Making Space:

Photographic Traces of Absence, Stillness and the In-Between in Public Spaces

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Declaration

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

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: _____

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Ultimately, photography is not subversive when it frightens, repels or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks.
(Barthes, 1981: 38)

Figure 1
Nicole Clare Fraser
Building Exterior
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm

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Contents

Abstract

My photographic project *Making Space: Photographic Traces of Absence, Stillness and the In-Between in Public Spaces* explores banal and commonplace empty spaces, non-places, liminal spaces and ordinary, inanimate objects. In the first section, *Situating my Practice*, I contextualise my practice within the broader context of photography and architecture, looking specifically at the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975) and affiliated photographers to highlight ideas about photographically documenting built structures. The visual language of the deadpan aesthetic is an important aspect of my work, and I elaborate on and explore "neutral" and "objective" ways of seeing. I consider a selection of photographers to establish various ways in which image-makers use a formalistic photographic approach to communicate narratives through the representation of built structures. I expand on a phenomenological approach to making images, exploring notions of tenderness, care, alienation and violence. In the second section of the document, *(Dis)Locating my Practice and Making Space*, I position myself within the identified terrain to further explicate my practice and project. The physical project takes the form of silver gelatin handprints, larger inkjet prints and a video projection, and I discuss the method of display and curation of the exhibition and how they motivate ways of looking, slowness and intimacy.

There is considerable evidence, however, that perception is not purely passive – that we do not only take in the world, we also make it.
(Hustvedt in Cole, 2017: ix)

Introduction

My studio practice explores banal and everyday public and institutional spaces, non-places, liminal spaces and ordinary inanimate objects that are experienced as a state of emptiness. The images in this body of work are of places and spaces within and around Cape Town, where I live.

The title of this document – *Making Space: Photographic Traces of Absence, Stillness and the In-Between in Public Spaces* – identifies several themes that are central to my work. Firstly, in "making space" I refer to the notion of construction: while I "take" these photographs as documents of what I see in the world, they are very much simultaneously an arrangement of forms, a construction of what I choose to photograph and how I print the photographed spaces in the darkroom. Secondly, the idea of "traces" is important to my work in that I deal not only with the mimetic trace of photography, but also the traces of the human beings who inhabit the spaces I photograph. "Trace" is also important in relation to the absence and stillness that I unpack below. The "in-between" signals not only the literal description of the spaces, which are often liminal, but also the 2020/21 Covid-19 moment.

Collective human experience seems to currently be in a state of in-betweenness. The current pandemic and the insecurity it has spread across the world have affected my fragile and tenuous experience of stability. Life changed in an instant, and for many months *planning ahead* became impossible. But while the world was still, I spent two years documenting the quiet and static spaces that simultaneously recorded the uncertainty and insecurity of this moment – and of life more generally – while I continued to look for the stasis and stability I have always sought.

To my perception, there are few stable spaces – and the few I find seem possible primarily in built structures. My subjects are usually found through happenstance and/or are sought for their particularity or specificity relating to appearance and function. The built structures I photograph are designed predominantly for public, institutional and recreational use, and the images I make focus on the arrangement of objects and the construction of interior and exterior space. While my images never capture people, I am interested in human relationships to the familiar objects I choose to capture: seating, chairs, handrails, pot plants, ladders, tables and electronic devices. I am intrigued by the *thingness* of objects and the personal meaning and association to specific things, for example the particularity of *that* plastic garden chair, school chair or wooden bar stool.[1]

According to W.J.T Mitchell (2002: x), "If a place is a specific location, a space is a 'practiced place,' a site activated by movements, actions, narratives, and signs". My work occupies the interpretive gap between place and space: the spaces I document are places of recreation, leisure, learning, health and administration and involve shared activity and social interaction. These spaces are usually experienced by the public during designated operating hours, when they are full of people and there is little opportunity to note small and seemingly insignificant details.

People routinely experience empty public places when they are the first to arrive or the last to leave their public sites of work. In these moments, when all is still and quiet, a subtle sense of loneliness, isolation and unease may be apparent. My work aims to explore this emptiness and sense of

1. Elaborating on objects and things, Bill Brown (2001: 4) discusses the following in his essay *Thing Theory*:

We look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.

gentle disquietude, seeking to be understated, to speak softly and to refrain from self-assertion.

This essay functions as a supporting document to my photographic body of work, *Making Space: Photographic Traces of Absence, Stillness and the In-Between in Public Spaces*. As a female lens-based artist, I seek spaces that enable a sense of safety and control within myself. Being perpetually aware of my gender and insecurity around my well-being in the world influences my interaction with the places I move through. This is reflected in the spaces captured in this body of work.

I long for a sense of safety and security. As a child, making up my room at home was for me always about constructing a sense of stability and a personal hiding place. As an adult, I construct *stable places* by photographing built structures absent of the chaos and vulnerability of the everyday. Growing up, I have always had irrational fears about the loss of family, the end of the world and was unable to watch the evening news on television, and I still have a sense of vulnerability that I cannot shake. I have sought to fulfill the construct of stability in how I take and make images, all the while aware of the futility of the exercise. The stillness and control evident in the images I make masks the anxiety, uncertainty and trepidation I experience in everyday life. Formally photographing functional and institutional places in this way – empty, structured, in-between – hints at the alienation and pathos I experience emotionally. I am attuned to small, banal moments within the spaces that I photograph that allude to a sense of care, connection and continuity, but at times also hint at insecurity or violence.

Through the conceptual lens of deadpan photography, I discuss how experience and understanding of place within the world can be reflected through the representation and experience of space by photographing the built environment. By connecting deadpan photography and Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* I aim to expand the concept of reflecting personal experience of being and one's relationship to the world.

My document takes the form of two parts. In the first section of this document, *Situating my Practice*, I contextualise my project within the broader context of photography and architecture by exploring the inextricable relationship between the two. This section elaborates on how this relationship was presented in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), an exhibition relevant to my practice because it introduced a distinct way for artists to document architecture and the built environment, and several of the participating artists foregrounded the deadpan aesthetic. I also discuss the influence of photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, elaborating on their work and how it shaped the deadpan aesthetic and contemporary photography. In concluding this section, I touch on Eugénie Shinkle's essay *Boredom, Repetition, Inertia: Contemporary Photography and the Aesthetics of the Banal* (2004), in which she describes a shift in photographic seeing that is not reliant on representing spectacular images but that has as its subject the banal and pedestrian.

I discuss the visual language of deadpan photography, looking at how it foregrounds formalist approaches to image construction, placing emphasis on structured compositional elements: geometric and linear

framing, straight-on and fixed angle of view, fine image quality and detail. In the spaces captured by the lens of deadpan photography, the human form is usually absent but suggested.

I also expand on Aron Vinegar's essay *Ed Ruscha, Heidegger, and Deadpan Photography* (2009), which looks at the deadpan aesthetic as a mode of being and existing in the world that can reflect the image-maker's individual lived experience and personal attunement. I reference the works of Lewis Baltz, Lynne Cohen and David Goldblatt and discuss the visual language and conceptual ties evident within their work. Baltz was included in the *New Topographics* exhibition with Bernd and Hilla Becher. Although Cohen and Goldblatt were not, the influence of the Bechers is evident in their work. I unpack these artists' works, considering notions of slowness, stillness, absence and quiet, as these ideas are important to my own work. While these artists operate within very different contexts, their work is connected conceptually and aesthetically to mine. Considering the presumed unemotional and detached perspective of deadpan photography, I pay intimate and careful attention to space while drawing on the deadpan aesthetic, giving it time and selecting small and seemingly insignificant details.

I explore notions relating to tenderness, inwardness and poetry through the work of writer and photographer Teju Cole, situating my work within a contemporary field that explores photography in a phenomenological and ontological way. By looking at Cole's practice and image-making I wish to highlight how a reading of photographic images of space and place can communicate narratives that relate to the photographer and their particular way of being in the world that is influenced by personal experience and attunement. I refer to the text *Sharing Inwardness in Teju Cole's Blind Spot* (2020) by Monika Gehlawat, in which she elaborates on the value of cultivating inwardness, patience and quiet through the visual and conceptual strategies of Cole's images and writing.

In the second section of my document, *(Dis)Locating my Practice and Making Space*, I introduce my work and situate it within the theoretical context of the first section. I discuss material choices that relate to the physical outcome of this body of work, elaborating on the small silver gelatin handprints, larger inkjet prints and the video projection to encourage a slow, careful and intimate reading of my images, emphasising my thematic and aesthetic choices of subject matter and the formal construction of my images. I make a brief reference to modernism, as many of the spaces I photographed display a modernist aesthetic. That being said, it is not my intention to further the ideals of modernism but rather to offer a subtle critique of these depersonalised, alienating, everyday structures.

My project is made up of a series of images captured in and of built structures. Notions pertaining to time, space, non-place and the in-between are relevant to the reading of the work, and I elaborate on ideas about the perception of time and space. A photographic image is always a pause in time, the momentary freezing of an isolated instant, and as the maker of the image, I am inseparable from this pause. As the person who was there when the image was captured, the images inherently refer to my relationship to a particular place. Although I am physically absent from the image, my presence is felt through my way of seeing. This echoes the

emptiness of the images, which are absent of the human form but are evident of human presence and usage. As this work was captured during a very unique historical circumstance, I reference the shifting experience of space in light of fears and concerns about contamination, infection and anxiety. Similarly, our understanding of touch has changed dramatically as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Every time we touch a surface or observe physical touch between people now, it is tainted by insecurity about spreading infection and illness. The notion of touch is echoed in the haptic process of working in the darkroom, physically connecting with the materiality of the printed page and with the tactile, touchable and vegetative objects within the images.

