

THE LAST COLOUR TO FADE

MORNÉ VISAGIE

University of Cape Town

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on personal recollections and collective history, *The Last Colour to Fade* offers a meditation on the sea as both a physical and psychological landscape. Memories of my childhood spent on Robben Island are interwoven with historical facts, with narratives borrowed from literature and film, and images from art and life. Shifting between first person and third, between my own reflections and those of others, I have found in the lives and works of Adriaan Van Zyl, Derek Jarman, Jean Genet, Virginia Woolf and others a shared affinity for water. The sea – changeable, inconstant – reveals itself to be evocative of not only promise and peril, but of sensuality, desire and eroticism. It offers as imperfect parallel the image of the swimming pool and its attendant changing room, evoking a history of the queer body in art and writing. The twelve discrete artworks collected under the title *The Last Colour to Fade*, are abstracted interpretations of these themes, where colour and materiality are primary. The works share a persistent seriality, with the recurring image of a pool, the motif of tiles, and repetition of form. Most tends towards fragility, towards a suggested impermanence, made from tissue paper, porcelain, or stained tarlatan cloth. The accompanying text is one of fragments and vignettes, which suggest rather than state my thematic concerns, pairing my own voice with those of others in quoted passages and poems. Both my exhibition and writing gesture to the liminal space between what is said and what is left unspoken.

THE LAST COLOUR TO FADE

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, I visited Robben Island for the first time since I had left my family home fifteen years before. I returned to the places I remembered from my childhood spent on the Island, to the graveyard, the guest house, the windswept rocks. Arriving at the communal swimming pool, I discovered a flock of dead seagulls floating in the water. The pool, left unkept, mimicked the dark green-blue sea just on the other side of the wall.

I was twenty years old. Soon after I visited, I read an account of two men, Rijkaart Jacobs and Claas Blank, who were drowned off the coast of Robben Island in the early eighteenth century. They were sentenced to death on charges of having a homosexual relationship, though the term *homosexual* did not yet exist.

The drowned men and the dead seagulls, the familiar rocking of the boat, my return to that place, together became a catalyst to reconnect with the Island, with my childhood and identity, the swimming pool, the sea, the land, and loss. The Island revealed itself not only as a site of national significance but one charged with personal resonance, a place that persists in my memory as both a physical and psychological landscape.

The first years of my life (1989 to 1995) were spent on Robben Island. While it was a safe place for children to wander freely, a suburban idyll of sorts, it was a prison to many of its residents. Apartheid South Africa, however, was coming undone – soon prisoners would leave and so too would the children. The year 1994 was the start of new beginnings on the mainland: for the warders and their families who lived on the Island; and for the many political prisoners who had been exiled there.

I do not recall when I first realised the historical weight that my childhood island carried, and the fate it promised for many people who were banished there. Innocent family photos of birthday parties and days spent by the swimming pool are haunted by the realities of the time. The enormity of the Island's violent past exists alongside my personal relationship to that burdened space, it is the unspoken presence in much of my work as in my memories.

Confronting the weight of the history of the Island, I find it is not possible to write a linear, sequential narrative that suggests neat connections and solutions to my entanglement with it. The works in this exhibition and its accompanying text ask to be read and viewed in a series of fragments which connect in less defined and absolute ways. These fragments include information, historical facts, stories and narratives taken from literature, film and art, which confuse the first person and the third, the author's voice and quoted text.

In my visual and textual fragments, I touch on ideas of queerness, violence, desire and the uncertain symbol of the sea. There is an ode to blue, a pink flag, golden foil, green tiles. There are those who have come before me, whose writing I return to – Derek Jarman, Virginia Woolf, Jean Genet. There are artists and their scenes of hope and isolation. There are cries of “crucify!” and furtive hands unbuckling belts. Interjections and asides disrupt the narrative to discuss the plot, a note on literature, a passing thought. The narrative is momentarily paused, forgotten, left to trail off. There is about my work and my writing an insistent fluidity, a resistance against certainty.

Unlike Jacobs and Blank, I live in a constitutionally free society protected from discrimination based on race, colour and sexual orientation – in theory, if not in practice. As a self-recognized gay man, I form part of the first generation of South African LGBTQI+ community who cannot be discriminated against by law. This reassurance, however, is bitter-sweet. There is no law to protect those among us who still end up as society's cast-offs. Freedom is not a given but a slow negotiation.

Exploring, or rather testing, this new freedom, my research had led me to past events, literature, film and art, only to find that no happy ending has been paved out for the LGBTQI+ community to follow. More often than not, those works I have engaged with conclude under the shadow of discrimination, exile, illness, death and existential heartbreak. They are a reflection and product of experience, governing laws and queer histories. The need and desire for companionship, acceptance and happiness are palpably evident in gay literature and film. However, it seems as though these wants and desires are seldom allowed. One need only to investigate the writings of Edmund White, Allan Hollinghurst and Jean Genet to see this pattern of unfulfilled need.

This text, however, does not intend to make an analysis of gay film and literature, nor does it draw specifically on queer theory. Within my body of work, I turn to themes of gay experience and culture that has been explored by a selection of authors, film-makers and artists. I reflect on ideas around illusory happiness, following a visual expression of the gay body's relationship with the island, the sea and the swimming pool, which extends to include spaces such as bathhouses and locker rooms, so often settings in gay film and literature. These spaces allude to desire, attraction and eroticism, as a place where nude male bodies intersect and meet behind closed doors, hidden by curtains or left unseen within steam-filled rooms. Beyond these spaces lies a darker social reality laced with violence – with illness, judgement, discrimination, incarceration and exile.

Among the writers I have turned to in exploring this theme, is the South African author, Damon Galgut. His role in my research and writing is perhaps oblique, as he makes no particular reference to either swimming pools or the sea. In his novel *The Imposter* (2009), however, he describes an ongoing battle with a weed-filled garden, a story I read an analogy of the narrator's struggling with life and identity. Scenes borrowed from Galgut's garden reflect and respond to the description of artist Derek Jarman's seaside garden on the English coast included in the fragments. Also included, is a short story Galgut wrote as the accompanying text to an exhibition of mine, *Fountain* (2018), which tells the story of two immigrant brothers, being thrown overboard, and the journey of death and memory that follows.

Jarman is a recurring figure throughout my work and writing, and I return often to his images and words, to his film of blue and to his journal entries. Both offer insight into the last years of his life spent living by the sea, tending to his garden, and witnessing friends die from the same illness that would later claim his life. Most present in my work is Jarman's *Chroma* (1994), a book dedicated to colour, which he wrote as he began losing his sight.

