliefs and values. My work displays evidence of being made by a person, imperfectly. Having wondered about this, along with a preference for handmade objects, I was interested in how material qualities might elicit particular feelings and preferences. In a book on the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi sabi* – the ‘beauty of things that are imperfect, impermanent and incomplete’ – architect, Leonard Koren (1994) correlates particular aesthetic sensibilities with philosophical values. According to Koren, *wabi sabi* is a loosely defined set of principles allied with the Zen notion of all things being transient and proposing ultimate beauty as rooted in the perishability of nature. Koren (1994: 25-9) contrasts the aesthetics and philosophy of *wabi sabi* with what he characterises as the perfectionism and regularity of Modernism. Koren (1994: 25) defines Modernism as: ‘the dominant aesthetic sensibility of mid-to late-20th century international industrialised society.’. The following table includes a selection of relevant examples from Koren’s comparative lists.



31. Two vessels demonstrating some of Koren’s listed contrasts between Modernism and *wabi sabi*.

<i>Modernism</i>	<i>Wabi sabi</i>
implies a rational world view	implies an intuitive world view
looks for universal, prototypical solutions	looks for personal solutions
mass-produced / modular	one-of-a-kind / variable
expresses faith in progress	there is no progress
future-oriented	present-oriented
believes in the control of nature	believes in uncontrollability of nature
geometric organisation of form: precise, definite shapes and edges	organic organisation of form: soft, vague shapes and edges
the box as metaphor: rectilinear, precise, contained	the bowl as metaphor: free shape, open at top
man-made materials	natural materials
ostensibly slick	ostensibly crude
purity makes its expression richer	corrosion makes its expression richer
intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction	comfortable w ambiguity and contradiction
cool	warm
generally light and bright	generally dark and dim

While the binary nature of Koren’s list may oversimplify complex concepts, what interests me is his suggestion that aesthetic sensibility, which may otherwise be



32. *Eureka*, 2014



33. In the studio: an acrylic sheet on top of a box

construed as mere individual taste, may reflect deeper held beliefs about the world or support the possibility that art can influence the way we comprehend the world. Research on mirror neurons furthers this theoretical link between the material quality of an object, the mind set of the maker and the effect on the viewer. Cognitive neuroscientist, Vittorio Gallese defines mirror neurons as the brain cells responsible for 'embodied cognition and multisensory perception', a complex form of stimulation implicated in the viewing of art. Gallese proposes a 'relationship between embodied simulation – driven empathic feelings in the observer and the quality of the artwork in terms of the visible traces of the artist's creative gestures, like brush work, chisel marks, and signs of the movement of the hand more generally' (Bacci and Melcher, 2013: 446). This statement proposes gesture as the material translation of the maker's attitude, for reading by the viewer. Relating these ideas to my own contemplation of what appeals in the hand made, Gallese's theory may relate to Koren's ideas on wabi sabi, with each imperfect (so, beautiful) gesture offering subconscious appreciation of the care attended by the maker.

Subscribing to Koren's analysis, I have created objects that may be interpreted as incorporating aesthetic qualities of both wabi sabi and Modernism, contrasting natural materials and imperfect finishes with synthetic materials and precision. The found materials used in *Eureka* are a response to my environment and my practice to reduce control in my process of finding my way to a work. The translucent acrylic sheet central to *Eureka* was found on my way to school in the recycling unit of my block of flats. As I had no particular intention for it and with limited studio space, I placed the octagonal sheet atop an open box containing two tubs of glue. The unexpected discovery of an ethereal haziness and colourful edge on the obscured white lid of a tub, against the darkness of the inside of the box evolved into the finished work. A frame was made with offcuts from the wood workshop and finished with leftover wall paint. The other items within the frame are material and colour experiments that were lying around the studio. In *Eureka*, it is not clear what one is seeing. By concealing the visible edge of the found plastic behind a circular wooden aperture and recessing both behind a second sheet of clear acrylic, the eye is denied instant recognition of the translucent substance. The white tub lid is deliberately positioned slightly off-centre, the edge of the circle is intentionally irregular and the frame retains its grain beneath ten, carefully applied layers of paint. Ambiguity, irregularity, asymmetry, hand making and circularity relate to Koren's list of wabi sabi qualities, whilst industrial plastic sheets, the uniformity of the white tub lid and the square frame tend towards what he considers Modernist ideals. As such, *Eureka* may echo my efforts to integrate two seemingly paradoxical attitudes, by exhibiting 'the coexistence of contradictory ideas within a consistent form'.



34. A thrown ceramic bowl (containing glue as an experiment in reflectiveness.)



35. An anonymous Tantric Painting from Bikaner, 2002

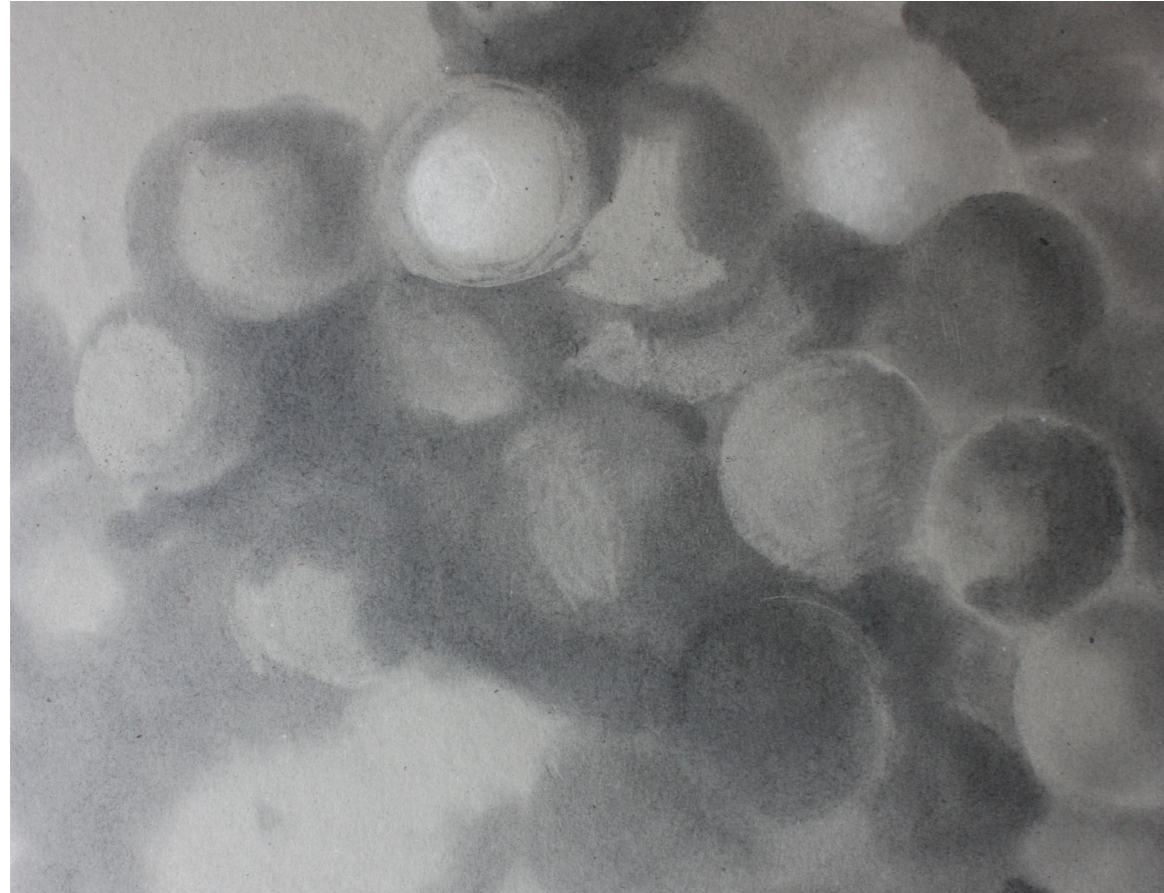
## Unfamiliar Materiality

### *Control in the Idea of 'I'*

For a few years, I have dabbled in ceramic wheelwork and in this, have found an ethos of unpreciousness that I carried into my painting practice. When throwing a cylinder, the foundation of any form made on the wheel, one's attitude of mind becomes physically evident when engaging with the responsive clay. The practice of throwing begs a soft focus, full attention and lightness of touch that guides rather than forces the clay. Working in clay felt less precious than painting. Without any investment in an idea of myself as a potter, failure had no graver implication than to return the unsuccessful cylinder to a ball and start again. It was this disengagement from the idea of myself as the maker that led me to consider the significance of self in the art-making process.

Looking through *Tantra Song* (Jamme, F.A. et al, 2011) a book on abstract Tantric paintings in gouache on paper, the work might be easily mistaken for that of 20th Century Modernists. It is this sense of familiarity that enhances the striking difference in the origins of these two sorts of paintings. The Tantric paintings are anonymous, opposing the regard for the artist-as-creator within the culture of contemporary Western art practice. The perceived significance of authorship seems consistent with the Western regard for individualism (as epitomised by fixation with celebrity). Considering the psychological ramifications of this phenomenon, Winnicott et al. (1986: 141) warn that 'the most aggressive and therefore the most dangerous words in the languages of the world are to be found in the assertion I AM.' These words reference the risks of defending certainty, proposing a link between individualism and the prevalence of anxiety in the West<sup>34</sup>. Similarly, Zen proposes that suffering is born of the attachment to an idea of a fixed self, to contrast a state of being that is ever-changing and interconnected with surroundings. The warnings of Winnicott and Zen, serve to explain my process-focused experience with pottery in comparison with my outcome-focused experience in painting. Based on this realisation, it is necessary to further consider method and materiality as they relate to fostering uncertainty.

<sup>34</sup> In a 2012 publication examining *Cultural Aspects in Social Anxiety and Social Anxiety Disorder*, researchers reported the prevalence of social anxiety disorder as between just under 8% in the US as compared with under 1% in East Asia (Hofmann et al., 2010).



36. Drawing from *Making From Nothing*, 2015 (detail)



37. *Drawing for Adrian*, 2014

### *Considering Skill as a Form of Control*

Diminishing control through the use of unfamiliar materials and application methods has been a regular practice of artists working with uncertainty. This unfamiliarity allows room for an exploratory openness that is quite different from focused determination towards a preconceived conclusion.

Technical skill that may initially indicate competency in practice can become a form of duty and limit possibility. In a paper titled *Art After Deskillling*, art theorist John Roberts (2010: 32) considers the role of skill in defining Modernist art:

Thus, if, in the post-cubist painting, hand and eye are no longer constrained by the dictates of bringing coherence to an orderly progression of mark making, in the work of the Duchampian artist, this freedom is limitless. This means that the ready made's deflationary logic invites more than a critique of painting's circumscribed sense of artistic craft. Duchampian deflation stands not simply as a negation of the status of painting, but as an actual extension of the artist's skills and competences.

Here, Roberts identifies a liberation of the definition of art and artists from skilled mark making, to conceptual innovation. For me, this turning away from 'the dictates of bringing coherence to an orderly progression of mark making' is not intended as a rejection of skill, but as an expansion of my own definition of an artist. I have employed techniques that resist familiar registers of traditional Western naturalism in an attempt to shift the reading of the works away from the appraisal of mechanical skill as a means of figurative representation. This liberation from the demands of expertise may be considered a move towards beginner's mind. To demonstrate this, consider the drawing *Making From Nothing* with *Drawing for Adrian*. By deliberately limiting mastery through the use of less precise tools in *Making From Nothing* (a pouch of charcoal dust, rather than a pointed stick of charcoal), a collection of mouse balls<sup>35</sup> was rendered with less detail and precision and was only lightly considered. Thus, the process of drawing remained curious, without a clear end point, and the result is more a relationship between charcoal dust and grey paper than a two-dimensional depiction of the subject. Moving away from figuration (with its recourse to narrative) and towards abstraction, widens the interpretation of the work, offering relative uncertainty in the reading.

<sup>35</sup> A box full of rubber-coated, lead ball bearings that were the tracking devices in (since) deconstructed computer mice.



38. Penny Siopis, *Blow Up*, 2010

Divesting full authority of material mastery, one becomes part of a process, immersed rather than fully in charge. To maintain the quality of uncertainty in the process, one needs to keep shifting the parameters of materiality or method. In a process that artist Penny Siopis refers to as *painting blind*, ink and glue works, start as inscrutable experiments, where the artist cannot see, let alone predict the outcome of her marks as she commingles streams of coloured ink with layers of opaque white glue (Olivier, 2014: 252). Siopis commences each painting with the canvas flat on the floor, so gravity encourages unexpected shapes to coalesce. The *first form* – only seen once the glue dries several days later – constitutes the first phase of making followed by a collaborative process of additions and subtractions that evolves between the painter and her media. (Nuttall in Olivier, 2014: 181). The academic and diplomat, Professor Gerrit Olivier describes her method as follows, ‘there’s a deliberate interference with the automatized habits of the painter. Of course you can’t eliminate these – but you can push in a direction where control is reduced’ (Olivier, 2014: 251).

This reduction of control through the use of unpredictable media, bears relevance to my own use of materials in enabling uncertainty whilst making. Siopis uses glue as a paint on canvas, embracing the obscuring effect of this opaque fluid whilst wet. In my own experimentation, I use glue as a painting medium to hold clay or other pigment or alone, when it offers varying degrees of translucency, depending on the thickness of application. I also use glue as a sculpture medium that, once dry, holds its form without support. Glue can be applied to a smooth acrylic panel and peeled off as a sheet, leaving a shiny under-surface and a silky, semi-matt top-surface or poured into a carved surface to render a relief. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a small form cast in glue that was poured over a plaster slab into which small circles had been carved with a linocut tool (to attempt to excavate a perfect circle in what was an unfamiliar material). The resulting work demonstrates a combination of control,



39. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 2014

wielded in the carving process with the unruly response of the glue: once removed from the mould, the plaster residue adhered to the raised areas of the glue, varying the translucency of the set glue and contributing to uncertainty as to what the material is. I found that using less precious materials, like five litre industrial tubs of inexpensive wood glue, helped to reduce my cautiousness and so increased experimental abandon.