I have grown accustomed to working in the sheltered space of the darkroom, and this process of image making has become integral to my practice for a variety of reasons. The darkroom is a meditative and contemplative process and space, where every activity is regulated by time, whilst the passing of time feels suspended. The darkroom process gives me an opportunity to spend time with my images, from placing the negative into the negative carrier, focusing the projected image, making multiple test strips and test prints to arriving at a completed image. It also affords me the chance to handle and touch the work in the process of making. My process in the darkroom is also about *ritual*, as the making of the images takes place in a specific space with a set of specific activities. Each step of this process is determined by time and by being present. The ritualistic nature of the process gives me confidence rooted in knowing the process, following the steps, repeating the steps and arriving at a predetermined outcome. Working in this manner gives me a sense of control and authorship, as I have a hand in every step of the process.

Lastly, I discuss my curatorial decisions and look closely at the photographs within the project, analysing a selection of the images to emphasize and explain my formal compositional choices. I have included many repeated signs and objects in my images to make reference to the process of picture making and photography itself, as well as to communicate notions relating to certain dialectics, such as tenderness and care and control and alienation.

Figure 2
Nicole Clare Fraser
Civic Centre Dining Hall
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm

Situating my Practice

In *Shooting Space: Architecture in Contemporary Photography*, Elias Redstone (2014) elaborates on photography's intersecting relationship with architecture. Redstone describes how "Buildings are, for the most part, solid, immovable objects fixed to the ground upon which they are built, and it is this very permanence that has allowed photography to document and interrogate buildings from afar" (2014: 6). The author continues that "... photography is the ultimate communication tool for architecture [...] However, photography is by nature subjective and presents a highly personalised view of the world" (2014: 6).

I am not an architectural photographer; I use the built environment to show something of how I see the world. The images of architecture that I make are not intended to fulfill the wishes of an architect or to satisfy commercial gain by enhancing an architectural structure. In the introductory text to *Space Framed*, Hugh Cambell (2020: 6) writes that "photographs offer a rich and complex meditation on the ways in which we occupy space." I use the architectural structure and its interiors in my practice to question and explore how space is occupied, maintained, used and arranged and what these constructs reflect about personal experience and ways of being in the world.

Through the subjective framing of urban structures, I show the moments I have paid attention to and placed significance on. The physical reality of these isolated views written into the everyday is always present, but my individual way of seeing brings about a certain particularity, which is further reflected in the making of the images. I discuss this further as the document develops.

Kate Bush (in Redstone, 2014: 8) describes the collaborative and "inseparable" relationship between photography and architecture in spite of their differences: "Architecture is slow, photography is quick. Buildings are singular, made to last and planted resolutely on the earth, where photography is endlessly reproducible and, in the digital age, increasingly malleable."

Architectural structures are static and immobile and thereby enabled the slow processes of early photography to render a still image. Early photographic exposure times were far longer than today, so buildings and structures were often chosen as subjects, because they did not move – unlike humans, animals and even the landscape. Photography has thus become the medium through which we generally see and experience architecture, from extravagant and unattainable spaces to the degraded and discarded. In the context of fine art, image-makers have documented architecture and the built environment to communicate narratives about industry, urbanisation, consumerism, history and personal narratives.

Many artists have used the language of architectural photography to critique and highlight social, political, economic and ecological issues and to communicate a more poetic experience of space and self, subverting and opposing the commercial element of architecture as a product.[2] David Campany (2018) writes about the complicit relationship between architecture and the photographic image in modernism and how this relationship has "troubled many commentators, photographers and architects. When architecture presents itself as mere image it is diminished. Likewise, if photography is forced merely to serve architecture, it too is diminished".

2. Bush describes a separation between architectural photography as a commercial enterprise and as the documentation of architecture by artists: "The difference between journeymen and artists revolves around the relationship between form and content. A functional architectural photograph will simply communicate a building efficiently. An artist will make us engage with an idea through the motif of architecture" (in Redstone, 2014: 8).

Architectural photography and architecture exist in symbiosis, but it is in the more critical voice of artists using architecture as subject to make meaning that becomes apparent in the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975).

New Topographics is considered an influential exhibition in photographic history (Cotton, 2004; Campbell, 2020).[3] The exhibited images documented the built environment with a detached, unexceptional, cool and neutral visual language.[4] At the time of its original curation, the exhibition was largely misunderstood and was sparsely viewed by the general public,[5] and it was only in later years that it was acknowledged as marking a turning point in the canonisation of photography as a fine art (Adams, 2010). In the introductory text to the *New Topographics* exhibition catalogue, Britt Salvesen (in Adams, 2010: 11) describes how:

> Recognizing and identifying the subjects was not difficult; reading and interpreting them was. Even today, the works offer cool resistance. The viewer, searching the small-scale, precisely rendered prints in vain for the conventional aesthetic hooks of expression, story, and beauty, has no choice but to take in what they show and then try to figure out what they say or mean.

The exhibition displayed North American and European photographers' exploration and documentation of the built environment and architectural structures (Cotton, 2004). The exhibited works were largely of mobile homes, industrial structures, streets, parking lots, office parks and roadside motels, offering a detached and undramatic viewpoint of the urban environment. The subject matter superseded the literal to reference a larger psychological and critical comment of the surrounding environment (Cotton, 2004). In *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (2004), Charlotte Cotton discusses how *New Topographics* was significant in that it brought social and political concerns into the gallery space under the discourses of conceptual art. This exhibition is also relevant because it foregrounds a seemingly "objective" aesthetic in photography rather than a sensational or spectacular aesthetic.[6] I say seemingly "objective", because its apparent "objectivity" masked a deeply critical view of the United States and capitalism. *New Topographics* foregrounds images of built structures and other documented objects in a cold, distanced and critical manner.

Bernd and Hilla Becher emerged from the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) movement, which led to the development of the deadpan aesthetic (Cotton, 2004). Cotton (2004) describes the Bechers as shaping contemporary deadpan photography through their teaching and involvement at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Germany.[7] They worked collectively on capturing images of industrial and vernacular architectural structures, developing a strict formula that they adhered to when creating their visual documents, which are considered aesthetically neutral and objective (Collins, 2002). According to Collins (2002) "the typology used by the Bechers emphasises the rewards of close scrutiny", and because the Bechers presented multiple structures in a grid sequence, "You must stand back in order to take them all in as a group, but to look closer at an individual picture it is necessary to draw nearer."

Bush describes how "the Bechers' project grew into a life-long mission to

3. *New Topographics* was curated by William Jenkins at Eastman House in 1975. The exhibition comprised 168 images by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessels, Jr. Eastman House restaged the exhibition in 2009 (Adams, 2010: 11).

4. Discussing neutrality and *New Topographics*, Emilia Mickevicius (2020) writes that "If the photographs looked 'neutral,' it was because they simultaneously resembled visual materials we associate with anonymity and information (such as topographical maps or real estate photographs), and activated the kind of looking we typically deploy to interpret those materials."

5. Visitors to the exhibition wrote: *"I don't like them – they're dull and flat. There's no people, no involvement, nothing." "At first it's stark nothing, but then you look at it, and it's just about the way things are."* (In Mickevicius, 2020).

6. In discussing the "stylelessness" ascribed to the exhibition by its curator, Alison Nordström suggests that "The very minimalism and ambiguity that the work in the exhibition shared allowed it to serve as a *tabula rasa* on which a variety of interpretive perspectives would be inscribed over time" (in Adams, 2010 :73).

7. Bernd Becher became a teacher of photography at the Arts Academy in Düsseldorf in 1976. The Bechers influenced succeeding photographers through various modes, such as education, book publications and exhibitions of their work (Blumberg, 2019; Cotton, 2004).

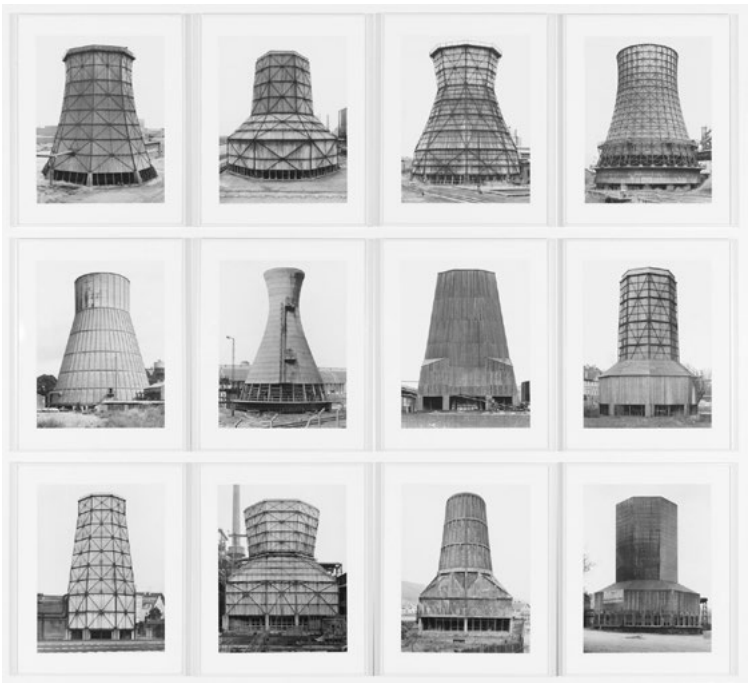

Figure 3
Bernd and Hilla Becher
Cooling Towers
1983
Silver gelatin print
Twelve parts, each 508 x 406 mm