Like Jarman's journal entries, South African artist Adriaan van Zyl's paintings of hospital scenes and seascapes record his experience of illness and imminent death. However, Van Zyl also offers the viewer innocent memory, nostalgia and desire through his *Bather* series of swimming pool changing rooms. These scenes, both of the sea and changing rooms, carry a memory charge – they evoke the many boat rides I took as a child between Robben Island and the mainland, and the Long Street pools where my partner and I have swum these past six years.

David Hockney, too, finds a forbidden desire and pleasure in damp places – swimming pools, changing rooms and shower scenes. In *A Bigger Splash* (1967), the figure that plunges into the pool will never surface, frozen forever in that mottled blue. Within his work, Hockney captures and stills the movement of water and male bodies, to be viewed like this – forever.

Other artists who recur in my work are Danh Vo and Bill Viola – Vo for his origin story, and Viola for his images of drowning. As a young child, Vo and his family fled Vietnam by boat. His flight and rescue at sea, and the artworks I discuss in the following fragments, have deeply influenced my impressions of the sea – a place of both hope and peril. “The sea, unlike the land, cannot be marked but is restless, always moving –” writes Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* (1933). Woolf’s drowning, visually narrated in the film *The Hours* (2002), has lent me an image of fragility, sacrifice and the submerged body. This idea is amplified in by Bill Viola’s video and sound work *The Arc of Ascent* (1992), which places the viewer and listener in the space of the living, witnessing another body’s violent experience of drowning and suffocating. Viola’s film distracts the viewer from the subject’s distress, by mesmerising the viewer with the sound of water, and images of light, colour and floating fabric around a submerged and suspended form.

Finally, as I find myself nearing the end of the past two year’s work and thoughts, I have begun reading the English translation of Jean Genet’s *Querelle de Brest* (1953). Here the sea meets land, a ship of sailors docks at a French port city, and Genet delivers a perfect combination of violence, desire and love: confusing beauty and brutality for the reader. Murder, sex and freedom become intertwined and synonymous.

In this exhibition, colour is primary. Here, the restrained palette of blues, reds and golds are expanded into bodies of colour. These coloured somas are suspended from the ceiling, either diffusing upwards or cascading to the ground, collapsing like chandeliers or waterfalls, while delicate porcelain buoys are scattered around the raw, uneven concrete of the exhibition floor. The room in which the works are presented is reminiscent of a bathhouse, with its lime-washed moulding walls. The windows, as round portholes, bring to mind a boat, a sea voyage. The creaking of the ceiling as it expands and contracts under the sun suggests the aural illusion of a rocking ship, and the sun-flooded arched entrances the setting of a church.

The bodies of colour in this exhibition are, in part, abstract interpretations of references taken from literature, film, and memory. They are, too, purely evocative fields, which inspire a sense of wonder and pleasure. Paying careful attention to visual harmony, the colour, line, shape and form of these works are visually arresting. It is only through this document, however, that they expand beyond the optic, to include notions and associations around death, loss, longing, nostalgia, memory, religion, sexuality, exile and distance. Each work is a sensuous backdrop, an isolated space, which is disrupted only by the spectre of violence left unsaid. The absence of the human body opens the work to narratives in which the imagined body is held between flight, falling and sinking. Abstracted, my work is a veil, which obscures its references even as it will not conceal them.

The works exhibited here have, in many ways, been informed by my training and practice as a printmaker. Repetition and multiples, materials such as tissue paper and tarlatan, and the lingering smell of solvent-based ink, are all characteristics of printmaking. Many of my works have required a dedication to collecting – such as the foils from used bottles of sparkling wine, which were individually washed, flattened, arranged according to colour and then sewn together. In this way, with this commitment, I have managed to construct largescale works layered with rich material quality, with time and labour. Every small element has been cleaned, flattened, sorted and cut before being sewn together into a substantial work.

As Jarman writes, monochrome colour is a “liberation from personality. It articulates silence. It is a fragment of an immense work without limit. The blue of the landscape of liberty.” (Peake, 1999:515) I take this to suggest that my works, with their insistent monochromatic themes, occupy a place caught between history, memory and thought, and another free of biography, of words and notions. The colours are not yet silent, but rather the veil, backdrop and carrier of countless narratives. Those of Vo and Viola, Woolf and Galgut, Blank and Jacobs. Those of the children and prisoners of the Island. The accompanying text that follows, like this chorus of narratives, is one of vignettes and fragments collaged together. Like light refracting off the water’s surface, the image is incomplete, each reflection a shard of a whole that cannot be held still.

ISLAND

In 1971, at the age of nine, my mother moved with her family to Robben Island, where they lived for three years. Her father was a warder at the Department of Prisons, later renamed the Department of Correctional Services.

In 1990, when I was a little under one year old, my mother held me in her arms as she again crossed that short stretch of sea, returning to the Island with my father and my two-year-old sister. My father, like my grandfather before him, was employed by the Department of Correctional Services and had been transferred to the Island.

I was brought up behind the barbed wire [...] that overshadowed the formative years of my life. I was surrounded by men in uniform all day. I got into uniform myself.
(Jarman, 1997:107)

On 19 August 1735 the two men had weights tied around their bodies and, somewhere between the Cape and Robben Island, were dropped into the sea to drown.
(Penn, 1992:25)

*There's a beautiful fisherman's cottage here,
and if ever it was for sale, I think I'd buy it.*
(Collins,1995:5)

In December of 1986, the artist Derek Jarman was diagnosed as HIV positive. Three years later, he moved to a cottage on the coast of Dungeness, England. Prospect Cottage, as it is called, was a fisherman's cottage built "eighty years ago at the sea's edge – one stormy night many years ago waves roared up to the front door threatening to swallow it... Now the sea has retreated leaving bands of shingle," which both separated and paved Jarman's way to the shore (Jarman, 1992:3).

*At night they are aglow with futuristic brilliance,
lights blaring like the stars that shine over the nearby ocean.
It's a confluence of the natural and the unnatural that could
only occur at the sea, constant and yet ever-changing.*
(Williams, 2018)

Here, Jarman started a garden that will be visited by many people after his death:

*Slowly the garden acquired a new meaning – the plants struggling against
biting winds and Death Valley sun merged with Derek's struggle with illness,
then contrasted with it, as the flowers blossomed while Derek faded.*
(Collins,1995:5)

We never had a lawn. Our front garden was beach sand and bleached shells. The only things that grew were windblown, like the leaning pine trees and the stinging nettles, which lined the treacherous path to the swing set beyond the empty fish pond.

As children, my sister and I told the story of visiting a dark cave. The walls left a white powder on our hands and clothes.

On the mornings that my mother spent at the guest house, setting up for the monthly Women's Club Tea, my sister and I would climb the staircase to the green room that overlooked the sea.

In 1995 we moved back to the mainland.