40. *Kali's Work*, 2014

*Kali's Work* involved a different use of the same glue. Here I was seeking to represent the translucent effect of bleeding ink on a printed muslin scarf. This was a second attempt, following my initial effort to carve the printed design in a layer of yellow encaustic to reveal a red ground (*The Shame*, page 162). I started the work by tracing images and symbols onto a sheet of clear acrylic with a fine brush and slow-drying acrylic paint. I then coated the area of the design with a layer of cold glue tinted with Indian yellow pigment and left it to dry overnight. On my return, I found that an imperceptible slant of the table top had caused the painting, in its liquid form, to run off the surface, pooling on a translucent, glue-coated sheet of acrylic that was drying on the floor below. The yellow and red liquids made a vibrant puddle on the otherwise empty sheet, yellow glue dragging the red drawing as it flowed, distorting the image of Kali and Shiva. In keeping with the mythology of Kali as a goddess of destruction and creativity, this incident declared the creative possibility in destruction. The chance reconfiguration of this work is exhibited as a testimony to the unimagined possibilities might come into being when we allow circumstances to work themselves out.



41. The drip (detail)



42. Laib collecting dandelion pollen

## Ritual and Repetition

Anish Kapoor (2011) identifies innate transformation that occurs in the act of repetition:

Well, when you repeat a thing and repeat and repeat a thing, it isn't the same thing. It isn't even the same size of thing. It comes to be, it comes to have if you like both parody of itself and actuality of itself [...] and the first making isn't the same as the last making, that somehow there's a kind of incantation of the object that changes it, it becomes poetry, it halts time, I'd say. It changes time. So I think this is a process which is profoundly mysterious and we have to dare to let us do this fundamentally stupid thing.

Identifying apparent absurdity in the act of repetition, Kapoor simultaneously validates this practice as one that allows for unexpected developments, therefore pertinent in the exploration of uncertainty. Relating to process rather than outcome, ritual is defined as 'a series of actions or type of behavior regularly and invariably followed' or a ceremonial practice performed according to a predefined sequence (OED, 2016).

Wolfgang Laib's practice exemplifies ritual to the extent that art theorist Didier Semin (1994: 70-76) refutes differentiation between process and product in his work, stating: 'Laib's art is at once a ritual and a sculpture or a painting, without allowing for a choice between one or the other.' In this manner, Laib creates installations that integrate earthly and existential concerns. Working in natural materials, including pollen, beeswax, milk, rice and stone, this process requires a substantial dedication of time and a persistent quiet effort. For instance, the work *Pollen from Hazel* comprised the efforts of eighteen years of collecting spring pollen in a hazel forest near his home, before installation on the floor of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (ART 21, 2014). Discussing his process of pollen collection, Laib questions perceptions of the valid use of time, saying:

[...] and the most beautiful is the dandelion pollen [...] and you sit days and days in a dandelion meadow, it's an incredible experience and it's something totally different than what our society thinks of what you should do or what you should achieve in an hour or in a day or in a week or in a month.



43.. Wolfgang Laib installing *Pollen From Hazel* at MOMA



44. Wolfgang Laib, *Pollen From Hazel*, MOMA, 2013

Here Laib<sup>36</sup> muses on the discrepancy between his felt satisfaction and what might be considered expedient by the Western culture of his upbringing. In the same interview, he acknowledges the role of the *Tao te Ching*<sup>37</sup>, in his own value system. As mentioned earlier, Taoism advocates simplicity and non-action, or letting things take their natural course. Demonstrating this ethos of non-action, the completed work, *Pollen from Hazel*, is a rectangular layer of pollen presented in an almost unaltered form, sifted onto a concrete surface and bearing little trace of the artist's presence through mark-making. As repetition within repetition, Laib has been installing and then returning his squares of different pollens to collection jars since the first one he exhibited in 1977. This habit of re-exhibition supports his claims to the timelessness and universal accessibility of the concepts presented in such works. Identifying the boundlessness of the embodied experiences he creates, he replies to an interviewer attributing particular meanings to his pollen work, 'the pollen is all the things you have said but maybe it is also many more things, things that maybe I don't know and you don't know...' (ART 21, 2014). As such, Laib insists on the primacy of his materiality and undefined sensory experience over the certainty of concepts. He notes: 'I became an artist and art is about not knowing where you are going' (ART 21, 2014). In other words, Laib considers the artist to be one who might embrace uncertainty and implies an integration of art and life.

Returning to the function of repetition, philosopher Gilles Deleuze suggests that 'repetition for itself is freed from being repetition of an original self-identical thing so that it can be the repetition of difference' (Smith and Protevi, 2015). Deleuze identifies the difference between the acts of repetition and exact replication, noting that serial gestures or products become noteworthy for the difference between them, rather than their similarities. In my own practice of repetition, anticipating endless tries frees me from self-imposed pressure to perfect any one attempt, which alters the tone of effort that is then likely reflected in the material form of each gesture. Once the ritualised form of making is decided, its expression can be attended to in an embodied rather than a thought sense. In the case of my studio methodology framework, familiar structure paradoxically offers freedom of expression.

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Wolfgang Laib qualified as a doctor before resolving the decision to work as an artist, considering the practice of medicine 'too narrow, focusing on the body without concern for the spiritual' (Klaus, 1986). In a recent interview, Laib acknowledges that he believes his art practice to achieve the same purpose he had originally hoped to fulfill through the practice of medicine (Art 21, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Lao-Tzu's *Tao te Ching* is the text on which Taoism was founded.



45. Edmund de Waal, *breathturn II*, 2013



46. *breathturn II* (Installation view)

When ceramicist, Edmund De Waal arranges simple ceramic cylinders in multiples, he transforms a stand-alone object into a gesture. Justifying his self-imposed title of *conceptual potter*, De Waal's installations incorporate surrounding structures and the spaces between his ceramic vessels: emptiness and environment are equal to object in articulating his compositions. De Waal's use of repetition demonstrates Deleuze's idea that repetition emphasises variation. Considering the relationship between concept and object in an interview with art historian, Tracy Zwick (2013), De Waal was asked:

TZ: '...it's John Cage who redefined the philosopher Gilles Deleuze's idea of repetition, a strategy you use, as the production of unintentional differences. Tell me about the place of music and the strategy of repetition in this work.'

EdW: 'The idea of a sculpture as a score and performance is exactly what this is; you're absolutely right. *Breathturn* is music, and it's a series of breaths, and its just pots on shelves.'

Here he identifies the paradox of complex concepts bound up in simple objects, specifically identifying the ceramic cylinders in *breathturn II* as markers of presence and time<sup>38</sup>.

Like a cross-section of a porcelain cylinder, *enso*<sup>39</sup> means circle, in Japanese. It also describes a Zen calligraphy practice of circle painting as a form of portraiture, said to represent 'a moment when the mind is free to let the body create'. The enso mark is made in a single stroke, on a single outbreath, and represents the individual who painted it, at that time (Seo and Loori, 2007: xii). Sometimes employed as a daily (spiritual) practice, completion of an enso comprises a single, ink brush stroke circle, accompanied by a signature, the date and an inscription – either traditional or original – complementing the gestural brush mark with intention to capture the spirit of that instant. An enso is also a symbol representing enlightenment, strength, the universe and the void – in other words, both form and emptiness.

<sup>38</sup> Time and presence are themes directly related to uncertainty in the introduction of this text.

<sup>39</sup> I first began to work with ensos in 2013, after I had been painting interpretations of frogspawn for many months and moved into a more deliberate engagement with the circle. Employing the practice of enso-painting, each circle represents a focused opportunity to mark time, breath, concentration and movement. At the time, I was interested in the concept of sequential momentary portraits, or recording the evolution of self, not specifically myself, but a graphic recording of the transience of all things, including myself.



47. A traditional enso painting



48. (*The Great Unknown*), 2016 (detail)



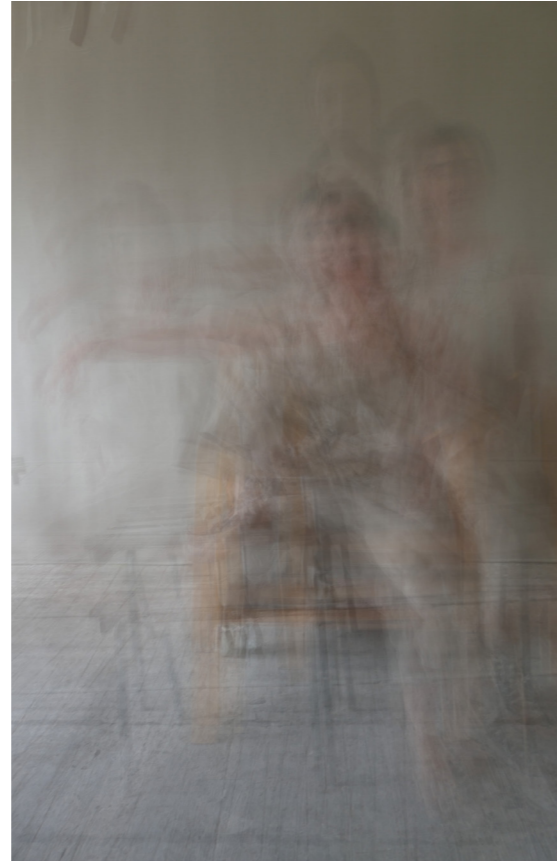
49: (*The Great Unknown*), 2016 (detail)

When employed as a repetitive gesture in my own practice, *enso* painting is curiously captivating. Like throwing a ceramic cylinder, the gesture of an enso is ideally performed with care and lightness. Though my practice of *enso* painting is repetitive, it is crucial that the execution never becomes formulaic or mechanical. With each new work involving these circular marks, I endeavour to vary an aspect of materiality or method to retain curiosity and promote the possibility of a different outcome. In *Quan Pink*, I learned not to correct errors, deciding that a relaxed error functions more productively than a tightly controlled correction. Using this lesson in (*The Great Unknown*), I allowed the liquid drips to remain, watching the bead of paint run down the canvas. I would then grab the residual drip with my brush, and form another *enso* as a continuation of the line that had run. This employment of chance led to a pattern of interconnection, offspring and generation, relating to my attendant contemplations of family, children and my dying grandmother. So the patterns that emerged related to thoughts, enacting Dewey's dialectic process of doing and thinking, as ideas arising from material arising from ideas. Exploratorily developed, one enso at a time, these paintings start with a single mark that evolves into a mass of repetitive marks. Though I make choices regarding colour use, dilution (transparency) and placement, I work towards a final form through the intuitive choreography of painting. Choices are informed by the preceding experiences of marks, colour and layering effects. Considering the work's large scale, the location of my body, extended by chairs and ladders, determines which areas receive most attention. Such factors are continually reconsidered and either embraced or countered.

The final paintings have a sense of the figural, perhaps due to the energy involved in making, the movement in the translucent layering, or the appearance that the marks are contained by, rather than covering the unstretched canvas (the ensos stop short of the edges). The terms *figural* and *figuration* are derived from the Latin root *figura*, meaning form or shape. 'Figuration' refers to 'ornamentation by means of figures or designs' or allegorical representation (OED, 2016). In direct contrast to figuration, abstraction bears no evidence of allegorical representation, but in its familiarity, presents an established visual language of its own. 'Figural' describes a sense of some thing but not necessarily something recognisable. It is 'a form of signification which relies on imagery and association rather than on rational and linguistic concepts' (OED, 2016). In creating works that are figural rather than figurative or abstract – despite occasionally tending more towards either abstraction or figuration, in order to disrupt uniformity – I hope to increase uncertainty in the reading. Philosopher Umberto Eco refers to this as 'open work,' proposing that unclear ideas, materials and imagery allow for greater freedom of interpretation and viewer involvement (De Mallac, 1971: 31).



50. *Quan Yin*  
Northern Song Dynasty Wood Carving  
circa 1025



51. *Bodydharma*  
Composite photograph  
2015

A second demonstration of ritualised process, *Quan Pink* constituted a daily ritual of painting Quan Yin, a Buddhist figure said to embody compassion, as a gestural form echoing a Northern Song Dynasty Wood Carving (circa 1025). Since the active attention of drawing forges a different relationship with the object considered, I hoped to become better acquainted with the nature of compassion, through painting Quan Yin. Every day, I painted Quan Yin's form over the previous day's painting using a mixture of cold glue and marble dust<sup>40</sup>. I initially considered the nature of compassion as it relates to the female form, denoting an ideal (universal) mother figure or womanhood more generally. Subsequently, I considered how the formal qualities of the sculpture – shapes and angles of limbs, torso and head position and facial expression – could so strongly convey the aura of compassion from an inanimate sculpture. I considered the relationship between Quan Yin's essence and her body<sup>41</sup>; whether one might engender her spirit of compassion by adopting the same posture or whether one's limited sense of compassion might reflect in my physical inability to achieve the pose. I undertook a series of attempts to sit in the posture of Quan Yin, challenging myself to come to rest in a rush by photographing myself using a ten second timer. This experiment culminated in a composite photograph (the digital layering of many separate images) called *Bodydharma*<sup>42</sup>, as a reference to the wisdom of the body. The use of repetition and ritualistic processes in *Bodydharma* and the enso paintings enabled a meditative state of working, heightening my ability to be present while making and releasing concern about the outcome.



52. *Quan Pink (process series)*, 2015

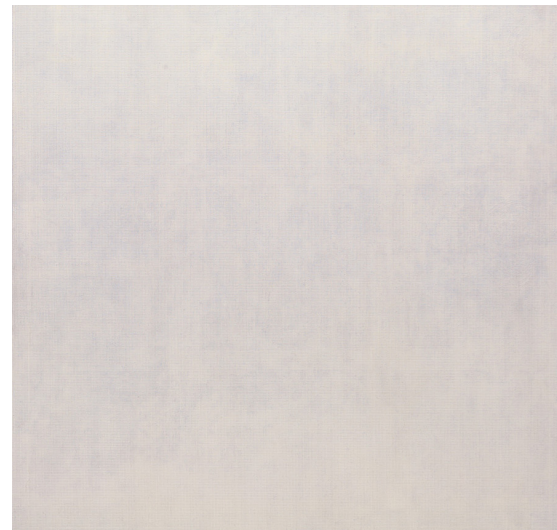
40 For several years, I had intended to carve a version of Quan Yin out of white stone, with the same intention of meditating on compassion whilst working. Considering a painted version, I rummaged through my cupboard of materials, looking for substrates to combine with the medium of cold glue. Marble dust seemed the obvious choice.

41 A regular practice of yoga has allowed me embodied glimpses into the mysterious continuities between mind and body.

42 *Dharma* translates directly as truth. So, *Bodydharma* is a play on the name of the 5-6th Century Chinese monk, Bodhidharma who has been credited with the origin of Chan Buddhism. .