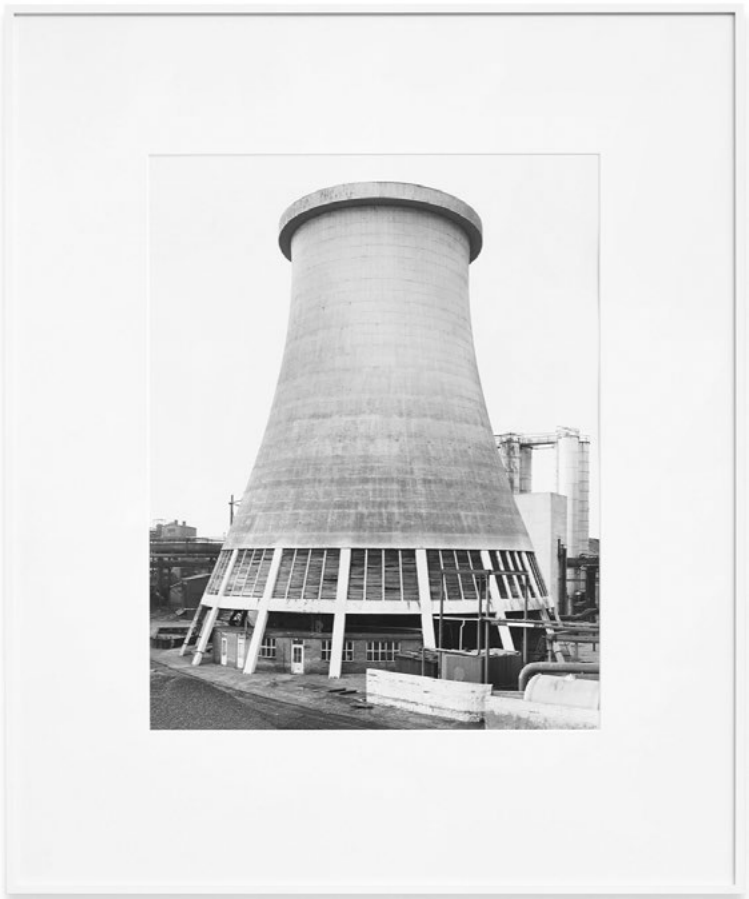

Figure 4
Bernd and Hilla Becher
Cooling Tower, Lubeck-Herrenwyk, GER
1983
Silver gelatin print
600 x 500 mm

document the defunct and decaying structures of industry across Europe and the United States" (in Redstone, 2014: 13). To this day, the Bechers have had a long-standing influence on artists and photographers. David Campany (2018) describes how the Bechers employed a "slow and cumbersome large format camera and tripod to pursue just one photographic convention – the formal, calm, centred, clear, detailed, rectilinear visual document devoid of the dramas of movement, shadow, or human presence."

The Bechers' images are always black and white, the architectural structures delineated and centralised within the photographic frame and the sky grey and overcast. They took their photographs from a raised perspective and a fixed vantage point that gave the viewer the impression of viewing the structure from midway up. People never appear in the images (Redstone, 2014). The Bechers' capturing of industrial structures were framed as documents, and their air of neutrality, an objective view, systematic recording and grid-structure display mirrored thoughts appearing in Conceptual Art in the 1960s and 1970s (Cotton: 2004).[8]

In the essay *The Long Look* (2002), Michael Collins elaborates on the Bechers' technique, describing how their work "frees them from imposing a conditional reading upon the viewer. The wisdom is the methodology they recognise in the 'neutral' depiction of record photography. The honour stems from a principle about not imposing their ideas on other people". This *perceived* neutrality is central to the work of deadpan aesthetics. Campany (2018) also writes about the perceived neutrality of the Bechers' work: "For all the apparent 'neutrality' these photographs did not make themselves. This is not detached and indifferent image making. The Bechers' commitment was total, unwavering and all consuming."

Although the deadpan aesthetic carries with it connotations of neutrality, to me the Bechers' photographic documents of industrial structures are deeply critical and question the ideals of capitalism, industrialisation and the spectacularisation of the photographic image.[9]

This shift in photographic style and subject matter initiated by the Bechers has had a profound impact on how image-makers represent and document the built environment. In her essay in the *reGeneration*[2] catalogue, Nathalie Herschdorfer describes how "Twenty years after the Düsseldorf School, photographers are still attached to a technique that gives a precise image" (in Herschdorfer & William, 2010: 26). Collins describes how the Bechers have become "the guiding light behind the so-called objective school of photography" (2002) but acknowledges resistance to the matter-of-fact nature of the work and its relation to art. For Collins (2002), "The answer lies in one simple verb: look. For looking is the heart of the Bechers' work, and is the reason why they use photography as their medium, for one definition of photography is a long look."

In *Boredom, Repetition, Inertia: the Aesthetics of the Banal in Contemporary Photography* (2004), Eugénie Shinkle writes about the shift in photographic seeing that represents a preoccupation with the everyday, the pedestrian and the banal, that refrains from spectacular or extraordinary images.

8. In her article *Bernd and Hilla Becher*, Naomi Blumberg (2019) writes that "Despite the couple's resistance to categorization, their work was integrated into the Minimalist and Conceptual art discourse of the 1960s and '70s".

9. Reflecting on the work of the Bechers and their "neutral" documents, it is intriguing to consider the historical context within which they made their images. Collins (2002) writes that:

> Hilla and Bernd both grew up under Adolf Hitler. They saw how he corrupted German art to promote his propaganda. This was particularly pertinent to photography, and it remained tainted after the war [...] This is why the legacy of August Sander (1876–1964), whose neutral approach to portraiture was damned by the Nazis, is so precious in Germany. It is also why the Bechers' continuing example is extremely important.

> As a photographic aesthetic or style, banality could be described as a kind of postindustrial realism, a turn away from the spectacular and an often pitiless focus on its antithesis [...] As a photographic aesthetic, it is less about the transformation of the everyday into the fantastic than it is about its ordinary re-presentation. (Shinkle, 2004: 2)

Shinkle looks to Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, in which Sontag describes photographic seeing as being "constantly renewed with new shocks, whether of subject matter or technique, so as to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision" (in Shinkle, 2004: 1). Shinkle (2004) describes a shift in photographic seeing that is not reliant on representing spectacular images.

The Bechers did not invent this critical "neutral' and "objective" photography, but their work pushed it to centre stage and created a momentum that influenced the next generation, such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Demand, Candida Höfer and others who attended the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf (Cotton, 2004). They were also influential in the US.

Deadpan photography has become a widely adopted photographic language used by many photographers. The language of deadpan photography foregrounds formalist approaches to image construction, with an emphasis on structured compositional elements: geometric and linear framing, frontal angle of view, fine image quality and detail and often monumental image scale and size. Due to these aesthetic parameters, the photographic language can appear reductive and formulaic.

The deadpan aesthetic has parallels with quiet photography (Gerry Badger), a descriptive viewpoint (Robert Silverio) and blank expression (David Bate) (Lančarič, 2017). Deadpan photography has become a prolific photographic language adopted by many image-makers across a variety of photographic genres, including landscape, architecture and portraiture. The American photographer Lewis Baltz (1945–2014) recalls that he:

> ... was looking for the things that were the most typical, the most quotidian, everyday and unremarkable. And I was trying to represent them in a way that was the most quotidian, everyday and unremarkable. [...] I didn't want to have a style; I wanted it to look as mute, and as distant as to appear to be as objective as possible... I tried very hard in this work not to show a point of view. (in Campany, 2015)

This idea of a non-style seems incongruous now, as it has become a commonly used aesthetic in contemporary photography. Ed Ruscha, Lewis Baltz and Bernd and Hilla Becher have all described how they strove to create images devoid of style (Vinegar, 2009; Campany, 2014; Lančarič, 2017; Cotton, 2004).

The deadpan aesthetic can seem matter-of-fact and emotionless, rendering the images at first glance absent of the image-maker's subjective sentiment. Cotton (2004: 81) writes that "these pictures may engage us with emotive subjects, but our sense of what the

photographers' emotions might be is not the obvious guide to understanding the meaning of the images". Cotton (2004: 81) describes how deadpan photography aims to capture an image of the world in a manner that reflects an objective and neutral observation, "a cool, detached and keenly sharp type of photography". However, the "objective" and "neutral" observation apparent in these images does not mean that the photographer has a neutral position in relation to the subject matter. Elaborating on the "neutral", Mickevicius (2019: 46) writes about Roland Barthes' thoughts on the subject:

> Barthes's text proves enlightening here for its emphasis on how the neutral (again, he avoids "neutrality") can be understood as operating at the level of positioning, or how things are put into relation with one another. In the case of literature or visual art, these entities can be thought of as the author or artist positioning or adopting a certain mode of address to their reader or viewer. Take, for example, Barthes's discussion of how unassertiveness – a concept at odds with the "assertiveness" of language itself – must nevertheless still be asserted. The same follows for expressing doubt or negation. Transposing these ideas to a visual art context, it becomes possible to conceive of a "neutral" style in positive rather than negative terms, as a mode of image-making where the author is paradoxically present in the form of absence. Such work does not lack affect; rather, its affect is unconventional according to existing standards regarding expressivity.

The dispassionate language of deadpan can invite a questioning, critiquing and concern for the human condition. The notion of the *neutral* is critical and does not originate from impassiveness or emotionlessness. Vinegar writes that the "deadpan approach, then, is a mode of photography that seems emotionally detached or 'neutral' in the sense that it does not make outright judgments, and thus tends to emphasize what might be called an 'evidentiary' condition" (Vinegar, 2009: 854). The idea is that the photographed scene can be experienced "neutrally" through the viewer's individual lens, which is defined by context and personal experience, without imposing the prescribed subjectivity of the artist.

The deadpan aesthetic's association with an assumed detachment and neutrality evokes an indifferent or disinterested view of the world by the artist. Vinegar (2009) writes that the indifference ascribed to deadpan aesthetics can be interpreted in light of Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*[10] and by observing all that surrounds one through one's own attunement, which influences how we experience and interact with the world around us.