Perhaps the most brutal of day-to-day life was the hard labour the prisoners performed, and the abuses associated with it, especially in the early years. Most prisoners would work in the quarries, quarrying lime and stone, or chopping wood, crushing stone...

[...]

They shoved him into the pit and started filling it up. When they had finished, only Mlambo's head appeared above the ground. A white warden, who had directed the whole business, urinated into Mlambo's mouth.

(Deacon, 2016:102-106)

In August of 2018, the alleged sexual abuse of under-aged boys by South African government officials during the nineteen eighties was published in *The Lost Boys of Bird Island*. The book is a record of the investigation lead by ex-policeman Mark Minnie and journalist Chris Steyn thirty years after the fact.

The Lost Boys of Bird Island investigates specific incidents tied to the party officials, where impoverished, under-aged boys were taken by boat and helicopter to Bird Island, just off the coast of Port Elizabeth, where it is believed that they were sexually abused, raped and possibly murdered by National Party cabinet ministers (Minnie, 2018).

The title of the book refers to, and is in memory of, the boys taken to Bird Island, who were abused, violated, killed, and never seen again. Here, the sea bound the boys to the island, their prison; the ocean an ominous collaborator that denied their escape and freedom.

Unsupervised, the Island was their playground; the graveyards, the lime quarry, the rock pools, the beaches, the shipwrecks, the field of arum lilies across from their house.

They always came home with a bleeding stubbed toe or had to run a vinegar bath to soothe their sunburn.

*What light penetrated to the bedrooms where children were born
was naturally of an obfusc green.*
(Woolf, 2004:147)

When a boy was born, the church raised a blue flag. When a girl was born, the church raised a pink one.

In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections. Robben Island was declared a National Heritage site and the prison reimagined as a museum.

For five years, between 2011 and 2016, the artist Danh Vo created a replica of the Statue of Liberty. It was made in 350 parts, just as the original had been designed by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi in 1886. Displayed in its many pieces, each made from steel and thick copper sheets, Vo's *We the People* is a fragmented, uncertain monolith.

As one critic wrote, reflecting on the erection of original statue in 1886 on Liberty Island, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean:

Liberty's light did not shine so bright on the black Americans still yearning to breathe free from the Jim Crow Laws lynching and disenfranchisement, First Peoples starved in concentration camps, or the women, Asians, Jews, gays and recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, Ireland, Italy and elsewhere who were systematically discriminated against, along with everyone else who for one reason or another could be denied equality and freedom.

(Berardini, 2016:22).

*There was a small cement stoep, from which steps led down,
and then the yard stretched away. It was choked with tall brown weeds
that had died long ago and set solidly in the baked ground.*
(Galgut, 2008:8)

He wanted to go see if the hen had laid any eggs in the outside toilet behind the door. This was her preferred spot. He pushed the door open without knocking. Abdul was standing with his trousers unbuckled and fly unzipped, pissing. It was the first time he saw a grown man's dick.

The German Invention of Homosexuality

August 1867, Odeon Hall, Munich:

*He was preparing to address his professional colleagues
on an unmentionable subject, same sex-love, and to protest
the various German anti-sodomy laws that criminalized it.*

[...]

...cries of “Crucify!”...

(Beachy, 2014:3)

When Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German lawyer, journalist and author, publicly ‘came out’ in the 1860s, he inspired the modern world’s first movement for homosexual rights, launched a generation later in Berlin in 1897. Ulrichs’ gesture of defiant self-expression contributed to the redefinition – even the invention – of sexuality (and homosexuality) in nineteenth-century Europe. (Beachy, 2014:5)

The traditional medical science of the time classified sodomy as a “willful perversion and the product of masturbation or sexual excess.” (Beachy, 2014:6) Indeed, the term ‘sodomites’ described those men of perverse bent, sex-obsessed predators who had grown tired of women and turned their attention to men of similar deviance. Same-sex eroticism was not only a perceived symptom of moral weakness but a danger to upstanding members of society who might at any moment be seduced, tricked or pressured into ‘unnatural’ sex acts. Sexual desire, it was agreed, was easily misdirected and young men were particularly vulnerable to erotic perversions. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, a Berlin doctor named Johann Ludwig Casper, challenged these long-held assumptions, arguing that many “sodomites had an innate, biological attraction to the same sex.” (Beachy, 2014:6)

By 1900 a progressive school of German psychiatry had formed around the belief that same-sex attraction might be congenital, and somehow an integral feature of a small sexual minority. It became possible now to imagine that certain individuals were attracted innately to their own and not the opposite sex. Indeed, German speakers – both self-identified same-sex-loving men and medical doctors – invented a new language of sexual orientation and identity that displaced the older understanding of perversion and moral failure.

(Beachy, 2014:6)

Long ago in the 1980s, perfectly respectable young homosexual aesthetes ventured into what would now be considered a very dodgy pursuit - namely cruising.

Far more risky than Grindr.

Like anything else, it was a skill. And one could come unstuck. In this particular pursuit, the line of beauty went quite wonky. Not too badly. It could have landed one on the tracks but by the grace of God, did not. "It was the hand of the Lord", my grandmother's words when I told her a much-abbreviated version of the event. I always treasured these kind and loving words and have often reflected on them. Of course, nothing is straight forward, all a mystery. And one is grateful.

One warm evening I decided I had to overcome my instinctive anxiety and enter into this practice. So as not to be a wallflower forever.

The Rondebosch station was one of several cruising joints, as was the whole path along the Liesbeek River. There was even a house, though this was later in the 90s, where a beautiful man sat naked in his lounge, with curtains open, and people looked in. A bold friend, sadly no longer alive, was confident enough on half a bottle of whiskey to enter and to have what he desired. Apparently, there was much "shushing" – don't wake the kids. This is a delectably far out urban tale, and it's true. I was wearing my jersey from Rome – it was kind of Byzantine in its design, blues, maroons, turquoise. Bought from a handsome Israeli who owned a shop near the central station - incidentally.

(An abstract written by Christopher Peters for my exhibition, The Line of Beauty, held at What If The World Gallery, 2015)

SEA

The Island's supply store was small and only stocked the bare necessities. Once a month, all four of us would take the ferry to the mainland to get what was needed for the weeks ahead. While in the city, we went for dentist appointments and doctors' check-ups. I was sent to a speech therapist because I seldom spoke.

I recall these many trips still, recall watching the sea rushing by on the side of the Susan Kruger or Dias. The waves shaped a whale's tale behind the boat, a white foaming fountain. In front, at the boat's bow, was the dark, impenetrable surface of the Atlantic.