53. Agnes Martin (installation view), Tate Britain, 2015



54. Agnes Martin, *White Stone*, 1965



55. Agnes Martin, *Trumpet*, 1967

## Functional and Found Colour

Anish Kapoor (2011) notes that colour ‘as material, as stuff, is both present as a physical thing and has a kind of illusory other reality, so in a way it becomes mythological. Color as stuff isn’t just other, it’s both other and present at the same time’. Through its illusory nature, concentrated attention on colour may offer direct sensation of the omnipresence of uncertainty; unsettling our common perception that seeing is believing. In my experience, the longer you look, the more colours you see, and the idea of true colour is soon subsumed with uncertainty. In an attempt to describe this, I reminisced:

Sunday, the bright morning filters in under an archway, through a coarse ivory drape. Neither inclined to get out of bed, nor sleepy, I am just looking. The walls and ceiling are white, but apparently every other colour too. All about flickering, soft edges waver to hard lines the moment I focus too precisely. With quiet attention, the vibrancy of things increases. I don’t know how long I have spent looking at the ceiling, but it is clear that it is staying nowhere.

Perhaps it was my intention to engage this sort of concentration, by using neutrals and white at the start of the project. I painted the studio wall pale buff grey<sup>43</sup>, and worked with the colours of linens and clays I was using on the wheel. I experience these tones as calming but lively, as the limited range of colour emphasises subtle variations. As sheer strokes of paint and graphite on uniform, square canvases, the works of Agnes Martin exhibit the power of a neutral palette to focus attention and create stillness. Martin had attended DT Suzuki’s classes on Zen in New York and incorporated Eastern philosophy into her practice, proposing her paintings as objects of contemplation without any intention to convey specific ideas, emotions or personal biography. Martin correlates the quietness of palette with state of mind, saying: ‘If you can go with them and hold your mind as empty and tranquil as they are, and recognise your feelings at the same time, you will realise your full response to life’ (Martin in Biesenthal, Tudor and Tudor, 1976: 47) Martin is reported to have suffered from debilitating mental illness<sup>44</sup>, which may further account for her preference for calming colour.

<sup>43</sup> I was taught that a neutral, rather than white studio background improves colour perception.

<sup>44</sup> Agnes Martin is said to have suffered from schizophrenia. The association between creativity and mental illness is a longstanding one, recently evidenced in a Swedish study which showed a frequent concurrence of creativity and bipolar mood disorder (Kyaga et al., 2011) Experiences with the emotional difficulties of others in my profession as a doctor and my own experience of emotion as a creative person, have lead me to reconsider the construct of mental illness as it is proposed by the discipline of psychiatry. Whilst expansion on this theme is beyond the scope of this project, it lies at the core of my interest. Alternative philosophical understandings of anxiety were mentioned earlier in the text, considering the ideas of Heidegger and Kierkegaard. Further support for the argument to de-pathologise the links between creativity and mental illness can be found in such writings as *Anxiety and Neurosis* by the psychiatrist Charles Rycroft and the work of Eric Maisel, an American therapist and creativity coach with a particular interest in ‘creative anxiety’. My affinity for Zen relates to a skeptical view of the Cartesian foundation of psychiatry that posits mental illness (despite an epidemic incidence) as a pathology to be diagnosed and suppressed with chemicals, rather than part of the normal range of human experience. In contrast, Zen sees struggle, particularly the struggles of mind, as integral to the human condition, to be embraced on a path towards self-knowledge.

Surrounding myself with warm, quiet colours similarly eased my own anxiety in the studio. Then, unexpectedly, yellow entered the room



My involvement with yellow began in 2013, some months after I first saw a picture of Wolfgang Laib's *Pollen from Hazel*. I loved the image for how it looked, but equally as a symbol of Laib and his way in the world. Yellow then arrived in my studio as a sheet of fluorescent acrylic, which I seized on my walk to the studio as it was being discarded by a design agency. The luminosity of the electric-yellow emphasised the understated whites and greys already there, seeming to emit light as the linen, canvas and clay softened or absorbed it. From then on, my eye was attuned and I collected yellow objects displaying different tones and qualities as they appeared – file dividers, rubber gloves, a scarf, dyed linen, powdered pigment, paint, a jar of preserved lemons. A range of yellows shone in the studio: warm Indian yellow (bordering

on red) to cold fluorescent yellow, translucent Hansa yellow liquid acrylic to opaque cadmium yellow oils. I enjoy the liveliness of yellow, the way that it interacts with light and makes linen look violet. The yellow square on my wall made me feel cared for<sup>45</sup>.

It is interesting to consider what draws one to a colour, when the choice seems instinctual. In *The Psychology of Colour*, social scientist Eva Heller (2009) challenges the notion of personal colour preference, claiming that colour choice is influenced by cultural heritage, philosophy, language and personal experience. In a survey of favourite colours, the colour blue was favoured by 45% of the two thousand participants, whereas yellow was one of the least favourite at 6%. According to Heller's study, yellow is 'the colour of contradiction', associated with 'amusement, optimism, gentleness and spontaneity' but also 'duplicity, envy, jealousy, avarice and cowardice.' In contrast to this conflicted feeling and limited preference for yellow in her Western (German) study population, Heller describes a high regard for yellow in Asian (specifically Chinese) cultures, where the colour is representative of 'virtue and nobility', 'happiness, glory, wisdom, harmony and culture' (Heller, 2009: 69-86). Almost two-hundred years earlier, German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

45 Further described in the section, Catalogue of Works, *Quan Yellow* demonstrated the emotional effect of a large, translucent square of warm yellow hung on the wall of my studio.

(in Doran, 2013: 7), published his *Theory of Colour*<sup>46</sup> in which he speaks of the physical properties of yellow and foretells Heller's characterisation of yellow as a colour of ambivalence:

This is the colour nearest to the light.

In its highest purity it always carries with it the nature of brightness and has a serene, gay, softly exciting character.

If however, this colour in its pure and bright state is agreeable and gladdening, and in its utmost power is serene and noble, it is, on the other hand, extremely liable to contamination, and produces a very disagreeable effect if it is sullied, or in some degree tends to the minus side. Thus, the colour of sulphur, which inclines to green, has something unpleasant in it.

Thus, Goethe identifies the paradox of yellow: its positive associations amplify its potential to disappoint, to appear negative.

As much as I would like to claim my own employment of yellow as an agent of paradox, I can only presume this as a subconscious motive. Similarly, whilst I can postulate an association between my interest in Eastern philosophy and my affinity for yellow, this would be to superimpose a theoretical construct on my actual experience. However, considering Heller's conclusions, maybe these associations were there in the emergence of yellow as a signifier of paradox and indeterminacy in my work.



57. In the studio: some yellow media

46 Goethe's *Theory of Colour* was more a phenomenological or philosophical consideration of colour than the scientific study that its empirical title suggests (Wittgenstein et al., 2007: 71). At the time of his writing, Goethe's ideas contested what he considered to be oversimplification in the reductionist physics of Isaac Newton's colour science. Though his theory has been largely dismissed by scientists, it is perhaps most usefully considered as a poetic complement to science, taking into account the eye's experience of colour, alongside Newton's studies of optics which specifically excluded the eye and reduced colour to a function of rays. (Sepper, 2009). As such, Goethe's approach bears some relevance to the phenomenological approaches to learning that I have described in this text.



58. Samples of translucency

## Translucency and the Use of Obscuration

Transparency, translucency and opacity recur in my work, reconfiguring, resisting and reflecting light. Translucent materials, including glue, plastic sheets, wax, wax paper, acrylic paint and oil paint, obscure visibility of what lies beneath, inviting one to look yet limiting clarity. Unlike opaque materials, which supersede what lies below, translucent materials maintain a trace of process, as underlying layers form a composite image. This visualisation of process over time encapsulates what it is to build on previous efforts and to present an accretion of attempts as a finished product that might not have been preconceived.

According to art historian Ernst Kris, visual ambiguity increases the creativity involved in viewing, described earlier by Ernst Gombrich as *the beholder's share*, by increasing the effort required to make sense of what is seen (Kandel, 2012: 189-192). In *Your Hands Full of Hours*, Edmund de Waal placed a sheet of translucent material<sup>47</sup> between two rows of porcelain cylinders. Compositional spacing, variation in height and surface irregularity draws one's attention to differences between the nearly identical cylinders. The obscured forms beyond the translucent divide alert one to the act of seeing as opposed to the objects themselves. Similar to Laib's commentary on the slow action of collecting dandelion pollen, De Waal's title relates the earthly act of making pots to considerations of the relationship between time and action.

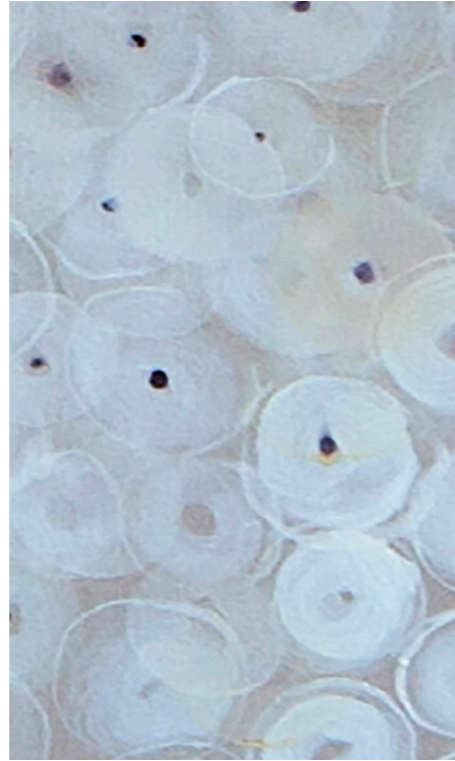


59. Edmund de Waal, *Your Hands Full of Hours*, (detail) 2013

<sup>47</sup> My own use of translucent acrylic preceded my discovery of De Waal's similar use of material on acquiring his eponymous monograph at the end of 2014.



60. *Possibility* (detail)



61. *Reflection of the Moon in a Thousand Bowls* (detail)



62. *Unknowing V* (detail)

Using various methods to create distortion, I aim to invite a quiet yet dynamic attention to what is being viewed. In works entailing repetition, like the painting (*The Great Unknown*), translucency allows for underlying circles to both mix with and remain distinct from overlying circles. As in *Your Hands Full of Hours*, partly overlapping or intermingled forms are less straightforward to read than two similar marks next to each other on a two-dimensional plane. In *Possibility*, partly obscuring a figurative collage depicting clay balls with translucent acrylic seemed to make the image appear *more* accurate, as the mind's eye makes sense of a distorted image. In *Unknowing V*, the limitation of a focal point or plane creates sensorial uncertainty, inciting the eye to grapple with what it sees. The reduced focus created by a translucent layer mimics a meditative gaze, with eyes half closed and resting a short distance away, as if softening the attention to include more than an object of focus. The consideration of ways of seeing, involving interventions like distortion, brings me to the final phase of my process: the exhibition.



63. Quan Yellow (installation view)

## *The Exhibition*

The mind is studied in the sanctuary of the meditation room, but it is out in the world where such insights may be best activated. Similarly, the exhibition is the safe space of the studio, opened out. Through exhibition, I aim to invite the viewer to share in the uncertainty entailed in making the work, by denying certainty of perception and subsequently encourage more creative, embodied viewing. To replicate my studio experience of being rather than doing, I hope to offer the viewer a welcoming environment in which he or she might feel comfortable to pause, experience not knowing or a sense of enquiry, even when this feels uncomfortable. In *The Curator's Task: Opening Up Space and Time*<sup>48</sup>, Mary Jane Jacob (2006) suggests:

Visitors, like artists, need to settle into taking time so that they can cultivate for themselves the ability to sustain the anxiety and uncertainty of waiting for an experience to arise, for art to tell them something. They need to be able to dwell on what Buddhists call the 'mind of don't know' – a creative space that allows for a sense of unknowing and the unsure moments of creative chaos within the process that can be convoluted and long [...] This means helping others to take the liberty to be unsettled in their own experiences; to be free from having to find answers or to imagine that no answers exist or that multiple, even conflicting ideas are possible.

Here, Jacob identifies the value of uncertainty as a generative aspect of exhibition viewing. Jacob extends her ideas on the value of uncertainty in the exhibition to the process of curating itself:

We are familiar with the path or research, but I have something else in mind: an exploration not directed at substantiating a thesis or proposition or locating an answer, but just going deeper and then...seeing where it goes...a quintessentially Buddhist model of openness and interdependence.

Jacob's proposition echoes the exhibition process I have used: to enter the gallery with certain parameters defined (such as space, extant work and time), with a spaciousness of approach that allows for contingency and innovation (considering placement, lighting and the addition of complementary objects or works).

48. This article followed *Awake: Art, Buddhism and the Dimensions of Consciousness*, a consortium looking at the relationship between the meditative, creative and perceiving mind and the implications of Buddhist perspectives for artistic and museum practices, conceived by curators Jaqueline Baas and Mary Jane Jacob to include fifty public events and exhibitions, between 2001 and 2004 (Baas and Jacob, 2004).

I have identified two elements of the exhibition process which contribute to this creativity:

### 1. A Different View: The Creativity of Contingency

The exhibition offers an opportunity to review the products of the studio in another space and time, distinct from the experience of making. This distance makes sense (or a different sense) of the body of work and allows for recognition of patterns and themes that may have gone unnoticed within the confined focus on individual works. The understanding of the work is suggested to the viewer by structural (grouping and arrangement) and practical choices (like titles and text or additional 'bridging' works). Placing the work in an environment other than the studio offers another physical space for contingency. The process of setting up the exhibition continues the production of the work, offering new relationships between objects and the spaces in which they are positioned. According to Danvers (2012: 168), contingency includes 'the condition of being free from necessity with regard to existence', 'openness to the effect of chance or free will' and 'uncertainty of occurrence.' Working with architecture, light and the new conversations between works, is a dynamic process contingent on unforeseen factors and echoes my method of studio work, rendering the hanging of the exhibition as a final meta-artwork of the project.

### 2. Interactive Inquiry

The exhibition offers the opportunity to present solitary studio pursuits to an audience. This community of viewers invites unexpected encounters (feelings, thoughts and dialogue) arising between viewers, the work and myself. I employ myself as an active part of the exhibition, allowing for the evolution of the work to include its interpretation (the beholder's share) and associated engagements between myself and the viewer. In this way, the exhibition constitutes a dialectic process between viewers, art works and artist, that allows me to further expand my inquiry into uncertainty through the experiences and ideas of others.