> The descriptive qualities that are attributed to the deadpan – the flattening out of expression, the evenness of affect, its monotone colouration, its apparent disinterest and distance from any engaged relationship to the world – are also the qualities of "indifference", a term which Heidegger uses to describe the average way in which *Dasein* exists most of the time in the world. He characterizes this condition as a levelling down in which we are caught up in what he calls the "everydayness" of the "they" – which is "us" in our supposedly "inauthentic" way of being-in-the-world. (Vinegar, 2009: 864)

10. *Dasein* is defined as "(in Hegelianism) existence or determinate being; (in existentialism) human existence." "Mid-19th century German, from dasein 'exist', from da 'there' + sein 'be'" ("Dasein", 2015).

Vinegar does not view "indifference" negatively, describing how it connects to what Heidegger calls "equanimity":

> Equanimity is a potential modification of indifference and is characterized by a calm and even-tempered "resoluteness" that has a vision of "the possible situations of the potentiality-of-being-as-a whole". But here I want to propose that we shift the emphasis from the volitional, heroic, and tragic connotations of Heideggerian "resoluteness" towards the terms "calm", "even-tempered", and "refraining from self-assertion". (Vinegar, 2009: 867)

Vinegar suggests that *personal experience* of the world can be reflected through the deadpan aesthetic, proposing that "we shift our sense of the deadpan from simply a mode of rhetorical delivery to a fundamental mood or attunement that reveals and modulates our modes of being in the world" (2009: 863). In discussion with Kai-Olaf Hesses, Steve Middlehurst realised that "a dispassionate presentation is not the result of a dispassionate photographer [...] In fact he believes that the opposite is true and that, to look at anything closely means the photographer must have some passion for their subject" (Middlehurst, 2015: 5). As Campbell (2020: 8) writes, "Photographers pay attention to the world: their photographing is the enactment of that attention, their photographs the evidence of that enactment."

Lewis Baltz's project *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California,* (1974) is an example of a *New Topographics* photographer's work embodying the "deadpan" aesthetic, yet the images are clearly critical of the structures (both political and physical) they "objectively" document. This body of work documents the proliferation of industrial parks in 1970s California.[11] The images show nondescript building exteriors, with most of the surrounding urban context removed in Baltz's selective and subjective photographic framing – subjective because the image-maker has control over what is included and excluded by the frame. The images are meticulously composed, architectural details impeccably placed within the rectangular picture plane, a sensitive and attuned attention on shape, line and a range of grey tones. The images could be mundane and banal but are elevated by his visual language and style. They are immensely still, quiet and descriptive.

Figure 5
Lewis Baltz
South Corner, Parking Area, 23831 El Torro Road, El Toro
1974
Silver gelatin print
154 x 228.6 mm

11. Allen Sekula feels that "Baltz's photographs of enigmatic factories fail to tell us anything about them [...] In California, we are led to believe, no one works, people merely punch in for eight hours of Muzak-soothed leisure in air conditioned condominium-like structures that are somehow sites for the immaculate conception of commodities" (Sekula, 1978: 870).

Figure 6
Lewis Baltz
South corner, Riccar America Company, 3184 Pullman, Costa Mesa
1974
Silver gelatin print
154 x 230.2 mm

In her dissertation about the reception of the *New Topographics* exhibition, Emilia R. Mickevicius (2019: 206) formally deconstructs Baltz's image *South Corner, Riccar America Company, 3184 Pullman, Costa Mesa, 1974*:

> Baltz situates the viewer facing a corner of an industrial building. One of the structure's smooth walls is illuminated in diffuse sunlight; the other is cast in even shadow. The walls meet almost at the exact center of the photograph, lending the image a balanced tautness. Moving outward from this midpoint, they are cut off by the photographs' edges, such that the viewer cannot know how far they extend in their unmarked planarity. The corrugated metal on the garage door at the right appears new and untarnished, as does the pitch black door nearby – which, like the stairs leading to the roof, offers a metaphorical way "out" of the image, but fails to disclose where it leads. It is unclear, likewise, whether the bed of dirt bordered by curbs in the foreground awaits greenery or additional poured concrete.[12]

Mickevicius elaborates on the image, describing how the "photograph establishes a tension that marks the entire body of work: that of banal, clinical surfaces that the photographer has nevertheless treated with a great deal of focus and attention, in the form of a rigorous, deliberate geometry" (Mickevicius, 2019: 207). The natural landscape and environment in Baltz's images is largely "absent or too listless to fight back" (Mickevicius, 2019: 208).

12. I have included this analysis of the image because it is an important entry point into the work of the preceding artists. It also offers an aesthetic structure for how I compose and construct my own images. Each surface and object is carefully considered to create a psychologically and poetically suggestive image.

Figure 7
Lewis Baltz
South Wall, Semicoa, 333 McCormick, Costa Mesa
1974
Silver gelatin print
154 x 230 mm

In Baltz's images nature is referenced or implied, but the existing plant life is controlled, contained and organised by human interaction and management. The inclusion of living plants in the images suggests the presence of human exchange:

> The uncanniness comes as a result of the way Baltz simultaneously registers an abundance of evidence of human activity on the one hand, and a total lack of humanity, individuality, or character on the other – indeed, a "crowded vacancy." It is as if people are everywhere, but there is a deafening silence. The buildings nearly taunt the viewer with their oppressive stillness. (Mickevicius, 2019: 208–209)

Baltz documents architectural structures, predominantly building façades and external surfaces, with a set of formal aesthetic constructions.[13] Mickevicius elaborates on Baltz's practice and process of picture taking and making:

> Baltz labored in composition and print to amplify the "specificity" of these shapes within the forms of the industrial parks. He deliberately worked in overcast conditions to eliminate shadow, and photographed them from angles that would minimize optical distortion. Shot straight-on, their surfaces appeared parallel to the picture plane, forcing the viewer to at least initially comprehend them as a kind of gestalt. (Mickevicius, 2019: 214)

13. Baltz employed a particular and specific method of working to achieve the technical result he desired:

> He employed a tripod for stability and used exceptionally low-light-sensitive film to achieve the finest grain possible in his prints. By shooting in light conditions that minimized shadow, he flattened his subjects even further. And in the photographer's archive, his printing notes reveal that he painstakingly exposed various areas of his prints to augment their luminosity and tonality. Paradoxically, the result of these deliberate, creative decisions were photographs that many viewers interpreted as uninformative and expressionless. The prints were rigorously precise, smooth, and even, somehow managing to augment the planarity and readymade quality of the buildings' exteriors. (Mickevicius, 2019: 215)

In “Fast World, Slow Photography”, David Campany[14] (2015) describes evidence of slowness and carefulness in Baltz’s work, writing that “Baltz reckoned that with a tripod, fine-grained film and great discipline in the darkroom he could get what he was after. The result was an immaculate set of photographs”.

Baltz’s work continues to instruct slowing down, to take the time and care to observe what might otherwise go unnoticed. This is perhaps even more important today, when the societal, economic, political, environmental and personal stresses pervasive in today’s environment of consumer culture, excess and surplus make it difficult to find stasis and stillness. As Campany (2015) writes, “Only slowness can counter speed. Only the mindful can challenge the mindless. Baltz played the long game.”

American-Canadian photographer Lynne Cohen (1944–2014) also practiced “slow photography” and used the language of deadpan photography with its undistorted perspectival views and seemingly cool detachment.

Unlike Baltz’s photographs, Cohen’s are largely interiors, the inclusion of wallpapers and indoor plants in her images nonetheless reference an estranged and contained nature. Her photographs, initially in black and white and later in colour, are also always absent of the human form, with objects such as chairs and beds serving as references to the human body and the designated function of a place. The interiors photographed by Cohen are paradoxically empty: empty of the human body, yet full of objects, signs and things that allude to and suggest human presence, use and activity. Penny Cousineau-Levine describes how “against backdrops of murals and wallpaper, which, fittingly, mock reality, the inanimate – chairs, tables, planters, ashtrays – mimic human comportment” (in Taichman, 2006: 29). Desks, tables, chairs and beds all stand, suspended in time before or after use. “When clustered together, empty chairs, with their obvious fashioning after the forms of human anatomy and

Figure 8
Lynne Cohen
Dining Hall
1973
Silver gelatin print
194 × 242 mm

14. David Campany is an artist, curator and writer who has written regularly about slowness and photography. I have found his thoughts and writings about photography instrumental in thinking about making and reading images.

Figure 9
Lynne Cohen
Untitled (Observation Room with Two-Way Mirror)
1980-1989
Silver gelatin print
215 x 275 mm

their strategic placements, hint at conversations both past and present" (Thomas & Cohen, 2001: 14). The emptiness of these spaces provokes questions and an overarching sense of uncertainty.

Cohen says of her work that "there is a critical edge to my work, but I prefer quiet persuasion to shouting at people. I have no interest in preaching or in being didactic. This is why I opt for a veneer of neutrality and prefer to underplay the critical edge in my work" (in Cohen & Hakim, 2007). Because of the mimetic nature of the medium, I believe a whisper can seem like a shout in photography. I therefore work with photography in a quiet way to deliver my critical message. I am interested in the spaces I photograph as both physical and psychological spaces. Georges Bogardi (2002) writes that "It is clear now that Cohen's priorities are not formal but social and psychological. Her pictures are social studies, meditations on how we organize our private nests and how others design for us the public spaces in which we conduct our lives."

Cohen has exhibited and published alongside the Bechers (Milroy, 2002), and her work has been compared to that of the Bechers' students. Sarah Milroy writes that Cohen feels Bernd and Hilla Becher expanded photography's limited association with art.