*Because it can be anything - it can be any colour,
it's movable, it has no set visual description.*
(Hockney, 1970:62)

The problem of depicting water remains one of Hockney's more persistent preoccupations. Water, he has found, is seldom still, the reflections and light on the surface constantly changing. It is at once both a mirror and a window. (Hockney, 1970:62)

He began collecting plastic bottles at the beginning of 2018. Once the labels had been removed and the bottles cleaned, he turned them into string, using a device he constructed from the blade of a craft-knife, aluminum skirting and wood. Then, with thick, long wooden needles, he knit the plastic string together to create sheets of colour.

To begin with, he was uncertain what direction this work was going to take, but he was drawn to its material qualities; its durability, the luminescence and rich tones. The bottles were no longer recognizable for what they were – collected together and transformed into a strange expanse of translucent colour.

It appeared to him as an image of the ocean, with the froth and bubbles caused by a body plunging into water or kelp forests, stretching upwards, to the sea's surface. (Fig. i)

I am like a body under water, breathing through the small opening of a straw. A body under water, breathing. Breathing through a small opening. Finally, I let that go. I let it go. I feel myself submerge. Submerging into the blackness. Letting go. Sinking down into the black mass. Submerging into the void. The senseless and weightless void...

(Ammann, 1995:19)

Bill Viola's three-part video installation *The Arc of Ascent* (1992) shows the body of a man floating underwater. The image radiates extraordinary comfort, as the viewer hears the sound of water and watches the floating fabric move against the figure. The water darkens from below, but "the darkness is not black: it pulsates, gurgles profusely and is shot through with colours" (Ammann, 1995:19).

Danh Vo was born in Bá Rịa, Vietnam, in 1975, the same year as the fall of Saigon. He and his family left their homeland in 1979 under duress in a boat organized by Vo's father. The vessel held 100 passengers. The intended destination was the USA; however, their boat was intercepted by a Maersk shipping vessel, and Vo and his family were taken to Denmark, where they were later granted citizenship.

This was not the fate for all the people fleeing from Vietnam. Many asylum seekers were attacked by pirates and murdered or sold into slavery and prostitution. The most common tragedy was death was drowning. Approximately 200 000 people died fleeing Vietnam by boat (Berardini, 2016:9).

These sea-bound vessels played ambiguous roles – some granted refuge, others delivered their occupants into the unfeeling sea, many were places of confinement and containment, surrounded by water and beyond reach. They were vehicles of both salvation and peril. For some, these boats marked people's passage between life and death. The voyage that Vo underwent as a child has marked his work and thought, the artist drawn always towards personal and global accounts of persecution, freedom, peace and liberation.

In 1713, Rijkhaart Jacobsz, a Dutch sailor sentenced to twenty-five years imprisonment, arrived at the penal colony on Robben Island. In 1715, Claas Blank, a Khoi-Khoi, was sentenced to fifty years on the Island.

During their confinement, in 1724, these men and other convicts went to Dassen Island to burn train oil. There, one night, in a small shelter on the Island, they were secretly observed “committing an abhorrent sin” by a slave. This incident was kept quiet until 1732 when the same two men were caught in “the most compromising of positions” in the prisoner shelter of Robben Island by two convicts, who reported the incident to the postholder. The official did nothing, believing the evidence of convicts worthless.

Some days later, however, Rijkhaart Jacobsz walked past the postholder who, on the pretext that Jacobsz had not raised his hat to him, beat him with a whip. Jacobsz, within earshot of others, shouted: “Send mij maar op ek heb hom ‘n t_ _”. The postholder and his corporal, not knowing what to make of his confession, failed to report the matter.

Finally, in 1735, the truth was confessed to the corporal when Jacobsz was again beaten after making improper suggestions to a slave. The corporal beat Jacobsz until he cried out, “Slaeniet, ek heb het gedoen, send my maar op!” One of the convicts stepped forward and informed the corporal of the previously reported incidents. (Penn, 1992:25)

While I do not believe I fear death, I do fear drowning. Sometimes when I swim, I find myself losing track of my breathing pattern, becoming short of breath and beginning to panic. I am curious to know where the mind goes when it leaves the physical and tangible body, when it enters a state of unconsciousness insensible to our normal spatial coordinates. This is an inner space, a purely mental landscape, a site animated by an incomprehensible logic.

At 02:20 a.m., the Titanic finally sank. Breaking in half, it plunged downward to the seafloor. Captain Edward Smith went down with the ship. The Carpathia arrived about an hour later and rescued the 705 people who made it onto the lifeboats. The people who were forced into the cold waters all perished.

(Tikkanen, 2019:n.p)

In the opening scene of *Querelle* (1982), a film by Rainer Werner Fassbinder based on Jean Genet's 1953 novel *Querelle de Brest*, the narrator begins:

“The thought of murder often evokes thoughts of the sea and of sailors.
What naturally follows these thoughts of the sea and murder is the
thought of love and sexuality.”
(Fassbinder, 1982)

The scenes in Fassbinder's *Querelle* were filmed on a set resembling a port in France, rather than in a real harbour, with theatrical lighting and saturated colour. The effect is one of looking through a golden lens, as if the sunset were paused at the sea's horizon, or if the sea itself was on fire and the film set in hell. The phallic statutory of the set's design gestures to the premise of the film's narrative. Throughout both the film and the novel, there is a magnetic relationship, a push and pull, between the erotic and the violent. Often sexual acts, or acts alluding to sex, are met with betrayal, physical pain or death.

One of the narrators, a character in the film, is a lieutenant on a ship that docks in Brest. He fantasises about the sailors on his ship, among them one in particular – Querelle. The lieutenant is portrayed as a lonesome and nostalgic character, always talking into a tape recorder:

*My tears soften me. I melt with their wetness on my cheeks. I toss.
I roll in waves of tenderness for these boys... and their hard, shallow cheeks.
When the time comes for me to drown in my emotion for Querelle...
will there be an alarm ringing for me?*

[...]

*I didn't realize what a perfect alibi a naval career provides.
It justifies celibacy. Women don't ask, "Why aren't you married?"
They pity you for knowing only the transient affairs...
and never the true love. The sea, the solitude...*
(Fassbinder, 1982)

The lieutenant finds a kind of freedom in his solitude on the ship and at sea. Here he does not need to conform to any of society's expectations on land. He is overcome by the sea, and references it throughout the film to describe his emotional state.

The port is a confluence of murder and desire. The sex and love in the film is met with violence and deception. It marks a point of friction, this place where land and sea try to merge but cannot. The ship on the other hand, is a place of containment, solitude and safety.

Within the novel, fog from the sea disguise and camouflage violence. When Querelle cuts the throat of a fellow sailor on land, he is protected by the sea mist which obliterates the trees and other surrounds (Genet, 2019:71).

*Pearl fishers
In azure seas
Deep waters*

[...]

*Lost Boys
Sleep forever
In a dear embrace
Salt lips touching
(Jarman, 1993)*

I.