In keeping with *The Paradox of Uncertainty*, I have intended to activate the gallery in a way that is inviting, yet also challenging its inclination towards discomfort and uncertainty. As my studio methodology created a boundary for safe experimentation, I intend for the exhibition to provide a safe environment for creative viewing that may include discomfort. To this end, I have considered

means of quieting, holding and engaging the viewers as well as means of stimulating, disturbing and disrupting. Through these methods I intend to engage embodied cognition, prior to intellect, through the use of multi-sensorial stimulation, including sound, touch and vision. In the interest of a serene environment, I use natural or otherwise low lighting. Through ordering, spacing and lighting, I aim to curate the flow of the viewer's attention. Large scale, immersive works like *The Great Unknown* are positioned so as to submerge the viewer in the experience of the painting. Other works physically hold the viewer, including *A Painting To Hold You Still*, *My Rope*, *Your Knots*, *To Be Held* and *Discomfortchair*. Using individual earphones for *I Don't Know*, similarly isolates the listener for the duration of listening. In these cases, the physical and auditory holding becomes a space of both attention and constraint, much like the studio space. Further disruptions to comfort include the use of abstraction and curious materiality, evading reason and perhaps the reassurance of narrative clarity or a familiar format. Similarly, the concurrence of non-contiguous cultural references far from my own, like Hindu goddesses and First Nation's practices, may be unsettling to those requiring consistency.



64. *A Painting To Hold You Still* (installation view)

This exhibition does not intend to dictate a particular view, rather proposing a broader field of vision. As a secondary form of communication, the text offers conceptual complexities that are not necessarily obvious in the appearance of the work. These adjuncts are offered to bridge the gap between the felt experience of a work and the nature of its origin, to enhance its accessibility and allow it to be viewed by the same viewer in different ways. At the time of writing, preceding the final exhibition, much of what I say is generalised and presumptive. As I have described the exhibition as the final stage in my process, this text can only be completed with a retrospective account of the exhibition itself.



65. Coming or going?

## *Concluding with a Dialectic of Doubt*

In *On the Nonsense of Sense and the Sense of Nonsense*, psychologist and philosopher, Paul Watzlawick (1995) writes:

The only thing we can ever know about the real reality (if it even exists) is what it is not. It is only with the collapse of our constructions of reality that we first discover that the world is not the way we imagine.

This statement proposes a concept of understanding as a dynamic process, which evolves through sequential constructions and deconstructions and where a premise of uncertainty is critical. If we consider belief as a subjective notion of truth, doubt is commonly held to represent the opposite of faith or belief. The existence of one might then infer the necessary exclusion of the other: to believe in something would require a disbelief in all that opposes it. Contrastingly, in relation to my own faith in the practice of art making, I propose doubt, like paradox, as a means to sustain a vigorous conception of art, similar to the proposition relating uncertainty with certainty. Art theorist John Roberts (2010) describes the development of art through the history of Modernism as an active process of doubt, entailing rejection and reinvigoration. He notes that 'art's negations, therefore, are not something that touch lightly on art, come and go, as if they were a decorative dusting of snow, but, on the contrary, that which actually secures art's conditions of visibility and autonomy, and, as such, give shape to art's unfolding' (Roberts, 2010: 95) Roberts thus identifies the generative potential in negation and characterises the role of artists within society to stimulate new ideas. So, uncertainty – and movement between belief and disbelief – is identified as a potential complement to a dynamic practice of art, both as a cultural paradigm and within individual practice.



Through the course of my project, I have encountered inner conflict. I went into it doubting the function of a Masters in Fine Art, fearing academia as an intellectual threat to the playful abandon I believe to underpin creative practice. Particularly, the idea of writing about uncertainty seemed equivalent to being asked to capture and cage my favourite wild bird. I feared that committing ideas on uncertainty to writing would instantly set the fluid, ambiguous nature of its substance, so essential to the sense of freedom the theme offers. Following profound struggle with this writing, I now see the symbiosis of non-understanding forwards (making) and understanding backwards (writing). Yet, to attempt to write a conclusion before the end, which would necessarily include the final exhibition (and perhaps a significant period during which I might further integrate the complexity of this experience), seems inconsistent with my approach, denying the importance of experience as the way to understanding. Therefore, this 'conclusion' is necessarily limited to the moment of its writing and I intend to complete it at the end of exhibition, once the work is down, my studio cleared and the dust storm of this last minute hysteria settled.

My role as an artist, as I see it, is to challenge perceptions, starting with my own. As I have described, my intention was to explore uncertainty for myself in a practical way. I have had no expectation of resolving the questions around uncertainty, wishing only to explore the theme and, at best, create an immersive environment for contemplation by the viewer, hoping to provoke others to consider their relationship with uncertainty.. One form of conclusion, may be the paradoxical triumph of putting together a Masters' exhibition, where uncertainty threatened to annihilate me along the way. Reaching the end of this project, anxiety in the studio has been replaced by active curiosity, iconified in the relative calm I felt facing the biggest canvas of my life, (*The Great Unknown*). Through practice, I have come to understand that the anxiety I seek to alleviate might mirror the same state of not knowing that enables the creativity<sup>49</sup> I treasure; that what seems to warrant fear might actually offer the greatest freedom. This is *The Paradox of Uncertainty*.

Preceding the actual end of the project, as an interim offering, here are three possible views of how I might conclude this experience:

<sup>49</sup> *Creativity* is defined as a process of having original ideas that have value. Educator Sir Ken Robinson (2007), promotes the importance of creativity as a way of thinking (as taught through the arts) and identifies being prepared to fail as a pre-requisite for creativity.

**Conclusion 1: Things I Learned About During This Project**

**the role of control in fear of uncertainty  
the value of knowing I don't know  
the possible merits of doing nothing  
the potential limitations of control  
the value of failure  
the relief of striving less  
the validity and value of grief  
the community of struggle  
the isolation of struggle**

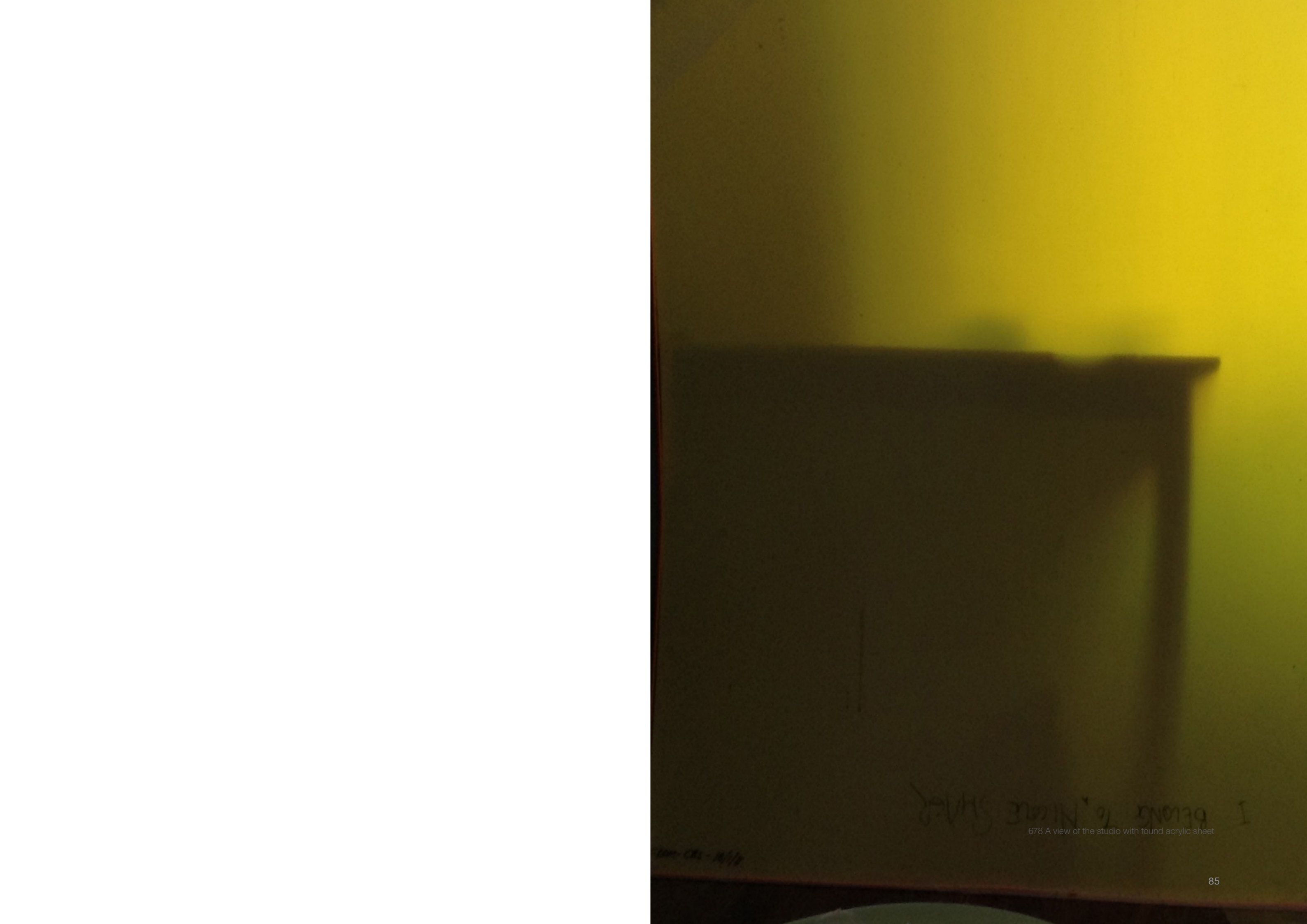
## Conclusion 2: All The Things That Happened

I committed, again, without knowing  
I found a love  
I believed in myself, stood for something, fell from grace and won shame  
I stood for nothing  
I lost that love  
I got the studio I wanted and found myself isolated by choice  
I became incapacitated  
I lost control  
I failed  
I did not make things I had intended  
I found that I had already done some things I was trying to do  
I stopped painting  
I reunited with the one I love  
I doubted myself and succeeded  
I regained capability and got anxious  
I lost a dream to find the possibility of dreaming less  
A curious conclusion



**Conclusion 3:**

**I don't know**



I belong to, Nicole Smith

678 A view of the studio with found acrylic sheet

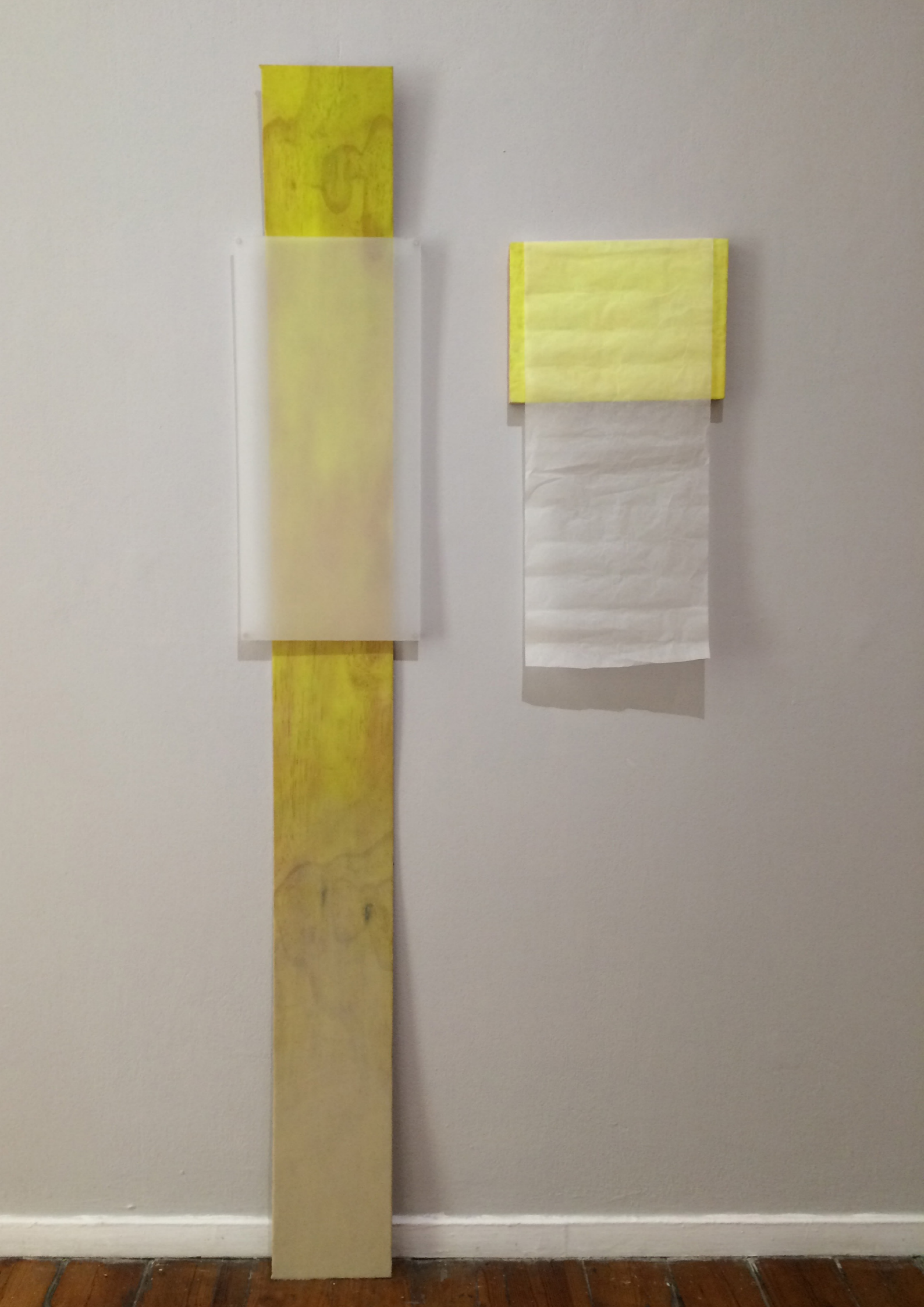
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*Making an Exhibition*