In *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (2003), Penny Cousineau-Levine describes Cohen's shift from working with the particular to eliminating specific geographical content in the titling of her images:

> The titles that had situated her interior spaces within their social context [...] were eliminated in favour of generic categories [...] She did away with the idea that it might be important to state that her images refer to the particular physical facts of specific places [...] One way of reading this quite major shift would be as a move away from an American preoccupation with "significant facts" to a more Canadian mode of downplaying the referents to which, we had always assumed, her pictures were meant to allude. (Cousineau-Levine, 2003: 95)

In *The Space of the Photograph* (2016), Andreia Alves de Oliveira writes that:

> Cohen is able, through her framing and visual strategy, to present an image of this space that is both concrete (this is an actual office in the world) and abstract (this is how these offices are designed to look like), singular (this is how this particular office looks) and universal (any office looks like this). (Alves de Oliveira, 2016: 20)

The tension between the particular and the universal has played itself out in photography, especially in South Africa, where David Goldblatt (1930–2018) was a strong proponent of the power of particularity in photography. Elaborating on the particular, Goldblatt said:

> I'm always concerned with the particulars – that moment, that dog, that pole. Not with a universal dog, not a platonic dog, not a universal pole. Not even with the concept of a dog pissing on a pole. It's that dog doing it at that moment that I'm concerned with. It's the immediacy that really grabs me. (David Goldblatt Timeline, 2011)

Figure 10
David Goldblatt
Government 'ethnic architecture': the Tourist Information Centre in the style of the Basotho hat. Phuthaditjhaba, Qwa Qwa (now in Free State)
1990
Silver gelatin print
445 x 560 mm

Figure 11
David Goldblatt
The Bedroom of Ozzie and Sarah Docrat before its Destruction under the Group Areas Act, Fietas, Johannesburg
1977
Silver gelatin print
275 x 275 mm

Okwui Enwezor writes that "David Goldblatt's images have been said to be 'eventless', to have a feeling of 'inertia', as if the landscape and things and people in it are suddenly fixed and immobilized" (2008: 31). Goldblatt located his practice in opposition to the spectacular. In his introductory text to *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*, Goldblatt (1998: 7) writes: "It was the quiet and commonplace where nothing 'happened' and yet all was contained and immanent that I was most drawn to". *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then* is an in-depth study of the built environment, captured in black and white with the detached language of deadpan photography in apartheid South Africa. I am interested in Goldblatt's formal language, his attitude to photography and his use of

the distanced deadpan style to describe the ideologies and structures that outraged him.

I see in Goldblatt's work an example of a "detached" photographic language being used to expose highly emotive subjects such as apartheid, hypocrisy, issues around stolen land, inequality and the broken promises of the new South African government.

Fay Janet Jackson (2020) compares Goldblatt's work to that of Zanele Muholi in "David Goldblatt and Zanele Muholi: The Grey Area". Jackson writes that "Goldblatt's activism is quieter, inherent in his subject matter, Muholi's activism is overt, radical". Jackson here reinforces the idea that activism does not have to shout to make its message heard.

In her essay "David Goldblatt and the Indeterminate Landscape", Ella Mudie (2019) writes that "there were moments during the country's turbulent 20th-century history when he drew criticism for adopting his dispassionate and anti-spectacular mode."[15]

Michael Godby connects Goldblatt's visual language with the deadpan aesthetic, describing how:

> The very clarity of the images, their pristine sharpness itself suggests significance, albeit without giving direction. All photographs freeze the world in a moment of time, but the clarity of these images does so in a way that appears to privilege the very act of seeing. (Godby, 2001: 421)

A number of contemporary photographers have worked with this critical sense of stillness and quiet, including writer and photographer Teju Cole (1975–), who spent his youth in Nigeria and the USA. Cole (2021) says of his latest project, *Golden Apple of the Sun*, made during the Covid-19 pandemic and the lead-up to the American elections in 2020, "Looking now at the work I made during that period, I am reminded that there is a quality of stillness present even at the stormiest moments. And that this stillness, this inwardness, is part of our survival."

Cole's work embodies a meditative approach to tenderness, inwardness and poetry, and he observes of his photography's relationship to poetry that:

> Nothing that remains solely within its genre succeeds as poetry. When I make work, no matter how small, no matter how doomed to be forgotten, only its poetic possibility interests me, those moments in which it escapes into some new being. If everything else succeeds but poetry fails, then everything has failed. (Cole, 2017: 110)

Cole has authored several novels, critical texts and photo books, of which the most relevant to my project is *Blind Spot* (2017). While *Blind Spot* documents the everyday and ordinary things that Cole observed in his day-to-day life and travels, Cole brings a different dimension to this recording of ordinary places. His images do not feel dispassionate, and there seems to be affection and poetry in his images, a sense of using places and objects as equivalents, even as metaphors.

In her introduction to *Blind Spot*, Siri Hustvedt writes that "Teju Cole's

Figure 12
David Goldblatt
Pool and Patio, Sunward Park
1989
Silver gelatin print
1100 x 1100 mm

15. Another of Goldblatt's bodies of work is his project on Boksburg, in which he explored place, space and people connected to his hometown.

> For Goldblatt Boksburg served as a metaphor for exploring his own upbringing on the West Rand and the life and values of the middle-class, white, urban society in which he lived in Johannesburg. In Boksburg he photographed life on the streets, in shops and businesses, the sports and social clubs, the churches, the municipality, the homes and gardens and the cemetery. [...] With his characteristic intimacy and dispassion, he dissected the social structures of this town to remind us of the ironies and hypocrisies as well as sincere gestures that were entwined in daily life in this town. (David Goldblatt: In Boksburg, 2009)

Figure 13
Teju Cole
Zürich
July 2015
Archival pigment print
485.7 x 825.5 mm

project is a phenomenological one. It is a study of a person's embodied consciousness in relation to the visible world" (in Cole, 2017: xvi).

Monika Gehlawat writes that in Cole's work "the reality that we are invited to consider is less that of what has been photographed than of the quality of consciousness that has chosen to see the world in this way" (2020: 222). In Cole's images one sees a cupboard, a chair, a wall, a view from a balcony – generally very ordinary scenes, but the way these ordinary objects have been photographed and considered makes us look again.

Cole's images are like the findings of a *flâneur*, who travels and explores new and familiar places. The sense of impermanence within his images reinforces the notion of traveller, visitor and temporary observer, and his images challenge and critique the act of looking, seeing and observing, offering information in the details and the seemingly insignificant. Hustveldt writes that the images in Blind Spot "emphasize the pedestrian" and that the "periphery is as important as the centre" (in Cole, 2017: xiii). Gehlawat writes that:

> throughout *Blind Spot*, there is an emphasis on surfaces; many photographs emphasize drapes, curtains, plastic covers, façades, screens, and, frequently, windows that have been marred in some way. I believe Cole uses this trope of surfaces to call attention to the photographic medium itself, just as his inclusion of window frames highlights the picture's edges. (Gehlawat, 2020: 222)

Figure 14
Teju Cole
Brooklyn
December 2014
Archival pigment print
485.7 x 825.5 mm

The camera enables an alternative mode of seeing, as seeing with one's eyes does not frame and compose our surroundings within a constrained rectangle as the camera allows one to do. Gehlawat describes how Cole's visual strategy, quiet address and formal compositions encourage the viewer to:

> become *more* aware of ourselves as viewers, of the photographer before us, and of the world he saw, because of the hermeticism of these pictures [...] I believe that in its scrupulous composition, tonal quietude, and representation of temporal duration, Cole's photographs invite absorption while stimulating an imaginative relationship between photographer and spectator. (Gehlawat, 2020: 213)

Gehlawat (2020: 212) writes about the value of cultivating inwardness, particularly in the post-millennial period, and suggests that Cole "offers pictures that protect and represent consciousness at work; pictures, in other words, that emerge from inwardness". Gehlawat (2020: 212) argues that *Blind Spot* "exemplifies the artist's commitment to an ethos defined by the value of inwardness. To see inwardness in photography, a medium typically associated with disclosure, may seem paradoxical". She continues that it is Cole's:

> abiding self-discipline that instills patience in his viewers. This "standing still" makes time for contemplation by using intermediality

Figure 15
Teju Cole
Tivoli
March 2015
Archival pigment print
485.7 x 825.5 mm

> to jog the pace of our consumption of these pages, slowing us down long enough to tarry with consciousness-at-work in pictures, language, and the interactions between them. (Gehlawat, 2020: 222)

Cole explains that "This is a time for protest and activism for sure, but it is also a time for subtlety, ambiguity and complexity" (in O'Hagan, 2017). He muses that "stillness, in photography, can be more affecting than action" (2016: 138), while Hustvedt describes one of Cole's photographs as: "five folding chairs squeezed between a vehicle and a fire hydrant. Do not be mistaken: protest and outrage simmer in these pages like a pot on low boil" (in Cole 2017: xv). The association of the inanimate chair is inseparable from the human body, and the image of five folded chairs constrained between an immovable water hydrant and a stationary vehicle evokes a tension and despair. Through a metaphorical reading of the space and the inanimate objects represented within the frame, narratives about the current human condition and personal experience can be contemplated and reflected upon.[16]

Cole talks about letting go of the need to create and validate spectacular images (Selasi, 2016), and in *Known and Strange Things* he suggests that "One of the difficulties of photography is that it is much better at being explicit than being reticent" (2016, 143). Cole repeatedly brings our attention to the notion of stillness and photography and how images can quietly convey meaning through stillness. The notion of *unspectacular*

16. Cole reflects on the difference between objects and things when describing one of his images from *Blind Spot* (2017: 228):

> How are things? These are objects of and around a bus stop: amorphous banks of snow, a metal drum, a bus shelter, the pole of a sign, a wooden post, the trunk of a tree, patterns printed on Plexiglas. Brought together by the rectangular organization of the viewfinder, they move from being objects into being things. They are no longer what they were made for. Now they are functional equals on the picture plane [...] Meaning comes from the collective tension and balance of these individual elements. But this dreamwork bricolage comes by an arrangement of the eye, not of the hands. An object is used. A thing is seen.

images is refreshing in our image- and media-saturated world, where the lifecycle of an image is short and is generally designed to create a quick and bold statement that captivates and imprints itself upon the viewer/consumer.