To escape from their country, a man and his brother stow away on a ship. They hide below the deck, in a narrow space between two storage containers, the sound of massive engines working underneath them, and they are here for perhaps four days before they are discovered.

Then they are dragged out into the light, which almost blinds them. The world is white and edgeless and they can hardly see the faces of the sailors who beat them, or the captain who sits in judgement on them, or the huge grey circle of sea that is now their fate.

They are set adrift, clinging to the broken remains of a crate. They float through light, they float through dark. Their sight has come back to them, but there is nothing to see except for water, which takes on the infinite forms of absence, now pouring and flowing, now placid and still, now creasing into lines that rise and fall, rise and fall. They do not speak, or if they do, only a little, because words are no longer the point.

Then the man's brother drowns. He lets go of the crate and sinks beneath the water, his face twisted so that he seems to be smiling. (Or possibly he is smiling.) The clear lines of him hover for a moment, then fade away, as if he's being erased.

Light and dark, light and dark. How many times? Why does it matter? The man washes up on a stony beach, the edge of a continent he's never stood upon before. letting go. Except that this time he's the one sinking under the water, the world fading gently overhead.

II.

Years later, he is working in a menial position in the home of a powerful government official. He sweeps floors, polishes shoes, carries things for people who don't really see him. The man is no longer the man, not as he used to be. He has learned a new language, he has acquired a new name. He has made up a past which contains only elements of the truth. He hardly ever thinks about the real past, or only late at night, when he's alone in his room.

But on one particular day, the past rises up in him, against his will. He is sent to a courtyard to clean a fountain, which has become covered with verdigris. (Time undoes the world continually, only labour can restore it.) As he scrapes at the metal, something about the running water mesmerises the man, drawing him in and back, so that suddenly he is there again, in the instant where his old life ended.

Vividly, intensely, he sees his brother, in the moment of his letting go. Except that this time he's the one sinking under the water, the world fading gently overhead.

And in this dream of drowning, the man enters a zone where he isn't here and isn't there, like a state of endless arrival. It's beautiful in the place between places, where air has turned into water. You fall and fall endlessly, and it's just like flying. Do you know what I mean?

(A short story written by Damon Galgut, a South African author, for my exhibition, *Fountain*, held at Smith Gallery, 2018)

The boy moved towards him, unzipped the man's jeans, pulled them down to below his thighs and started sucking his flaccid dick, trying to arouse him. The man pushed the boy away and said he was bored of him.

COLOUR

Early in 2019, during a visit to the Island, as I was looking at faded photographs in one of the old prison buildings, a friend who was with me pointed out that blue is always the last colour to fade. The images were copies of original photographs taken on the Island when it was a functioning maximum security prison for the detention of political prisoners during apartheid.

A year before Jarman's death in 1994, his film *Blue* (1993) was released at the Venice Biennale. During the final years of his life, Jarman started losing his sight. He began to see as though through a blue filter. *Blue* is devoid of images and consists of only a saturated blue screen accompanied by a voiceover and musical soundtrack. The spoken words, written by Jarman, are from "a diaristic and poetic text documenting his AIDS-related illness and impending death at a time that he had become partially blind, his vision often interrupted by blue light." (Wilson, 2013) It is a film about Jarman's own experience, and simultaneously a tribute to the artist Yves Klein.

A veil of blue hangs from the ceiling; the curtains made from tissue paper sewn together (fig. ii, iii). Paper dissipates in water. To the artist, the delicateness and transparency of this material reference the fragility of the human body. Moving through a passage between two curtains, the viewer is momentarily cut off from the rest of the room, lost within a field of blue.

The curtains are drawn closed as if awaiting an enactment or narrative.

The blue hand-dyed tissue paper, which both absorbs and reflects light from its surroundings, sets the space alight with a glowing blue presence. It is the backdrop against which all the other works are seen. The tones of blue mimic those of a well-maintained public swimming pool or the tiles of a hospital, with panels of aquamarine-green interrupting the blue.

When we were together (2011), a work he produced during his final year at art school, consisted of a stack of 1000's of blue sheets of paper, which were free for the audience to take. The work was, of course, reminiscent of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' series of stacked paper works. His particular blue, Pantone 318, was taken from a dated satellite image of the Robben Island swimming pool, when the pool was still maintained and in use. This work references an earlier time, when his family (father, mother and sister), still lived under the same roof. Years after they moved to the mainland, his family separated. The Island, for all its political darkness, was for him a place of containment and togetherness.

There is a stillness. The stillness is disrupted only by movement, as the slightest breeze of a body moving passed the curtain stirs the paper, creating an echo of creasing paper that follows the viewer as they pass through and by the blue.

The passage leads to another room with two projected video works.

A definition of bruise:
*Blood or bleeding under the skin due to trauma of any kind;
typically black and blue at first, with colour changes as healing progresses.*
(Makins, 1991: 206)

The weeds. They seem, somehow, more numerous than before, rustling and hissing, mocking him in a foreign tongue.

[...]

What better way to mark a new beginning than by clearing out the weeds?
(Galgut, 2009; 77)

*Not all immigrants are picked up by Maersk shipping vessels.
Too many are turned back, captured and deported, left to drown,
all traces and remains disappearing.*
(Berardini, 2016:22).

Unravelling sails are suspended from different heights (fig. iv, v). Made from white tissue paper, they billow in the breeze. With every movement, a new crease is made in the paper, where the paper fibres have been broken. A trace is left wherever the stillness of the work has been interrupted.

The paper has been carefully sewn to create seams into which dowels have been fed and string attached, the work suspended from the ceiling. This tissue is so delicate that even the finest needle and thread can tear it. It is too fragile for the wind and sea.

In printmaking, tissue paper has many uses. It protects the printed or inked areas of plates and paper, is used to lift dust from borders, and is laid between prints when stored to prevent one sheet from rubbing against the other. It is also used in soft-ground etching to assist in the transfer of delicate pencil and graphite textures to the ground itself, where it becomes the residue and trace of the mark and image made, before it becomes permanently etched in the metal plate.

Against the white walls and ceiling beams, the collapsing sails hold a gentle presence, almost disappearing against the architecture. The work is ghostlike, cloudlike, celestial. The collapsed curves appear as waves in rough seas, or sails that cannot stand the wind; a visual metaphor, perhaps, of the treacherous journeys taken by people in search of freedom and safety.

Jarman is living on the cusp of the sea and land. The shore is a confluence, where these two meet and intertwine. He is close enough to the sea to experience the possibility of the sea's infinity and promise of freedom, with the yearning to escape the rules of the conservative, heteronormative societies on land. He is living here, suffering from a human disease and experiencing the deterioration of his body. The sea becomes the liminal space between life and death (Williams, 2018:n.p.).

The blue Buddha smiles in the realm of joy.