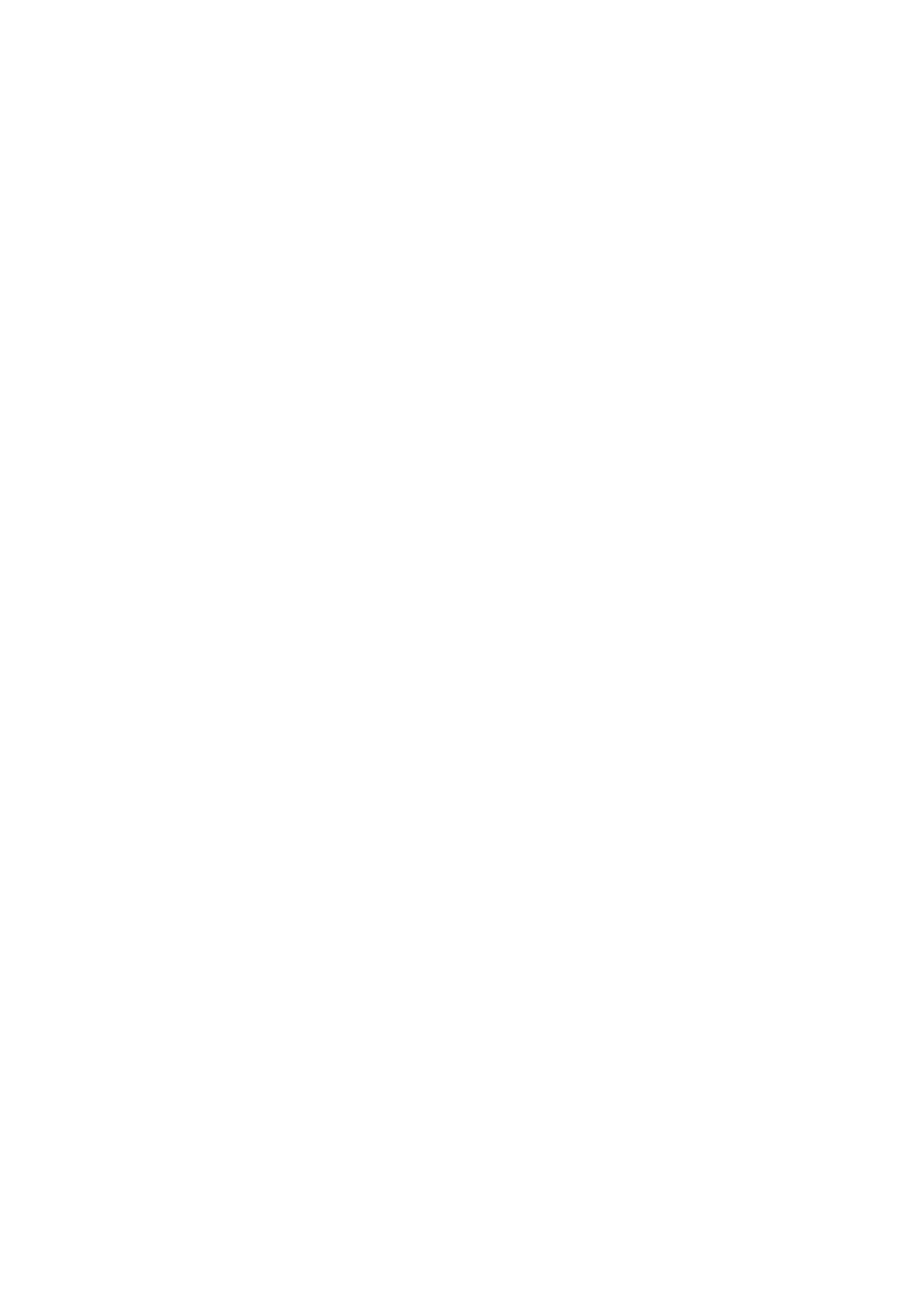


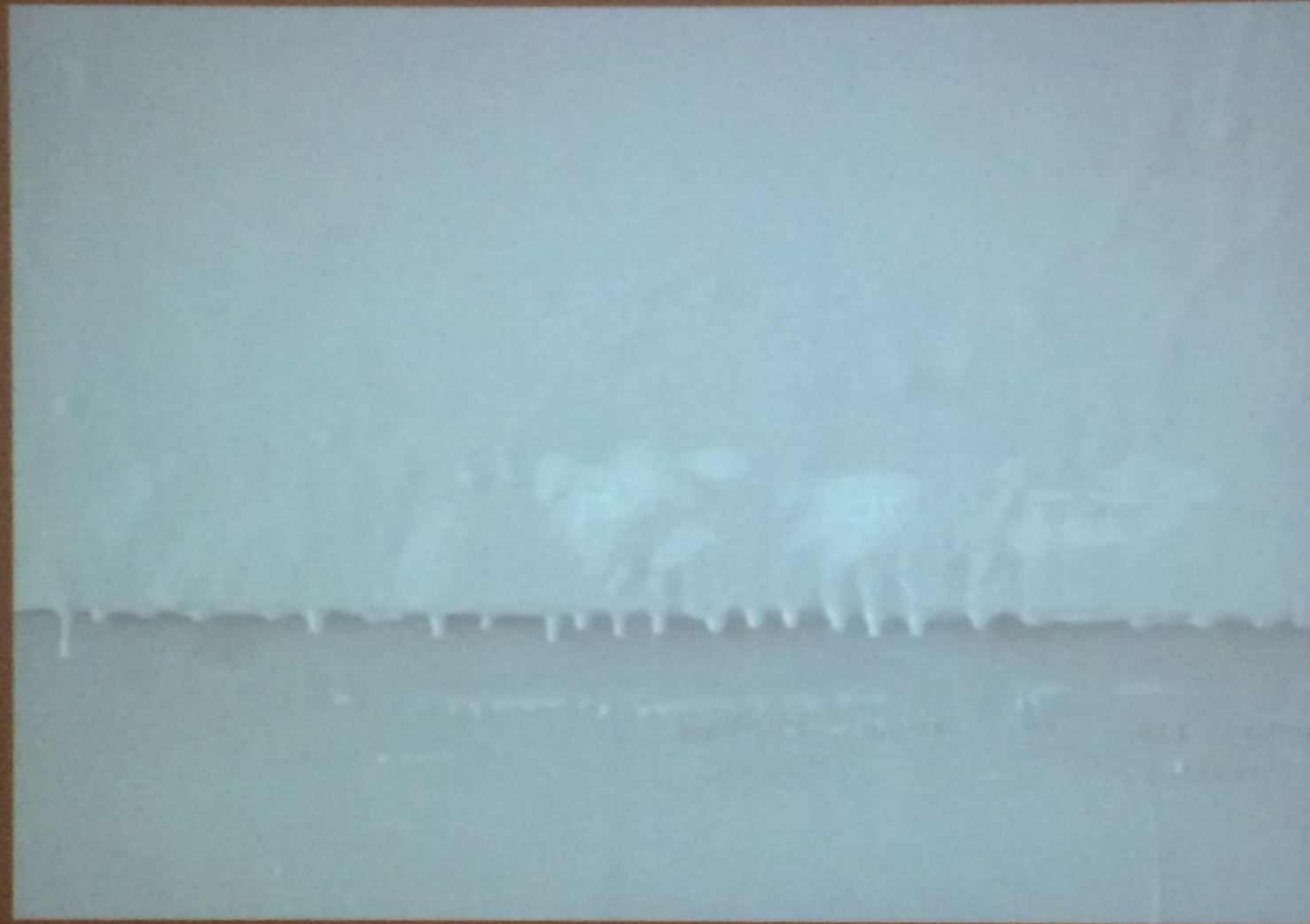






















STUDENT  
ART

SHARIN NICOLE  
STUDENT





A man with short grey hair, wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt and dark blue jeans, stands with his back to the camera. He is looking at a wall covered in many small, rectangular papers. A German Shepherd dog is sitting on the wooden floor to his left, looking towards the wall. The man is holding a blue leash attached to the dog.

STUDENT  
ART

SHARON NICOLE  
STUDIO 21



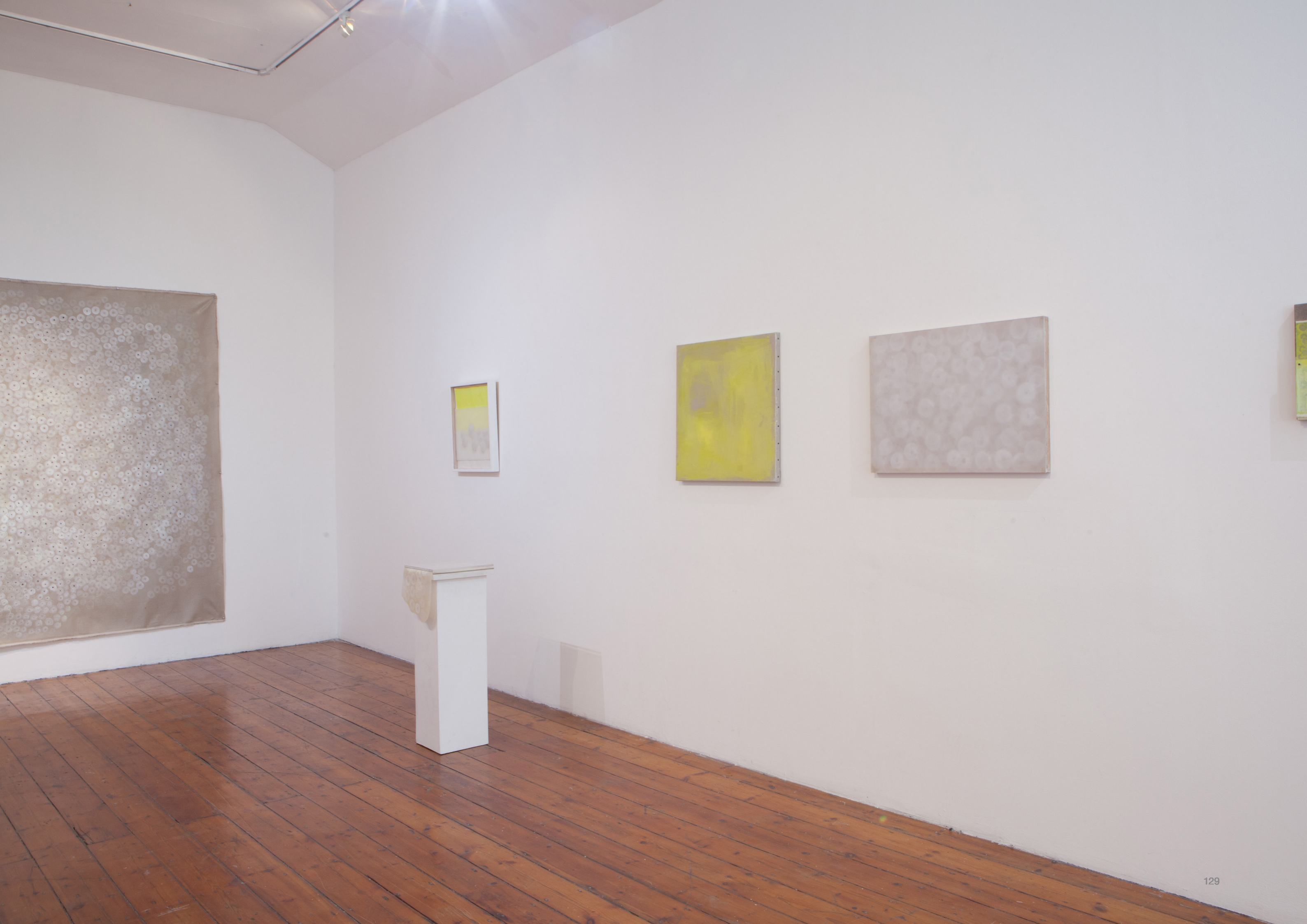
















## *An Epilogue*

I am writing this final chapter in July 2017, a year and five months after the thirty-hour exhibition of *The Paradox of Uncertainty* went up and came down. Hoping to reignite its memories, I reread this text and looked through photographs, trying to exhume a living experience from words and images, but it is long lost. In place of that vivid, felt intensity of several days' installation, culminating in a brief show made even briefer by a migraine, I have distant retrospect; a hazed over and precised recall made up of thoughts... and so, my intention to complete this project by relating the final phase of the process was thwarted by life's arcane coursing. Triumph and dismay, obstacles stumbled and others leapt during the installation process have coalesced to form a smooth, pleasingly familiar lump. I do remember being pleased with the final result and finding a sense of completion – not of the MA per se, but the feeling that I had done what I needed to do, artistically, yielding satisfaction with an associated conviction that I could retire my dynamic armament of materials for good.

### *Some Memories of The Installation and Exhibition*

Choosing between a smaller, less formal space with wonderful natural light and the formality of the Michaelis Gallery, with the advantage of more directive architectural space but the need for artificial lighting.

Stan and Adrian installing *To Be Held* in the riskier corner of the corridor into the main corridor...and it worked!

Struggling with lights and finding warm halogens and as many incandescent spot lights as possible to create a gentle and focused atmosphere for viewing.

Not being ready for review of the arrangement of my show by my supervisors (running late) and staying up all night leading up to the exam date (of course).

Removing *Quan Pink* from the backing and re-placing the figure onto a photographic diffusion film donated by a company who does lighting for the film industry. How exciting it was to see this work hung and gently illuminated!

Building the tower of *Effort / Possibility* to reach the ceiling.

I had a migraine on the evening of the opening and had to leave, so missing the opportunity to speak to viewers about the work.

Waiting around all day whilst the examiners were in and feeling utterly spent.

The sense of futility of in taking the show down and moving works into storage



### *So What Happened In Between?*

Just a few days after the final exhibition, I left for a month's medical work in Scotland. Two weeks back in Cape Town, in the middle of a spring day, my partner, Adrian and me were severely attacked by intruders on our return from a walk in the forest. Without going into detail, our lives were almost lost and have since, entirely changed. Adrian was paralysed down the left side and spent a month on a ventilator and a further three in hospital. For these weeks that have felt like years, uncertainty has been my greatest ally. Doctors loathe to incite false optimism have pitched their hazarded prognoses low, so risking the crushing of hope; a caveat of uncertainty as consolation. Having honed my ability to embrace the possibility innate in not knowing and being well-aquainted with the crippling anxiety that arose any time I considered The Future has enabled me to endure. One of the most inspiring rehabilitation consultants we have encountered in this time believes that 'what we cannot rehabilitate is that which we don't know how to rehabilitate yet.'

Having intended to complete this text with a chapter on The Exhibition, I wrote: I described the exhibition as the final stage in my process, this text can only be completed with a retrospective account of the exhibition itself. Perhaps the truest completion of the project has been to take lessons from the studio out into the world.



### *And Art Making?*

I started to take lessons in throwing pottery in August 2016. Cylinder after cylinder demanding my hands and my mind for just a few hours, between hospital visits. The learning felt like new life. After six months of four-hundred gram cylinders, I have moved onto bowls.

At the start of July 2017, I took on a small studio space.  
I am not sure what it is for

and for now, that's okay.