Cole's photographs of inanimate objects communicate narratives around everyday social and political structures and systems. Cole describes how:

> When we look at a small scene of inanimate objects or vegetal objects, and these objects appear to be striving or under pressure, we don't literally see the emotional landscape of individuals within the city, nor do we see something that is definitely typical of this city rather than that city. We do not see the strain, the raw wounds, the inner fires still burning, or the scars. What we do see, with luck, is something that can work by analogy, as in the work of the poets. (Cole, 2017: 156)

Cole's quiet compositions and their feelings of stillness engender kindness and tenderness in which softly coloured rooms hold, curtains muffle and chairs offer refuge. Cole (in Selasi, 2016) describes a wish to create and evoke tenderness in his images:

> I think a certain toughness, a certain querulousness, is the common contemporary pose. But I'm deeply interested in tenderness, in intimacy. I want this softness to come through in my work. It doesn't cancel out the politics, but it goes out well ahead of it. And for that tenderness to come across, no matter how knotty the argument at hand, I have to set myself into an attitude of tenderness when I'm making the work.

Cole's images of interior spaces resonate with the notion of *softness*, yet a tension within each frame hints at loneliness, solitude, insecurity and the outside observer. Cole's photographic images reflect some of the moments he has spent his time considering and committed to capture and freeze in a photographic image. Hustvedt (in Cole, 2017: x) suggests that "We pay attention to what's most salient for us [...] We are prone to cultural biases. They vary from place to place, are notoriously stubborn, and are often unconscious", and she describes the "ongoing arguments about whether we see the world or whether we see an internally generated representation of the world" (in Cole, 2017: ix). Gehlawat (2020: 219) elaborates on the assumed dispassionate and anti-spectacular visual language of Cole's work, asking: "Should we fault Cole's picture for being too complacent, too passive in its reclusive symmetries? Or, as I want to argue, is the very ethical temperament of this picture a call for order, an image of regard, an offering of peace?"

In conclusion to this section of my document, I would like to offer some thoughts about quietness, stillness, "objectivity" and the "deadpan" in photography over the last 50 years.

By adopting the apparent objectivity of the deadpan aesthetic reflected in the work of Baltz, Cohen and Goldblatt, I argued that a metaphorical reading of the image-makers' phenomenological experience of the world can be read and experienced by the viewer. The viewer, then, can interpret the depicted space in a manner that relates to their personal

experience of the world. It is the perceived neutrality of the deadpan aesthetic that enables this multi-layered reading of an image.

In considering Baltz, Cohen, Goldblatt and Cole, ideas about practice and image are explored in a variety of different ways. Baltz's highly formalistic visual language in *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974) was used to capture exterior spaces and building façades to give visual expression to the proliferation of new industrial parks in California. Cohen's images explore a diverse selection of interior spaces across many countries and highlight human artifice and construction of private and public spaces. Goldblatt turned his lens onto the everyday during a tumultuous and violent time in South Africa's history. Cole uses stillness and poetry to communicate ideas around personal experience of time and place. Looking at the different practices of these photographers, who have all focused on physical structures and their surrounding environment, I find a pertinent and intriguing intersection between the highly formalistic visual languages of Baltz, Cohen, Goldblatt and Cole.

The accumulation of spaces through photography brings into being a fundamentally transformative process for each of these artists, one that narrates or alludes to the stories they feel deserve time, documentation and slow looking. The empty tableaux they reveal offer the viewer space to feel according to their own experience, rather than insisting they feel in a particular way.

Through my investigation of other artists who photograph spaces in a still and quiet way, I seek a sense of commonality with my own ways of seeing, looking and photographing. I discuss this further in the next section of this document.

Figure 16
Nicole Clare Fraser
Reclining Beds
2020
Silver gelatin handprint on cotton rag
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm

(Dis)Locating my Practice and Making Space

The body of work I created for my MFA is comprised of 37 small silver gelatin hand printed prints, six large inkjet prints and a video projection. All the images are black and white.

The images take three different material forms. A selection of the images were hand printed in the darkroom as small 8" x 10" or 12" x 16" prints. The small scale invites intimacy and requires a close proximity to see the details in the print. The print quality and choice of paper create a soft and tonally grey image. On closer inspection, the gentle eggshell texture of the paper is discernible. The prints are window mounted and framed by a thin wooden profile.

Contemporary photography is often monumental in scale. I am more concerned with smaller prints since I can print them myself, but also because I am interested in my own and the viewer's sense of intimacy with the photograph. However, I also enlarged a small selection of my images to roughly A0-sized inkjet prints. These larger prints simultaneously invite intimacy and distance. Their large scale causes the viewer to step back to view the whole image, but the scale also prompts viewers to step closer again to examine details that are missed when the image is smaller. This dynamic between distance and intimacy is very important to the work and aims to hold the viewer close and afar simultaneously. The varying scale between the images invites different ways of looking and seeing and creates a tension through the push and pull of the different sizes.

The exhibition also includes a large video projection of what appears to be a static photograph. Like the photographs, the projected image is very still and quiet. If one observes the projection long enough, however, it is seen to be a moving image. This subtlety is important, as I hope it encourages the viewer to observe the work more closely and carefully.

The images were taken using the "deadpan" aesthetic but with less emphasis on Baltz and the Bechers' critical lens and with more significance placed on quiet, even tender, moments in architectural spaces that are not generally expected to evoke such a reaction.

Considering my use of the deadpan aesthetic, the images that I have captured do not communicate a grand narrative that looks at concepts relating to consumerism or urban sprawl and gentrification. By using the language of deadpan aesthetics to communicate a more personal and interior narrative through the documentation of space, I aim to elevate the everyday and commonplace by *noticing* it, giving it time and care. The deadpan aesthetic has allowed me to hold the world at a distance, to communicate while refraining from self-assertion. The project does not speak overtly but infers subtle themes, such as isolation, loneliness, instability, ambiguity and insecurity.

Images captured of a particular moment in time and space bear reference to my presence as the person observing and preserving a scene. Representing space with the deadpan aesthetic transforms the built environment into a perpetual liminal space, caught in a moment of transitory stillness, whether the space is functionless or caught empty and devoid of its particular designation. As Hugh Campbell (2020: 7) observes in his essay *Space Framed: Photography, Architecture and the Social Landscape*:

> The space of the photograph always includes the space of its making. Where the photographer stood, the view point established, the time taken: all of these are embodied in the final image every bit as much as that which is depicted.

When photographing these empty architectural interiors, I am looking for moments of contradiction and ambiguity. The representation of empty places reflects a withdrawal from social and human engagement, yet there is also a yearning for connection seen in the elusive moments of human intervention: a plant leaning toward the light from the adjacent window; chairs assembled in social circles or packed tightly together in stacks and rows; a pool's steel rail and steps reaching into the water to assist one in or lift one out. These moments, revealed through objects and spaces, suggest tenderness and a longing for interrelation but are suspended in their in-betweenness, a transitory moment of not knowing, waiting and anticipation – a liminal space.

In this project, I documented liminal spaces in predominantly institutional architectural buildings in Cape Town. The structures are largely public and functional and fulfil modernist ideals of order and form following function. Many of these buildings were created during South Africa's apartheid years, and as a child growing up in the 1990s and 2000s I visited some of these buildings for activities relating to domestic life and recreation.

In her thesis *Unstitching Rex Trueform: Exploring Apartheid Modernity and Architectural Modernism through the Rex Trueform Garment Manufacturing Factory, Salt River (1937–2013)*, Ilze Wolff (2014: i) writes that "20th century industrial buildings in Cape Town [...] are representative of a particular kind of modernity, one that is entangled with constructions of race, class and gender".

I look for a particular anonymity and dispassion in the modernist architecture that I photograph, spaces that create a detached backdrop to the scene I select to photograph. I am drawn to the buildings' straight lines, form and symmetry and the structure's materiality – the flooring, brickwork, concrete and window frames – which hints subtly at its making and function. Many of these modernist structures refer to the complex social and historical past and present and to South Africa's apartheid legacy, standing as witness of and to the country's past. Details particular to South Africa's built environment are seen and suggested in many of the images through the specificity of building materials, brick work, ubiquitous plastic chairs and the suggestions of violence, security and insecurity seen in the indoor shooting range, razor wire and surveillance cameras.

Architectural space is a construct designed and built for a particular purpose and context. It has an agenda: it houses bodies, facilitates commerce and enforces segregation, keeping some in and others out; it is inequality, time and experience made concrete. This is particularly evident in the South African context, where space and place are experienced differently depending on one's race, gender, age, privilege and economic position. The awareness of space is determined by personal experience of being in the world and is informed by race, gender and economic standing. Space is not neutral, and identity influences how

a space receives one and how, in turn, one experiences the space.

The series of images presented in this project represent over a year of absence captured in 2020 and 2021. I am interested in time, space, non-place and the in-between. In order to better understand my practice, I have explored these concepts in the history of photography and in my own work. In his essay *Physical Space, Image Space, Psychical Space*, David Campany (2018) elaborates on the relationship between photography, space and the body in its varying forms:

> There is the space in front of the camera, which may or may not contain bodies, there is the space beyond the frame, and there is the space occupied by the embodied photographer. [...] But very often it remains a hidden dimension of photography. This is partly because of the way in which a lens can produce such a strong impression of the space before it, an almost illusionistic impression of transparency that swallows all the viewer's attention. This force is still harnessed by the discourses of science, topography and reportage to allow the photograph to stand in as a supposedly adequate record or substitute knowledge of the world, rather than a selective impression of it.