Dark blue embroidered with gold.

There are gold flecks in the lapis.

Blue and gold are eternally united.

They have affinity and eternity.

(Derek Jarman, 2000;104)

Suspended from the ceiling, the transparent cloth appears as a stain glass window, with hundreds of panes in greens and blues (fig. vii - ix). Two colourless crosses break the colour field. They begin just beneath the ceiling, and their centre lines run the length of the cloth, down to the ground. Flecks of golden yellows appear irregularly among the greens and blue. The cloth ends in a dark pile on the floor.

Across the room, a red column stretches from the floor to the ceiling (fig. x, xi). Another cross is just visible within the red, fragmented tiles of cloth.

Both hanging pieces are made from tarlatan, collected over many years. Tarlatan is an open-weave muslin or mull cloth, used in bookbinding and dress-making, but particularly in printmaking to remove the excess ink off etching plates. This is how the work has obtained its various shades of colour, with distinctive saturated stains. Each piece of cloth – and the stains that mark it – carries the residue, a memory of the lines and surfaces it wiped clean.

The tarlatan has been cut up into rectangles, measuring 24 and 11.5cm, to replicate the tiles of the Long Street Baths swimming pool. These tile-like strips of tarlatan have been arranged and sewn together. The work is produced on the same scale as the 25m-long pool and is five meters wide to include the exact width of two swimming lanes and two swimming bodies.

The swimming pool has been a recurring subject in the artist's work over the last ten years. It has been a symbol of joy for him and his partner, a homage to their love and a means to commemorate the gay lives that have influenced them. With this work, the artist lays the swimming pool to rest. It begins to merge with the ocean. The pool and the sea becoming intertwined, as the dark green-blues of the coast, of Hamlet's "incarnadine multitudinous seas," turn into the bright luminous blues of swimming pools (Shakespeare, 1842:270).

The two bodies implied by the two lanes of the swimming pool symbolise are absent. The colourless lines gestures, perhaps, to Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* (2004) or artist Justin Brett's *Line of Desire* (2009). The latter was part of a body of work about Graaff's Pool in Sea Point, in sight of the Island. Behind the wall that obscures the pool from the promenade, men would bathe naked amongst other men.

It became a place where the desire to be close to another body could be fulfilled in a temporary privacy. Brett's work refers to a time when the LGBTQI+ community in South Africa were facing exile and discrimination. It also speaks of a time of the HIV crisis here and in the rest of the world.

When standing in front of the two hanging pieces, one red, the other a confusion of refracted blues and greens, visions of cathedral stained-windows and crosses are clearly evoked. The viewpoint is that of a swimmer, diving and suspended, before plunging into the water, or of that of the divine, high above the swimming pool with a bird's eye view.

Suspended, the swimming pool acts as a veil, as the means to transcend to another place. It belongs neither to the space in front of it nor that behind it.

II. Fragment I, II (An Affair Below)

*Druk teëls in asuur olie
maak nat die papier, strek
dit oor ou hout, monteer
hier vir ons 'n swembad.*

*(Onthou hoe ek op 'n keer
verby een van jou lovers ry
voor die Langstraatbaddens,
handdoek oor fyn skouers.)*

...

(From a series of poems, written by Fourie Botha, for my exhibition,
Die Blouw Wis, held at Nuweland Gallery (The Netherlands), 2018)

Looking at the pool from above, I remember the flock of dead seagulls I found in the Robben Island swimming pool in 2010, floating in the dark water. It brings to mind the image of Icarus, flying above the sea to freedom, doomed to fall and drown.

Words, English words, are full of echoes, memories, associations. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing today. They are stored with other meanings, with other memories, and they have contracted so many famous marriages in the past. The splendid word incarnadine, for example, who could use that without remembering multitudinous seas.
(Woolf, 1937:n.p.)

In his early work, South African realist painter Adriaan Van Zyl explores sexuality, identity and desire. His imagery is figurative and referential; his colour palette conveys and conjures the associations of his subject matter. In *Hamman 2* (1989), a painting from a series of bathers in Paris, he depicts a ghostlike, naked figure emerging from the background. In these scenes, it is “as though one is transported into an entirely different world.” (Hundt, 2007:11)

One gets the sense that Van Zyl is portraying a memory, and within this nostalgia, mourning a loss. His *Long Street Baths* series (2004) show a cool palette and a more clinical approach. His warm sepia palette, using burned sienna, amber, yellows and browns, evokes a sense of nostalgia and longing. In *Long Street Baths 2* (2004), a male bather disappears into a changing room, with a young child entering the scene on the right. The paintings depict the soft blue and greens of the interior of the Baths that is still evident today.

In contrast to the swimming pool series, Van Zyl's *Hospitaaltyd* (2004), creates a charged space between viewer and painting. Produced two years before his death, *Hospitaaltyd* portrays the artist's time spent in and out of the hospital. There is a hospital bed, an operation room, a waiting room. With his empty pictorial spaces, this series conveys the artist's understanding of mortality. The absence of the human body conjures the artist's sense of hapless loneliness.

Many of Van Zyl's paintings from this time are arranged as diptychs and triptychs, the stark clinical space of the hospital juxtaposed with beautiful seascapes. Van Zyl wrote that his pre-medication gave him the sensation that his bed was gently rocking, which conjured in his mind vivid images of waves and foam – “he proposed various metaphors to describe the bed: a boat upon the horizonless sea of cyclic existence; a cradle that rocks us from birth to death; a stage upon which life's major drama unfold.” (Hundt, 2007:54)

Hues of blues, greens, greys and the shadows in his paintings of the hospital interior convey the ocean and the image of a swimming pool. The colour palette unites these different scenes and forms a narrative that portrays his emotions and understanding of a place.

Van Zyl died at the age of 49 after a long battle with cancer.

*In coral harbours amphora spill gold across the still seabed
We lie there
Fanned by the billowing sails of forgotten ships
Tossed by the mournful winds
Of the deep.
(Jarman, 1993)*

The grass was wet, the ground slippery, and the cold intense. He could hear a bird singing. He sat down on the coffin in which his mother was decomposing. The smell of the rotting body emanated from between the badly-fitting planks without his resenting it, for it mingled naturally with the smells of the grass, the newly-dug earth, and the damp flowers.

For a moment the child's thoughts turned to that awe-inspiring phenomenon, the decomposing of the mortal remains a loved one: a misfortune that leaves one's own being and enters into the natural order of the universe.
(Genet, 2019:50).

*What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else
is the image of a place: a place where your bones and mine are buried,
thrown, uncovered, together. They are strewn there, pell-mell. One of your
ribs leans against my skull. A metacarpal of my left-hand lies inside your
pelvis. (Against my broken ribs, your breast like a flower.) The hundred
bones of our feet are scattered like gravel. It is strange that this image of our
proximity, concerning as it does mere phosphate of calcium, should bestow
a sense of peace. Yet it does. With you, I can imagine a place
where to be phosphate of calcium is enough.*

(Berger, 1991:101).