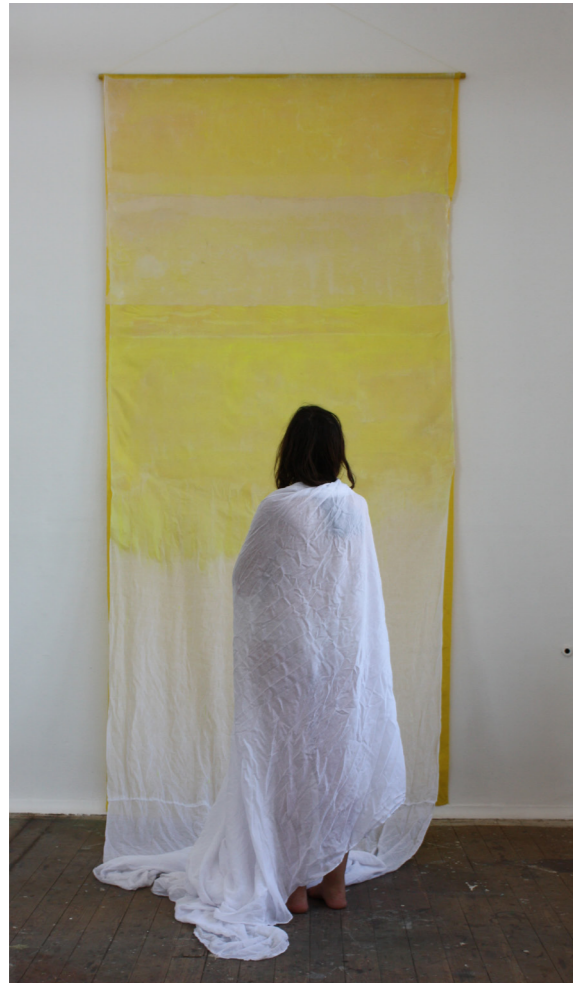
*Nicole Sherer*

16th October 2017

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## *A Painting To Hold You Still*



(installation view)

### How To Use This Painting:

1. Position yourself comfortably (sitting or standing).
2. Swathe yourself in white fabric.
3. Be quiet for greater or equal to one minute.
4. You may cut a small swatch off the end to keep as a memento.

*A Painting To Hold You Still*  
2014  
Pigment powder and glue on cotton  
1400mm x 3300mm + 5000mm



## *Discomfortchair*

This is my studio chair.

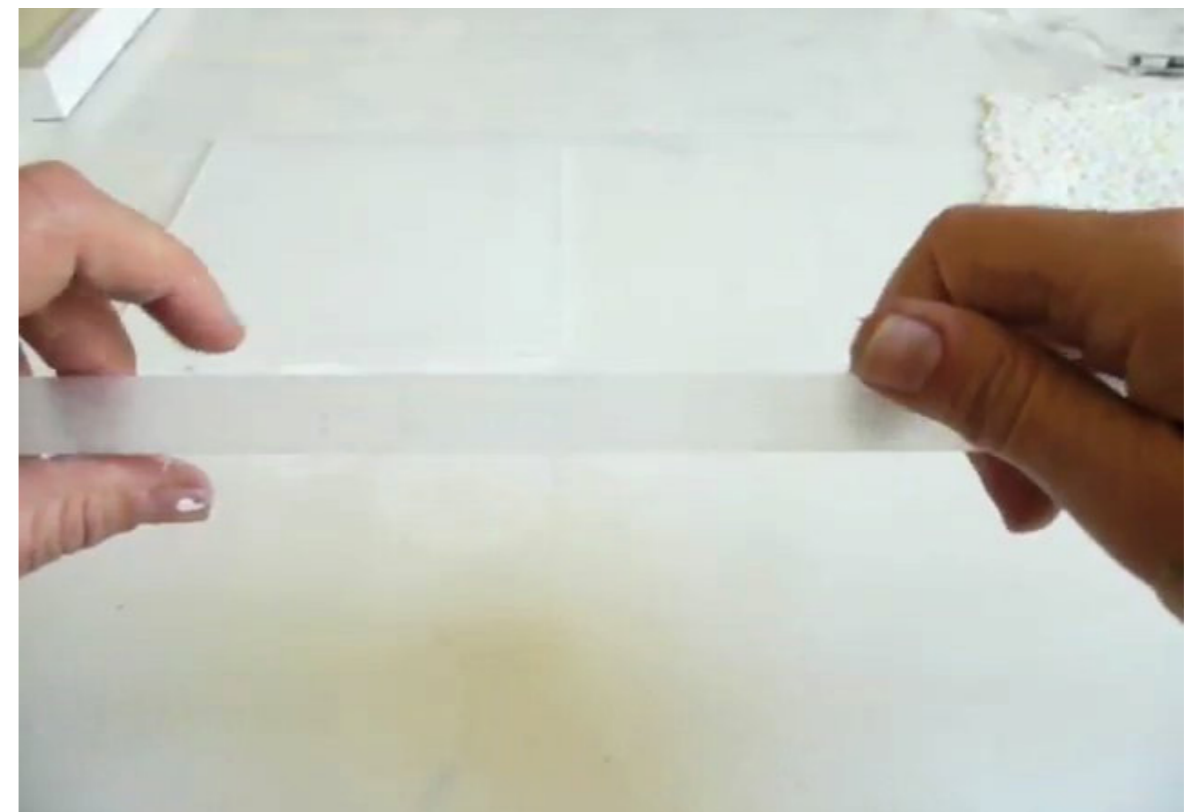
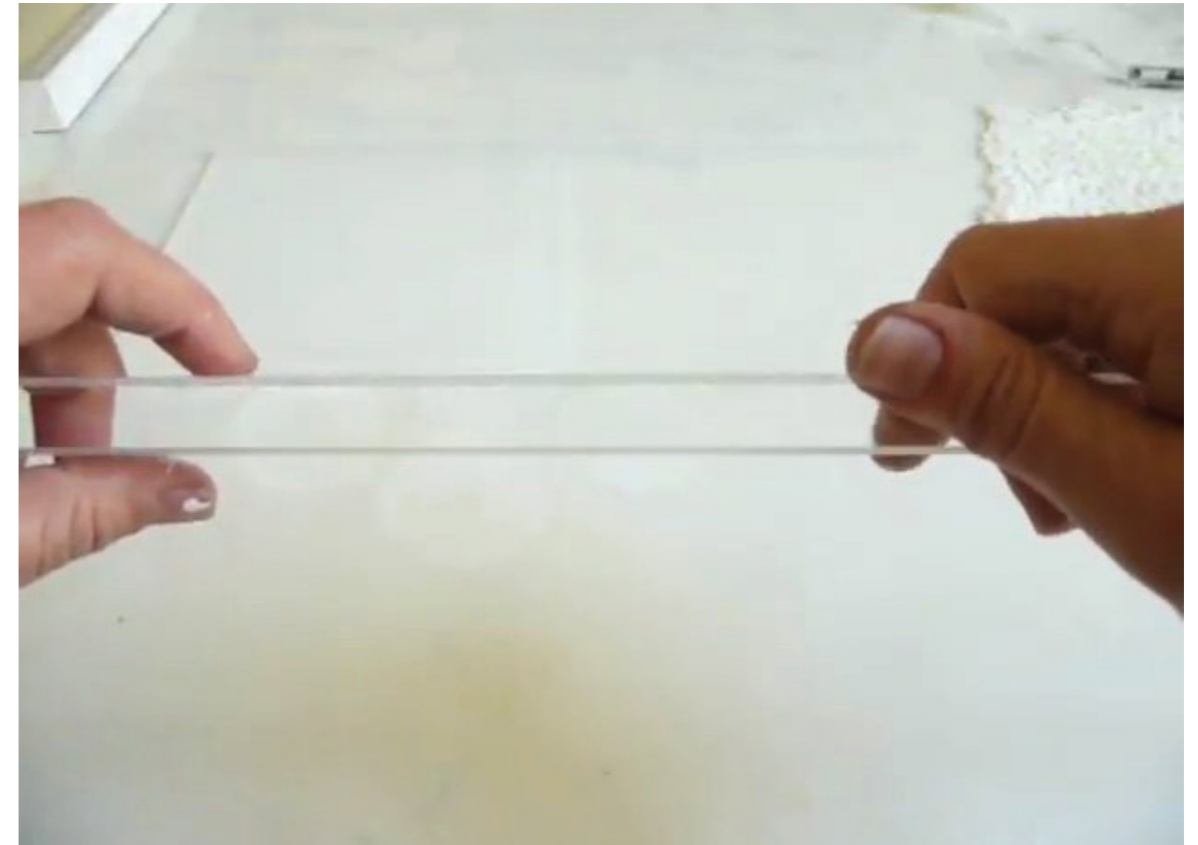
It was given to me. In its original form, the chair was too low for a comfortable view of works and difficult to move. I raised the chair on a pallet (found outside the studio) attached to four casters (bought). The legs were then extended with wooden offcuts to prevent the chair from tipping forwards or backwards. On this constructed base, the seat is high enough that my feet do not reach the floor. It reminds me of being a child and also makes it more difficult to get up. In this way, the chair encourages sitting still for longer, to look, to consider, to endure. The upholstery is firm and supportive



*Discomfortchair*  
2015  
Chair, wooden pallet, wood, casters  
800 x 1000 x 1300mm

## *Do Think Do Think Do*

A one minute film considering how using the hands can alter the way one sees things, as slow rotation appears to alter the visibility of a strip of clear acrylic (subsequently used to suspend *Kali's Work*). The film is displayed in ambient daylight rather than darkness, projected onto a translucent, partly covered sheet of white acrylic. Both of these contribute some degree of obscurity as demonstrated in *Possibility*. The decision to leave the plastic film partly attached to the surface it protected, shown on page 28, was made at the time of exhibition, as another form of obscurity (covering) seen in *Two Secrets* and *The Shame*



*Do Think Do Think Do* (still)  
2014

Plastic on acrylic, with project film of one minute duration  
1000 x 1000mm

*Unknowing I*



*Unknowing I*  
2014  
clay, glue and acrylic on board  
600 x 600mm

*Unknowing II*



*Unknowing II*  
2014  
Oil on linen  
500 x 700mm

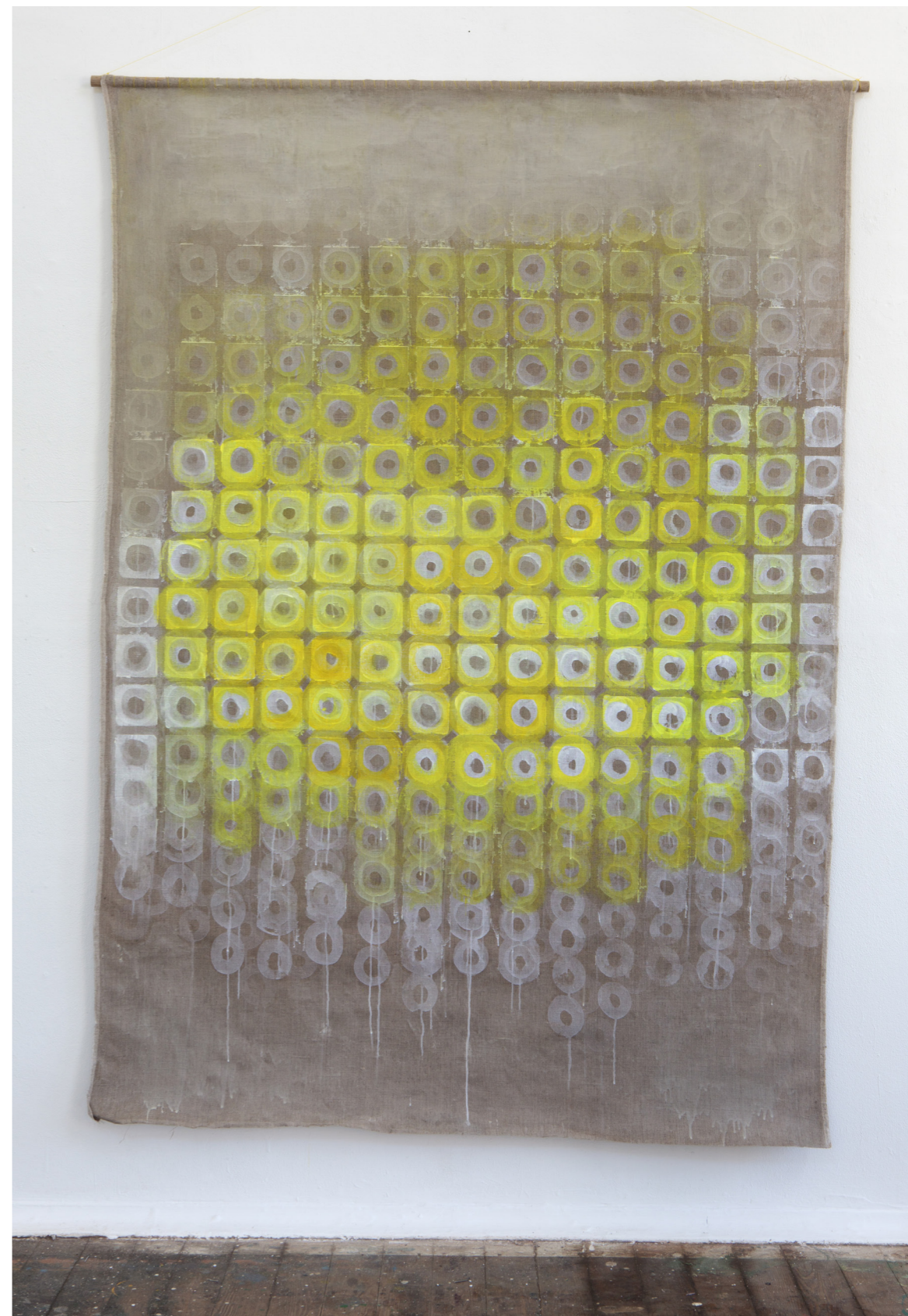
*Unknowing III*



*Unknowing III (above)*  
2014  
Acrylic on linen  
600 x 600mm

*Painting Started with a Plan*  
2014  
Acrylic and glue on linen  
1450 x 1840mm

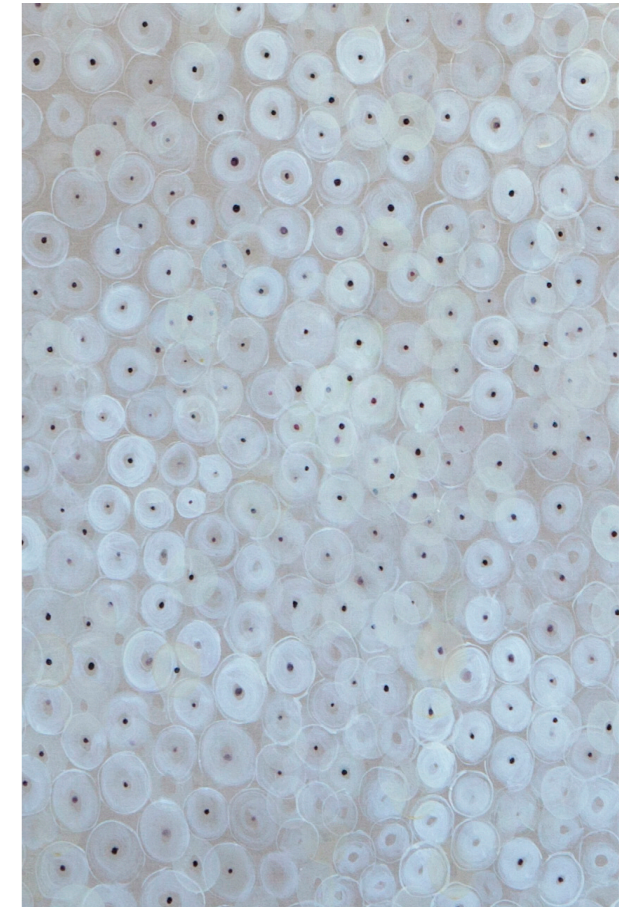
*Painting Started with a Plan*



*Reflection of The Moon in a Thousand Bowls*



*Reflection of The Moon in A Thousand Bowls*  
2014  
Oil on linen  
3060 x 2220mm



*Reflection of The Moon in A Thousand Bowls*  
(detail)

## *Unknowing IV*

When I realised that I was painting with the same colours as the clay I was working with, I switched to painting with clay. This painting was an attempt to capture the liveliness achieved when quiet neutrals are activated by yellow.