The images created by Baltz, Cohen, Goldblatt and Cole referred to in *Situating my Practice* share an affinity for a moment frozen in time, but each image evokes a feeling of uncertainty as to what was before or what will come after that particular moment. Time is suspended in these images.[17]

I suspend time by capturing absolutely still architectural interiors and exteriors that are usually populated but have no human form physically present within them. The composition, framing and angle of view within the images enables the viewer to insert themselves into the depicted scene, creating a space for thoughtfulness, contemplation and observation. This moment of quiet offers the viewer an opportunity to go inward and feel, without reading visual clues written on photographed faces, expressions or an overt narrative.

The architectural structures are permanent, static and solid and seem caught in a moment's pause between activities, but the anticipation of activity is imminent and the absence of people in these functional spaces appears temporary.[18]

Many of the places I have photographed fall into the category described by Marc Augé in *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995). "Non-places" are the temporary spaces that facilitate our global and commercialised experience of the world and exist due to the overabundance and excesses of our contemporary capitalist world. Non-places support globalisation, commercialisation and escapism: shopping malls, airports, motorways (Augé, 1995). These non-places in semi-public, public and institutional spaces communicate and express notions of physical and emotional liminality. Space becomes transitory, impermanent and transformative. My images represent a physical place with a prescribed and predetermined function, but devoid of the bodies that would normally use the structure and affirm its particular designation. The work on exhibition quietly addresses my personal experience of the structures that facilitate our daily existence. Existential uncertainty and

17. On the subject of a pause or interval – a moment frozen in time – I would like to consider David Campany's (2018) writing about the Japanese term *ma*:

> Roughly translated as a combination of pause/gap/interval, *ma* designates the spaces between the observer and the observed, and between the various elements of what is observed. *Ma* recognizes that this negative space may not be *physically* real, but it is *psychically* real, playing an active part in the observer's understanding of themselves and what they observe. The greater the intensity of seeing, the more palpable this experience of *ma*, and this can be translated via the image for the viewer. David Goldblatt's series *Particulars* (1975) is not only an affectionate and fascinated documentation of human dress and gesture: it is also a documentation of the photographer's observant movements and encounters with those he chose to depict.

18. See W.J.T. Mitchell's *Landscape and Power* (2002: ix) for his writing about the difference between place and space:

> Space has connotations of abstraction and geometry, while place resonates with particularity and qualitative density. There is outer space, but "outer place" sounds odd. For something to "take place" is radically different grammatically from "taking space" (or should it be "taking up space"?). Place is an intransitive verb that takes an object: "I placed a jar in Tennessee." "Space" only becomes a predicate as a metaphor for displacement and disorientation (one can be "spaced out" or "space" objects by widening the distance between them, so that the verb "to space" seems directly counter to the action of placing).

a questioning of purpose are amplified by the current global pandemic. Perpetually seated on chairs in waiting rooms, waiting for something to begin, to end, to find meaning. I seek moments of connection that are written into the fabric of architecture and are suggested by the arrangement of objects in a space. I essentially construct moments of dialogue, care and engagement, yet, there is no human form involved in engaging with the proposed activity. Chairs talk amongst themselves or to their empty reflections, a pool ladder steps intimately into or out of the water, spa beds draped in towels languish together, evoking corporeal mechanical bodies. The work speaks simultaneously to the fragility of life, connection and detachment and is felt through the lens of anxiety, isolation, uncertainty and a longing for real attachment and understanding in a world that feels ever more constructed on false hope and manipulation. The photographed scenes do not state a determinable narrative but rather hint subtly at our understanding of how structures are occupied. Some images contain moments of lightness and humour, while others reflect a darkness, even violence. Each image is tinged with quiet and disquiet, aloneness and loneliness, relation and alienation, being cared for and disregarded.

In every image, an architectural element or functional object suggests a purpose or use. Chairs that facilitate the body during work, discussion, reading or socialising are empty. Structures that contain – swimming pools, theatres and squash courts – are shown vacant, caught in a liminal moment of inactivity and stillness. Objects become still lives. The absence of people from these spaces offers an opportunity for reflection and a questioning of this intentional absence. The architecture becomes a shell and the objects and furniture denote the human body. There is often a feeling of melancholy and stillness in the images, a pause before or after the chaos has subsided.[19] The images momentarily suspend the everyday and the banal. "We might say that photography is an embodied activity and also a *located* activity" (Campany, 2018). Photographing spaces communicates my physical movement through these particular places: I travel in my car, seek out the individual assigned to show me around and then physically walk through and observe the built structure and the objects within the space. These objects – chairs, electrical hardware, windows and doors, plants, signage, handrails, pillars – are all traces of human presence and activity, and it is that which interests me.

Shared spaces have become imbued with anxiety because of the danger of infection in the current global Covid-19 pandemic, and freedom of movement and access to many spaces have consequently been restricted. This has drastically shifted the human experience of being in the world, and it has highlighted the innate inequalities of economic, racial and gendered existence.

The spaces I have captured reflect my understanding of my position in South Africa: the spaces are well maintained; they represent economic stability; they are primarily interior spaces, because as a woman this is where I feel *safer*. The exterior, the city beyond the confines of enclosed buildings that I access through pre-arranged appointments, is volatile and imbued with uncertainty to me. As a female artist I seek out spaces that enable a sense of safety. Being perpetually aware of my gendered experience and feeling insecure about personal security influences and dictates my interaction with the built environment.

19. Amy Ray Stewart (2016: 298) writes the following about melancholy:

> Bearing witness to modern forms of individual and national depression as diagnosed by Kristeva, Miller conceptualizes melancholic artwork as a form of "spiritual inoculation," defined as an "intentional exposure to a small dose of an otherwise lethal malady," that accomplishes an intimate encounter with melancholia and its discursive traumas, without pulverizing subjectivity or further suppressing its melancholic being.

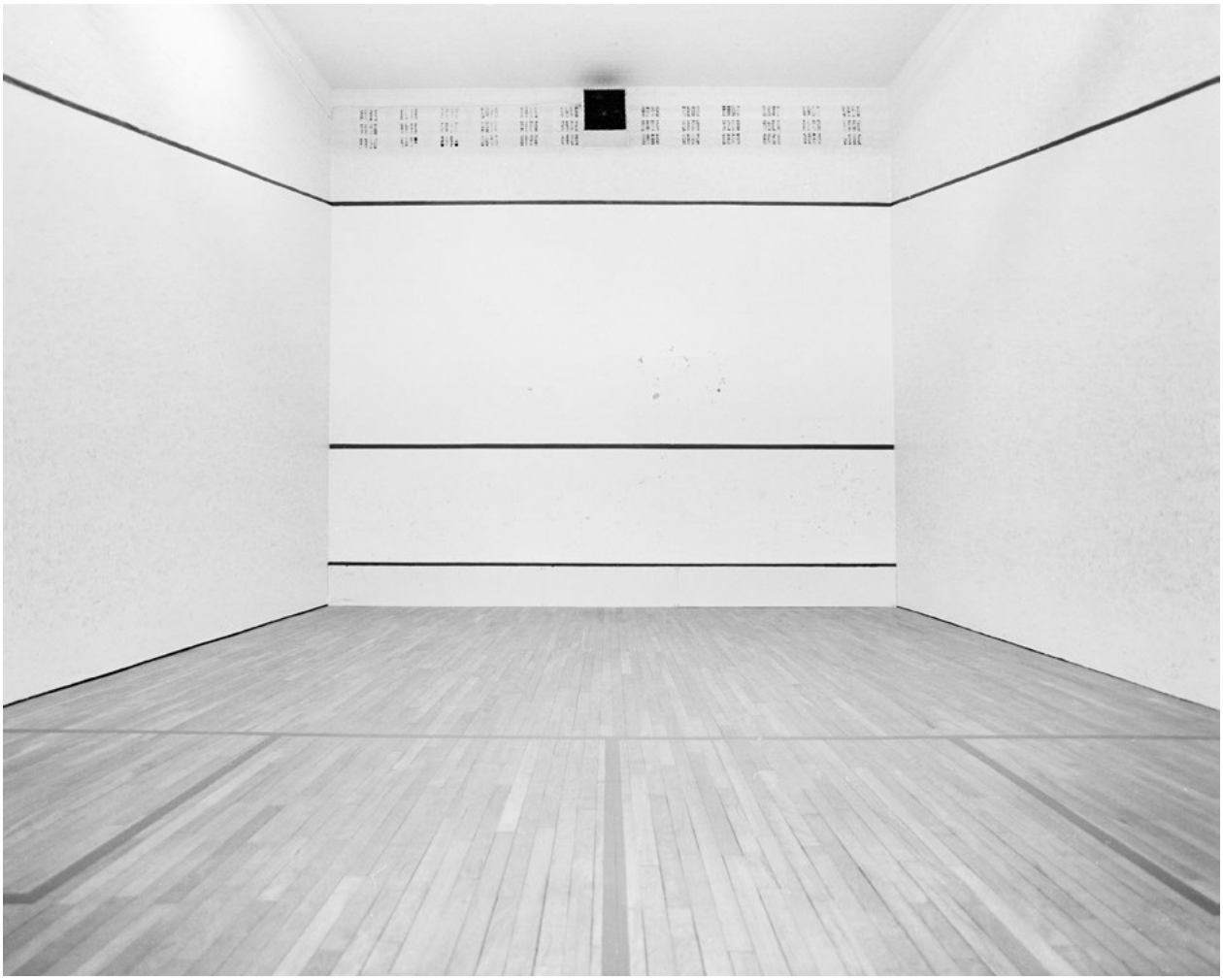

Figure 17
Nicole Clare Fraser
Squash Court II
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm

Figure 18
Nicole Clare Fraser
Untitled 2 (Darkroom)
2017
Silver gelatin handprint
405 x 460 mm

I seek to retain individual control over the process of making in my practice. By working with black and white film and processing images in the darkroom, I wish to remove the need for another person's assistance to create the work.[20]

I am awed by the black and white image's ability to simplify and order space, and I am captivated by the shapes and tonal value it renders of the colourful, chaotic and busy world. Documenting architectural space in black and white transforms the colours of the everyday into hues of grey and enhances the formalistic qualities of space, light, form and tonality, an attempt to strip away the familiarity of the world that exists in colour and to create distance. Distilling the image to black and white amplifies the construction of the space, and the grey image creates a distance from how the world is ordinarily seen and experienced. The deadpan aesthetic enables a neat and clear ordering of spaces that can in real life feel overwhelming and chaotic, and at the same time it communicates something personal. By looking and waiting for still moments amidst the busyness of the everyday, I aim to create a sense of ambiguity that disrupts our perception of space.