Uncle Dave began to lose interest in him, preferring his younger sibling, who had just turned thirteen. Uncle Dave began passing the older sibling off to his friends (Minnie, 2018; 47)

POOL

In 2010, I visited the Island for the first time after saying goodbye to my family home fifteen years before. On this trip, I visited various sites that I remember from my childhood spent on the Island. The guest house, the graveyards, the tennis courts. Arriving at the communal swimming pool, I discovered a flock of dead seagulls floating in the water, which mimicked the colour of the dark green-blue sea on the far side of the wall.

Icarus, in Greek mythology, flew over the ocean, freed from his Island prison. As Icarus flew higher and higher, closer and closer to the sun, forgetting his father's warning, his waxed wings melted, and he fell into the sea to his death. (Jones, 1996)

Below the suspended paper sails, white porcelain buoys are arranged and weighted on the raw, uneven floor (fig. iv, vi). Although fired to 1000 degrees, the hard porcelain is as porous and fragile as the sails above it. Hollow, these vessels will sink if submerged water.

The shape of these buoys references that of traditional Japanese fishing buoys, made from glass. Often these buoys and their nets would get lost at sea and wash up on shores around the world. My grandmother once found one in Walvis Bay, on the Northern Coast of South Africa. Living in the dry and barren landscape of Namaqualand, this buoy was her weather guide to give her hope of rain. When and if the moisture in the buoy formed condensation against the glass, she believed that it would rain. The waterhole on their land, however, remained empty.

*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green – one red.
(Shakespeare, 1842:270)*

Woolf walks out of her home, through her country garden, along a pathway until she reaches the river bank. She pauses, forlorn, before places large stones in the pockets of her coat, then slowly walks into the shallow green river. While this final act is taking place, a letter she left for her husband is narrated by a woman's voice.

As the letter ends, Woolf waits silently in the river with the water at her neck. As her head submerges, we hear the sudden and loud sound of exhaled air breaking the water's surface. The viewer accompanies Woolf down into the river, as her body sinks into the blue and green void. We hear the movement of the water and clothing moving with the river plants; finally, a hand wearing a golden ring wistfully announces her demise.

In this depiction of Virginia Woolf's death, water becomes a carrier for the body to a world unseen. The viewers become willing participants in witnessing something potentially violent portrayed with beauty. The water, light and colour become unbearable, conflated, as they are, with tragedy. Violence and life, the scene suggests, are synonymous, as too are beauty and death.

At the end of the blue passage, passed the suspended paper curtains, an arched opening leads to two projection rooms.

In the righthand room, a film plays. The imagery was filmed on Robben Island and in the Long Street Baths (fig. xx - xxiv). The accompanying sound consists of underwater noise and readings from texts by Woolf and Jarman. The film weaves the surrounding works with a more distinct visual reference, and creates a narrative of colour that weaves the exhibition together. The film's visuals focus on abstracted architectural scenes. Its images are a meeting point between childhood memory and adult experience. It is the first time in the exhibition that the body makes an appearance.

The photographs at the entrance of the gallery, similarly lend the exhibition a sense of setting (fig. xviii - xix). These photographs, taken on Robben Island, are of the places I remember from my childhood.

To the left of the arched entrance is another projection room. Scenes of a body plunging into water are obscured by shades of blue knitted plastic, suspended from the ceiling. The sheets are arranged and suspending together, erupting and splashing against the other. Though the knitted works are still, the various shades of blue catch the light at different angles, creating depth and movement.

I am reminded of my childhood interpretations of the ascension of Jesus during Sunday School – of dramatic and colourful clouds with the body of Christ in the centre, and light refracting in rainbow colours.

How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.'
(Isaiah 14:12-14)

Over a couple of months, he collected empty champagne bottles for their yellow gold foil. After cleaning, flattening and sorting, the foils were sewn together, following the natural curve of their circular form, which gives the works their circular shape. The finished work exists in four sections: the central half circle and the other three pieces that join below. Together, it creates a layered “wingspan” of approximately four and a half meters. (fig xii, xii)

He collected rose gold foils, too, which underwent a similar process, and were sewn together to create two works. Individually, they are each half the size as the golden piece. The yellow gold wings are hung in the middle of a wall, outspread, with the two rose gold pieces on either side, folded in half, as if collapsed. (fig xiv, xv).

When he started collecting the foils and sewing them together with, he was uncertain of his intention. He liked the material, its colour, strength and malleability. The shape that the sewn foils have taken on mimic that of a priest’s cloak, similar to Matisse’s chasubles, the interior of a Baroque Church, outspread wings or the sun’s reflection on the sea’s horizon.

Suspended, shaped and sculpted, the foil surface might be reminiscent of Dahn Vo’s fragmented sculptures, *We the People*, the replica of *The Statue of Liberty*. The works are luxurious, mesmerizing, and could evoke a sense of wonder. The foils are the residue of a popped bottle of champagne - the remnants of events passed. They allude to celebratory occasions and thus form part of the illusion, ideal of happiness and romance. But the gold is illusory. It is not real, but fake. He is drawn to this idea of an unattainable, idealised moment of happiness.

Vo acquired a set of three chandeliers from the Hotel Majestic in Paris when it was undergoing a change of ownership. These chandeliers hung in a room in the hotel where the 1973 Paris Peace Accords to end the Vietnam War was signed. Vo and his family, amongst many other Vietnamese, fled Vietnam by boat when it was at war with China and Cambodia in the 1970s (Tomkins, 2018).

Suspended from the gallery's ceiling or disassembled, almost dissected, on the floor, the chandelier is a ghost of its former self, a silent marker of that historical event. While simultaneously forming part of Vo's personal history, these objects raise broader concerns about Western colonisation and the radically arbitrary nature of identity.

*On 25 December 1819, the Xhosa prophet Makhanda Nxele, also known as Makana, who was imprisoned on the Island on charges of leading an attack on Grahamstown in 1818, tried to escape from the Island with about thirty other prisoners in three boats. The boats capsized drowning Makana and most of the prisoners. Only four prisoners made it back to shore.
(Deacon, 1992:56)*

*On torn ragged feet
trailing grimy bandages
with bare thin legs
I pattered around the prison yard a while
while politicos learning of me gaped
wondering how they had managed to make of me a thing
of bruises, rags, contempt and mockery.
In time things grew better.
(Dennis Brutus, 1978)*

The water becomes alive with waves around me as I make an incision in the surface. I float parallel with the surface, keep my head level with the rest of my body, look down at the blue line at the bottom of the pool. I push my chest down, my body pivots at the fulcrum of my waist, and my hips and legs move up to the surface.