*(detail)*

*Unknowing IV*  
2014  
Acrylic, clay and glue on canvas  
1200 x 1200mm



## *Possibility*

Before throwing on a pottery wheel, preparation includes wedging the clay to get it consistent in texture and to get rid of air bubbles. The clay is then broken off into even sized balls which can be stacked to one side of the wheel to allow for ease of movement from attempt to the next.



(detail)

*Possibility*  
2014  
Cardboard, clay, glue, acrylic, wood, acrylic sheet  
450 x 515mm



*Unknowing V*



*Unknowing V*  
2014  
Clay, glue, acrylic sheet on board  
500 x 700mm

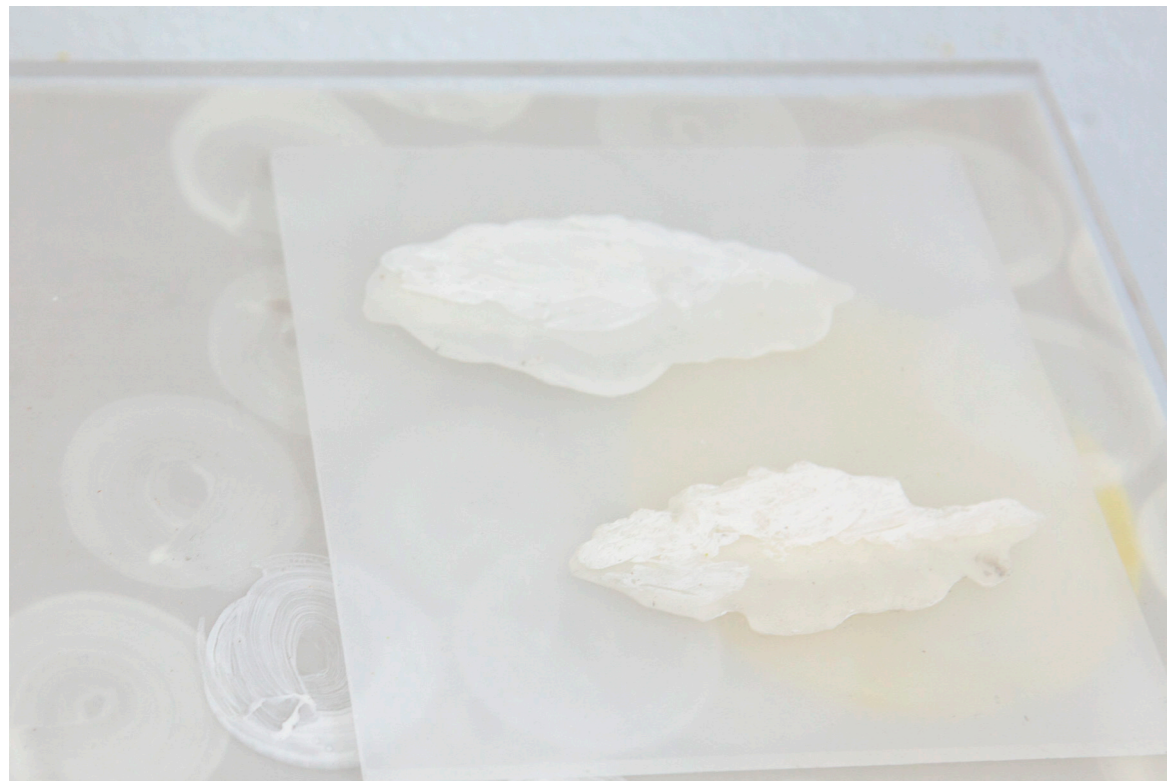
*Eureka*



*Eureka*  
2014  
Acrylic, wood, acrylic paint, fabric, plastic tub lid.  
610 x 610 x 80mm

## *Unknowing VI*

Somewhere between a painting and a sculpture, *Unknowing VI* was forged whilst installing work for my 2014 interim assessment and looking to do many things, including finish works as the hour of the review approached. This piece was originally displayed on a stool, so demonstrating the contingency that can flourish when the panic of time pressure gives way to immersive focus



(detail)

*Unknowing VI*  
2014  
Acrylic, wood, porcelain, glue, linen, plinth  
300 x 850 x 300mm



*Unknowing VII*



*Unknowing VII*  
2014  
Silk, wax, paint pigment, copper pins, acrylic sheet  
300 mm x 540 mm

*Kali and Shiva II*



(detail)

*Kali and Shiva II*  
2014  
Acrylic, glue and tape on board  
175 x 175mm each

*The Cloud of Unknowing*



*The Cloud of Unknowing*  
2014  
Glue, plaster and pigment powder  
350 x 250mm

*A Trace of Kali*



*A Trace of Kali*  
2014  
Glue, wax and pigment powder on acrylic sheet  
600 x 400mm

## The Shame

This work was a first attempt to capture the vibrancy, translucency and irregularity in the print of a traditional Indian scarf. The print has been modified to include an image of Kali, the Hindu goddess of time, change, power and destruction. Though fearsome in appearance, Kali represents the concept of a Divine Mother: destroying to recreate. In this image, Kali steps on Shiva, her consort, who apprehends her unbridled rage by placing his body in her way.

The top panel was made by coating a red-primed board with encaustic coloured with Indian Yellow pigment powder, then carved with a linocut tool. The lower panel is made by brushing the same encaustic on with a filbert brush, leaving the trace of the fast drying time of wax

as each stroke sets instantly on meeting the board's surface.

In the final form of this work, the scarf is used to cover the figurative depiction of Kali and Shiva (left) to allow for a less narrative reading of the piece. .



*The Shame*  
2014  
Carved encaustic on board  
605mm x 1280mm



## Kali's Work

*Kali's Work* is another attempt to recreate the translucency of the muslin scarf. I made these works involving Kali, whilst contemplating the relationship between creativity and chaos and also, the role of my own aggression, with particular reference to ideas of femininity and institutional decorum.

As previously described (page 51) the experimental process of production, using acrylic paint, cold glue and pigment powders was completed by the intervention of gravity. Overnight, the painting ran off the edge of the table... *Kali's work*, perhaps.

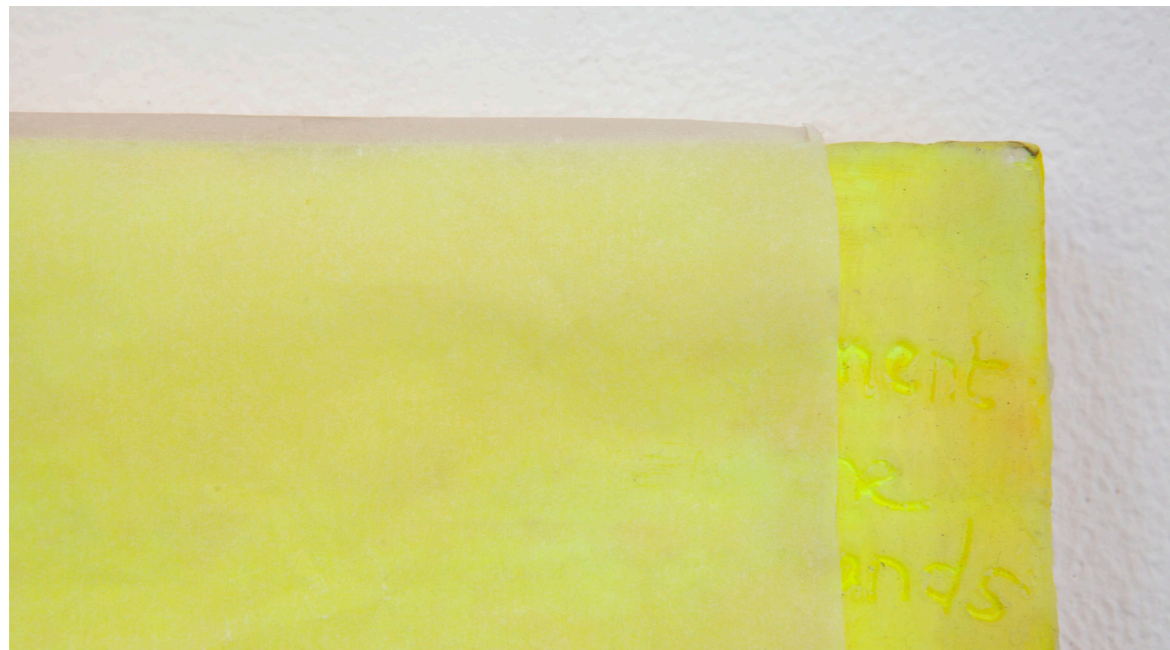


(process / detail)

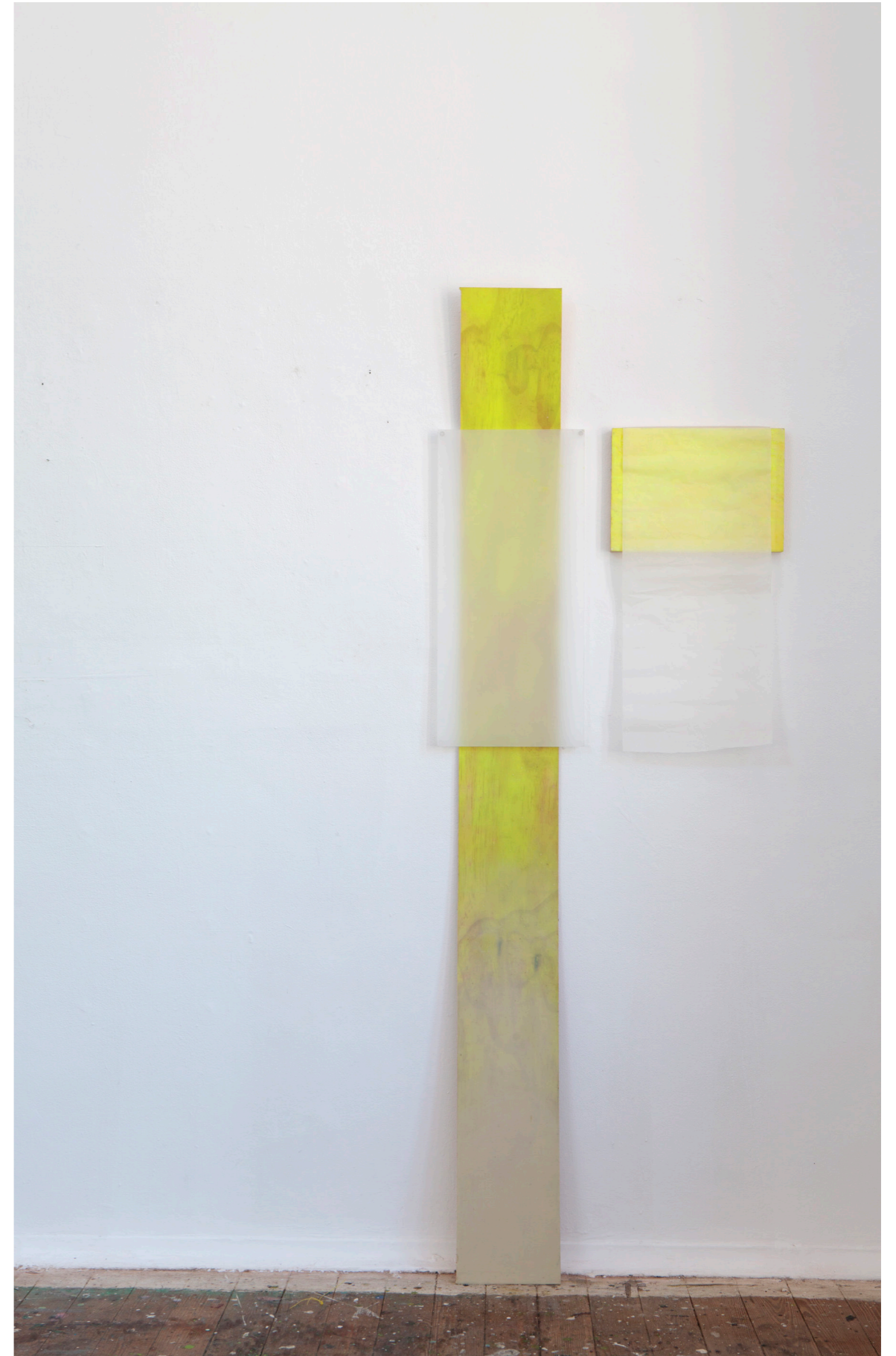
*Kali's Work*  
2014  
Acrylic, cold glue, and pigment powder  
800 x 2200mm (height variable)



*Two Secrets*



(detail)



*Two Secrets*  
2014  
Acrylic, wood, wax, wax paper, fluorescent yellow pigment  
350 x 660mm + 300 x 2101mm

### *30l Effort + 15l Possibility*

*30l Effort + 15l Possibility* is a monument to trying. It represents the effort that goes into learning or making, beyond works deemed successful as an integral part of creative practice. Some of the five litre tubs in this particular installation view are filled with either incomplete ideas for artworks or unsuccessful thrown clay vessels (which can be recycled) and others are full of material, like glue and air. The contained material 'efforts' in the piece vary according to recent studio projects and the column can be adjusted to fit any space, ideally reaching from floor to ceiling.



Detail: thrown ceramic vessels inside tub

*30l Effort + 15l Possibility*  
2014  
Plastic tubs, variable contents  
size: 240mm x (175mm x number of tubs)



## *To Be Held*

### Ingredients:

One broken relationship  
Five unanswerable musings  
Five unused canvases  
Grief  
Pursuit of relief  
The wish to be held

### Method:

- 1) Dichotomies identified and listed
- 2) Canvas surfaces prepared for painting
- 3) Time spent staring at canvases, wondering how to proceed
- 4) Canvases painted with translucent white mixture, contemplating:

Love vs Longing  
Compromise vs Sacrifice  
Hope vs Self-deception  
Courage vs Self-destruction  
Possessive (Romantic) Love vs Universal (Self) Love

- 5) Canvases inverted so that painting faces inward
- 6) Wires stretched across studio ceiling
- 7) Canvases suspended to form holding space
- 8) Circle on floor placed to denote standing room for one

### Related works:

*Quiet*  
*(I) don't know*

*To Be Held* (studio installation view with cardboard template in place of mirror)  
2015  
Glue, zinc pigment, linen, elastic, wire and found mirror  
1400mm x 3600mm x 1400mm (height variable)



## *(I) Don't Know*

This is a subsidiary work that was made during the process of constructing *To Be Held*.

*(I) Don't Know* is a five minute, thirteen-second sound recording. It plots an embodied expression of uncertainty, through the spoken mantra, 'I don't know', recited whilst gazing at the five canvases that were to become the installation *To Be Held*. Initially overwhelmed by confused feelings and unsure how to represent the experience in a material form, this sound piece is intended to demonstrate the transience of emotion (through altered cadence of voice) and the potential relief in relinquishing the will to control through rational understanding and planning. The background sounds of everyday life outside the studio further endorse the sense that life goes on.



*(I) Don't Know*  
2015

Voice recording of 5 minutes and 13 seconds, associated with a film of the view of five canvases shown in image.

## *Quiet*

This is a film recording of the edge of one of five newly painted canvases: a meditation on *Romantic Love vs Self Love*, for the work *To Be Held*. What initially appears still - or constant - intermittently yields to a dynamic drip, before settling to stillness again.



*Quiet*  
2015  
7 minutes and 55 seconds

## Quan Yellow

Several years ago, I wanted to carve a sculpture of Quan Yin, a female form said to embody compassion, also referred to as 'She Who Hears All The Cries of The World'. Considering Zen calligraphy, where a brush is employed in contemplative practice, I decided to paint Quan Yin instead. My plan was to paint her form each day, in layers of glue and opacifying powder, over and over, on top of the image of the day before. The intention was not figurative representation, but to use the time spent painting a gesture of her form to contemplate and perhaps internalise the consideration of her qualities... Which (feminine) qualities make for ultimate supportiveness, for compassion, for boundless kindness with strength? What makes the perfect mother, woman, carer?

After experimenting with different mixtures, I decided to use a combination of marble dust and glue – the marble dust seemed apt for a figure I had planned to carve from stone. I used a large acrylic sheet I had found as an available ground for the plasticky medium which I planned to peel off the surface once I was done...after however many Quan Yins. And then I got distracted.

After some weeks, I suddenly noticed that the very presence of this soft, glowing yellow square nestled behind my desk, at a certain height, of a very human scale (almost exactly my height) created the sense of a kind, omnipresent companion in the studio space. I suspected that the work was done, but again concerned that I was using a conceptual ruse to avoid painting, I performed one Quan Yin gesture using glue and marble dust. The drips fell onto a sheet of clear Perspex I had positioned to catch any 'tears'. Once done, I could confirm that the image had not been necessary – she was already there.

*Quan Yellow*  
2015

Acrylic sheet, glue, marble dust, linen canvas, pen on paper, wood  
1850 x 1660mm



Glue and powders (detail).  
This piece was later  
irreparably water-damaged.



## Making From Nothing

On a weekend in Tesslersdal, visiting my aunt and uncle in their new home, I selected a text for my seminar paper, from a book entitled *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*.

Later, at breakfast, we met with a neighbour who invited us to visit her studio on our way home. I went on ahead and spoke with Blue de Gersigny in her studio. She is a practicing Tibetan Buddhist and her work mostly comprises repetition and multiples of found objects. Her aesthetic felt familiar. Amongst other things, Blue showed me porcelain balls that she had collected some time ago, by moonlight on a beach near Newport Deli in Mouille Point...possibly weights, washed up from a wreck. I picked one up and found it irresistibly appealing: perfectly round, perfectly smooth, perfectly matt, perfectly bright and perfectly muted. One ball weighs just enough to settle comfortably in the palm. Before leaving, I asked Blue for one of the balls. She offered me three. I accepted one, gladly.

Two days later, I went to fetch a classmate, Gina from her studio to eat birthday cake. I took the porcelain ball along to show it to her, as I thought she would appreciate it too. On our way out of her building, I found a wooden crate of mouse balls that look just like the porcelain ball, discarded by another student.

Some weeks later, I drew the mouse balls, using powdered graphite bundled into a tight fabric pouch, a rubber and some chalk. Looking to represent the serendipity of that encounter, born of awareness rather than agency, I chose to depict the balls using a method that relinquished (much) control. By reducing my efforts to depict in hyper-realistic detail, the quality of my gaze on the balls softened with a resultant relaxation in my whole body.

*Making From Nothing*  
2015

Charcoal and chalk on paper, porcelain ball, wood, mouseballs, metal stand  
600 x 1720 x 450mm



## *My Rope, Your Knots*

This rope is used for hanging upside down. I had it installed in the studio after finding a great sense of restoration in this inverted posture at a yoga class. The title refers to the securing of the rope by my ex (at the time) during a rather turbulent time of getting to know each other. The rope became an artwork once it had been associated with the theme of being contained or constrained running through works such as *To Be Held*, *Cocoon*, *Discomfortchair* and *A Painting To Hold You Still*.



A view of the studio (hanging upside-down)

*My Rope, Your Knots*  
2015  
Rope, wall fixtures and footprints  
100 x 700mm (variable)



## Quan Pink

*Quan Pink* was my second effort at the layered Quan Yin painting exercised described in *Quan Yellow*.

During installation of the final exhibition, the glue form of Quan Yin was very carefully peeled off the plastic ground seen here and affixed to a sheet of translucent lighting diffusion film with cold glue. This final form can be seen in the exhibition installation views, which precedes this catalogue section.



(detail)

*Quan Pink*  
2015  
Glue and marble dust on acrylic sheet  
1500 x 1670mm



## Cocoon

Caterpillars become moths through metamorphosis: a process of transformation initiated by the secretion of auto-digesting enzymes, which occurs beneath the protective coat of the pupa. The cocoon is woven of silk and overlies a pupa. It is protective.

Some people believe that crisis is transformative.

The Pomo, a First Nation's tribe in North America, has a well-established practice of basket weaving. When a member of the tribe is unwell and nothing is making them better, the individual is tasked with weaving a basket. It is believed that the weaver's illness will be woven into the basket and that when the basket is complete, the maker will be healed.

This is my cocoon (unfinished).

In its finished state, it will be suspended across a room. It is strong enough to contain a grown person.



Process view



(detail)

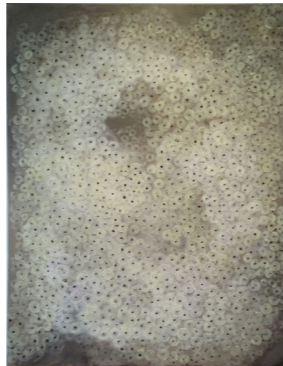
*Cocoon*  
2015  
linen elastic on cardboard frame  
500 x 3000 x 100mm



## Obelisk

I had long planned to paint an enormous colour field similar to the abstracted frog spawn images in my post-graduate diploma exhibition, *Dynamic Stillness:In Formation* (2013).

In October 2014, I began my efforts to acquire a 3.5m wide x 10m long roll of clear-primed, linen canvas, made by Belle Arti in Italy. In March 2015, a studio wall was especially constructed to hold this canvas.



DS:IF VIII (2013)  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
112x140cm

Ordinarily, I would have bought such canvas from Jackson's Art Supplies in London. Complexities of couriership, size, local suppliers and myriad other hurdles along the way resulted in several months' emailing between myself, The Italian Art Shop in Newlands, Jackson's in London, Belle Arti in Italy and various couriers. The greatest barrier seemed to be that no airline was able to transport an object of 3.5m length. Eventually, the suppliers cancelled the planned air freight and I was told the canvas would need to travel overland from Italy to Cape Town. It arrived five days later, labelled with KLM stickers.

At the time of constructing *Obelisk*, I had not yet faced the canvas. I wondered what might drive such enthusiasm to procure this object, which, on arrival, was then left in its corner.

Hope.

What would you do for it? How much would you pay for it?

Hope.

*Obelisk*  
2015  
Cardboard tube, printed emails on recycled paper brought from the UK by aeroplane  
3300 x 140mm + emails printed on A4 sheets (arrangement variable)



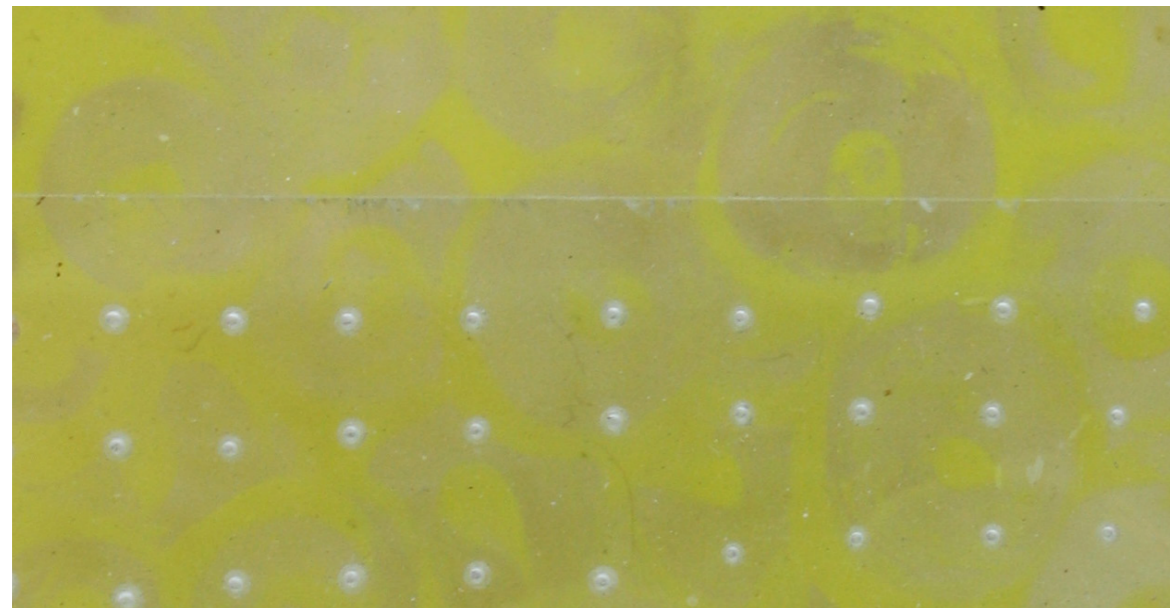
## *Gamkaslemons*

Gamkaskloof is a remote valley in the Karoo, where it is possible to stay in a nature reserve and experience a very quiet, very simple sort of life in houses built by those who subsisted here in the 1900s . Next to the house we rented, was a tree of tiny lemons, which I picked to preserve on my return to Cape Town

Looking to mark this memory with an artwork, I tried to draw, paint and collage the jar of lemons. *Gamkaslemons* is an assemblage of experiments with paint and a drill on acrylic sheets, with two scraps of linen intended for another project, a year before .



*Stappies Cordier, Gamkaskloof*



(detail)

*Gamkaslemons*  
2015  
Acrylic paint on acrylic sheet, linen  
200 x 350mm



## *(The Great Unknown)*

This is the final painting of my project, as yet incomplete. For this reason, it has a tentative title, indicated by brackets.

As described in *Obelisk*, this outsized canvas took several months to procure, finally arriving around the middle of 2015, to be pinned to the 3.5 x 5m drywall that had been constructed in the studio at the start of the year.

Facing the long-awaited, enormous canvas, I was aware of feeling surprisingly unafraid; less anxious than I had previously felt facing small, relatively insignificant grounds. Able to accept some apprehension and the possibility of failure released me from significant anxiety. Even before I started to paint, this painting signified what I had hoped to achieve in this project on uncertainty (in relation to anxiety) namely, to worry less about outcome.

In the final exhibition, this work was displayed in the main gallery, where I could continue to work on it during the course of the show.



*(The Great Unknown)*  
2015-ongoing  
Acrylic on linen  
3300 x 5500mm  
(width variable up to 10 000mm as fabric still on roll)



## *Home Improvements*

When I moved in, the outside of the studio door was painted a rich mulberry colour. Left open, the colour disrupted the quiet colours inside the room. In my enthusiastic efforts to find the wood beneath the paint, I began to peel years of layers of paint off the door using a heat gun and a scraper.

After a couple of hours, I became impatient with myself for 'spending all my time fussing to get the studio to look nice', so stopped, intending to continue once I had done some actual work.

This is how the door remains.



*Home Improvements*  
2015  
Door with paint partially stripped

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## *Acknowledgements*

Virginia MacKenny and Penny Siopis, my supervisors, for tolerating all of my process and for seeing and hearing beyond the surface.

Stanley Eamon - The Saint of Michaelis - for tireless kindness, optimism and tolerance.

Moeneeb Dalwai - for technical help and refuge in the IT underbelly that is your office.

My family - who helped in so many ways, at any hour. Particularly, to my mother, Joan for last emergency delivery services and snacks, my father, Ivor, for actually reading this text, my sister, Julia, for *InDesign* coaching at unreasonable hours, cousin Peta for your wholehearted belief in me and Jenny and Daniel for your unfailing support.

All the generous and unwitting providers of materials for this project, including Blue, Ingrid Bolton, Panalux, Jack Hammers, Brian's Autoglass, a design studio near Dunkley Square and others who gave or threw very good things away.

Those students of Michaelis with whom ideas and excitement could be cultivated.

Henry - for yoga classes that provided the scaffolding for this experience.

Quanta Gauld - for your sunbeam enthusiasm in supporting writing and editing.

Adrian Kohler - for providing many themes, a little writing desk, incomparable practical help and your wry foil to The Establishment.

My schooling and broader upbringing, for the double-edged gift of an education that encouraged innovation, outspokenness and courage.

*...thank you all.*