I turn my head to the side to breathe. My mouth is just above the water's surface. With this side view, my face is half immersed; one eye underwater and the other above. Stroke. As I reach my hand forward, I drop it below the surface just before my arm is fully extended. My body turns sideways as I cut through the cool medium.

I breathe out underwater, just in time to turn my face sideways again to breath in. Stroke.

One arm, then the other. Already my hand is reaching forward. The left and the right take turns endlessly.

I come up to breathe every five strokes.

THE LAST COLOUR TO FADE

CONCLUSION

Coming to the end of this project after two years of work and research, I find the words left unspoken lie heavy on my mind. Accompanying this series of fragments and vignettes, this collage of texts and images, are all those I did not or could not include. I think now of the hands of my mother, that sewed together many of the works in the exhibition; the same hands and Singer sewing machine that sewed the clothes I wore on the Island. And the voice that said “everything in life can’t be straight.” The voice of my mother, who later stood up against the Dutch Reformed Church for excommunicating homosexual members.

Among those who go without mention are Gertrude Stein, Edmund White, Colm Toibin, Robert Mapplethorpe, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and countless others. *Orlando* is absent, as is *Giovanni’s Room*. Alan Hollinghurst is mentioned but not explained. All these figures, these books and films and songs, that have influenced my work profoundly, obliquely, unconsciously, exist in the margins. E.M. Forster, Pierre Bergé, Tatamkhulu Afrika – the list grows like the weeds in Galgut’s garden, quickly and inexhaustibly.

So much of my work, I find on reflection, exists in the unsaid, in what is left unarticulated. I think of my childhood spent without thought of the prison, and my persistent reticence to know my father’s position in it. I think of the silence that first surrounded my sexual identity, my refusal to name it, to own it. And I think of the dimmed sounds heard underwater as I move back and forth across the pool. None of my works are titled, they are not bound by a name, but rather exist in a self-possessed quiet. I have resisted the impulse to define, to describe and circumscribe. All I offer are fragments and colour.

I have swum down to the seabed and come up with only a handful of sand. What else lies there, still and unseen beneath the weight of water above it? What lies beyond the memories of uniforms and Sunday school, sunburn and chalk-white caves?

What did it mean to live beside those depths and know nothing of its darkness?

The sea – *multitudinous, incarnadine* – holds our attention precisely because it is changeable. It is without conclusion, without end.

Figure i



Figure ii

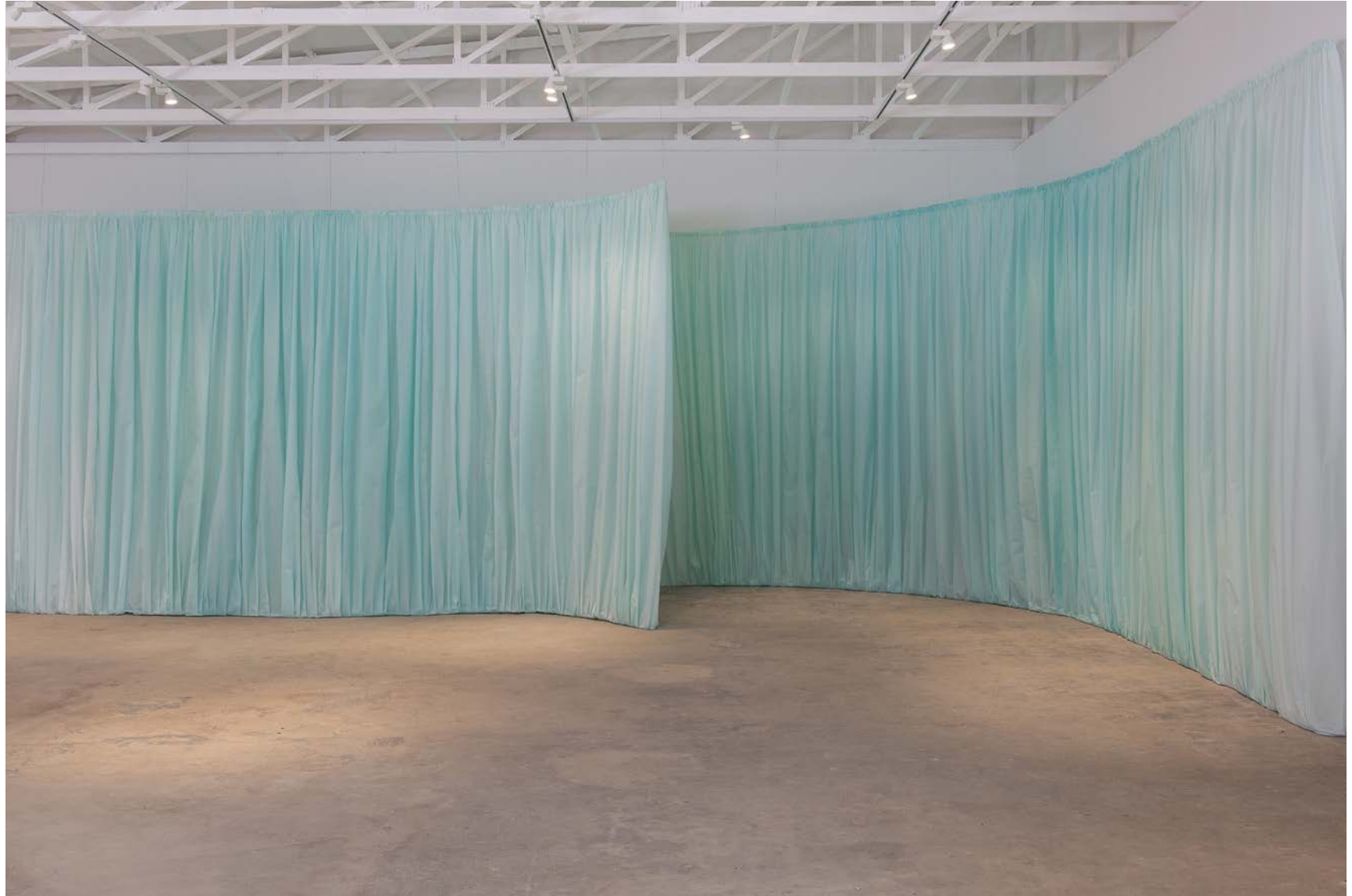


Figure iii



Figure iv



Figure v



Figure vi



Figure vii



Figure viii



Figure ix



Figure x



Figure xi



Figure xii



Figure xiii



Figure xiv



Figure xv



Figure xvi



Figure xvii



Figure xviii



Figure xix



Figure xx



Figure xxi



Figure xxii



Figure xxiii



Figure xiv



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