I used a medium-format camera with black and white film. Analogue photography and the darkroom enabled and facilitated complete authorship of the process, from capturing the image to processing the film to making the print, and I did not have to give control over to a laboratory.

The tactile method of analogue film processing and hand printing is integral to my process of capturing the photographic image. I am drawn to the safe quiet of the darkroom and the haptic process of hand printing. I handle the delicate film in complete darkness, working through a set of predetermined steps: developing the exposed film, carefully checking the temperature and measuring the solutions. Each step of my process is monitored by the rotations of a wall-mounted timer. Structured time passes according to the varying steps of making.

20. I do, however, interact with other people when being granted access to the physical places. Access and permission play an important role in the work, because my withdrawn temperament pushes me to do things the right way. I need to feel permitted to feel at ease photographing in a space. To attain access, I sent emails and made phone calls requesting access and waited for permission to be granted – a time-consuming process that sometimes took days or even months. The process of obtaining permission created a space for human connection. If access was permitted, I was facilitated by someone connected to the place and "shown around" by someone who told stories about the daily activities and narratives of that place's history or overwhelmed me with a flurry of suggestions about what I should photograph and why.

Figure 19
Nicole Clare Fraser
Untitled 6 (Darkroom)
2017
Silver gelatin handprint
405 x 460 mm

Significant periods of time are spent waiting for film and prints to wash and dry. I then print a contact sheet and select a frame to enlarge. The negative is delicately removed from its clear plastic sleeve with tweezers. This feels ceremonial, meditative and precious. I know what is required, and the activity has become reassuring and predictable. This method enables me to spend time with the images. There is an introspective quality to the printing of the images, and my process adds the quiet of the photographed subject. The images, still and frozen in time, are consciously printed in my practice of spending time alone in this dimly illuminated room where time determines outcome.

The darkroom is a small and irregularly used facility that is usually experienced in isolation. It gives me time away from the business of contemporary life and is something I need, intensified by my introverted nature. The darkroom also forces me to slow down and be present, which is something I normally battle with, needing activities to escape the insecurity and anxiety of my existence. In making these images, I am also asking the viewer to slow their looking and to spend time considering the simplicity of the image before them. I hope that looking deliberately at a simple composition will create the space to notice small details and “feel” the image.

I find myself more reclusive, more hesitant to voice my feelings and concerns in a world striving to be heard and noticed. The darkroom allows me to shy away into its solitude and safety. The rhythmic process of agitating chemical trays and tanks, the monitoring of time passing and the exposing and evaluating of test strips offer moments of respite from the insecurity of daily life and human interaction. The darkroom offers me an opportunity to be consumed in process and making, an experience I do not find possible when working digitally, where the illuminated screen with its multiple tabs and the constant checking for new forms of digital communication and validation provoke distraction.

In my practice, the image I capture from outside are brought to the inside of the darkroom to be meticulously recreated. The printing, the texture of the paper, low in contrast and full of greys, juxtaposes the banality of the depicted subject and prompts questions about why such a mundane scene should be afforded such an alluring surface, why so much time and care should be spent to print an image of essentially nothing.

In his essay *Something Rather than Nothing*, Stephen Horne writes about Thomas Demand's series *Dailies*:

> He was thinking a great deal about time when he decided to print his series *Dailies* (2008–ongoing) using the dye transfer process … Each print, Demand said, takes days. The time invested, and the resultant longevity of the prints, contrasts with the casualness of the original images: snapshots taken by the artist on his iPhone. (Horne, 2013: 24)

The work I have printed presents a limited, monochromatic palette of greys captured by photographing interiors in diffused light. This aesthetic is enhanced by a cotton rag silver gelatin paper that produces a low-contrast image with a warm paper base and textured finish.

Figure 20
Thomas Demand
Daily #7
2008
Dye transfer print
830 x 770 mm

The darkroom offers an isolated space that enables a focused and haptic creation of the image from the photographic negative onto the printed paper. At every point of the process, an extreme level of care and attention is required to preserve the fragility of the materials and respect the technical procedure.

Teju Cole reflects on the use of analogue film photography, noting that "Film had to be loaded into a camera, the shot had to be taken with some awareness of the cost of materials, the negative had to be developed, and the print had to be enlarged. A certain meticulousness was necessary for photographs, a certain irreducible calmness of temperament" (2016: 69). Cole's ideas about the calmness and meticulousness required for working with film resonate with my practice.

Figure 21
Thomas Demand
Daily #21
2013
Dye transfer print
460 x 560 mm

I begin the series of photographs in this exhibition with an image of a closed surface, a blank exterior wall. The image presents an obstacle and resists entry. Entry and exit are alluded to in many of the images by signage, doorways and windows. In the images, open doors lead to nowhere and windows are concealed behind closed curtains and blinds. By beginning here, I hope to invite a sense of curiosity, a wanting to see inside. Here, I invite the viewer to cross a threshold.

When making these images, I looked carefully at the edges of the image frame, the vertical and horizontal lines and at small, seemingly insignificant details. In spending time constructing the composition, I hope to encourage the viewer to take time to explore the small details written into the image. The visible content within the images is sparse and minimal, and I hope it encourages the viewer to look more closely and to spend more time with the work.

In selecting a scene to photograph, I reveal my personal experience of being in the world. As a reserved person who has difficulty with human engagement, I find social interactions daunting. The slowing down of my photographic making through analogue photography and the careful

Figure 22
Nicole Clare Fraser
Factory Wall Exterior
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm

construction of the deadpan aesthetic allows me to stand at a distance and observe. My context and history dictate my perception of what surrounds me. This experience of place recorded by camera is how I explore and question personal existence.

The majority of modern and contemporary lived experiences and everyday interactions occur within and are facilitated by built structures. These inanimate structures tell and hold stories about how we exist within the world. "Objects, sometimes more powerfully than faces, remind us of what was and no longer is: stillness, in photography, can be more affecting than action" (Cole, 2016: 138).

I am interested in how structures and inanimate objects symbolise the designated function of a space, its particular use and activity. Objects and signage can help deduce what activity is performed in a particular space. A space can also communicate narratives of privilege and comfort, poverty and inequality and social, economic and political context and history. In his essay *Even Walls*, Emmanual Iduma describes how "Walls, after they are built, do not last forever [...] Walls interact frequently with human bodies, which are enclosed within or rest against them. Experience, as a result, accumulates on the surface of walls" (in Baumann, Chuang & Onabanjo, 2017: 261).

The documentation of place provides evidence of the human trace, visible in the arrangement of inanimate objects that facilitate the human body and in the marks that humans leave behind through repetitive use, residue or stain. What is left behind also communicates the care and attention paid to a particular place. The cement floors of parking lots are stained with oil and tire tracks, while small community theatre chairs reflect age in their torn pleather or plastic seating. These are contrasted by a luxury or more *valued* entertainment space that generates a higher income or holds a more prominent hierarchical standing within society; so many details can be observed in each of these spaces and the fabric of their makeup.

Figure 23
Nicole Clare Fraser
Underground Parking
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm

The trace, reflected as a stain, evokes something unwanted, something to be removed and got rid of. The black marks across a squash court wall are evidence of the beating of a rubber ball and allude to moments of violence and force. Similar scars are ripped into the ceiling of a shooting range. An all-pervasive awareness around safety, security and access in South Africa is evident in the razor wire coils that frame building façades. The traces left by the human mark and the modification of spaces and structures to suit individual needs show that these places are made for and inhabited by people and reflects the provisional nature of structures and that change is always present. An impermanent doorway is cut into a large garage roller door, but this door within a door is later bricked closed and sealed off.

In the last year I have become interested in institutional spaces that, while anonymous and institutional, are particularly South African. In my image of *Gallows Hill Traffic Department* (2021), in Green Point, I photographed a mundane scene in an institutional building. The building's materials allude to the nature of the place; brick, paving and concrete, with aluminium window frames. In the black and white image colour is sensed through our understanding of the surfaces regularly used in South Africa's built

Figure 24
Nicole Clare Fraser
Gallows Hills Traffic Department I
2021
Archival ink on Innova 300gsm cotton rag paper
Image size 704,2 x 880,2 mm
Paper size 915 X 1140 mm

environment: red or brown brick, mottled grey concrete, green leaves and terracotta-coloured plastic pots. The space is neither inside nor outside. The courtyard, generally situated within a building or building complex's centre, is a shared space that offers a momentary escape from the artificial light and interior nature of the working environment and offers a space for a pause, a rest or a conversation with colleagues. Yet it remains a contained and controlled space.

This particular courtyard is occupied by an assortment of pots and plants. Multiple interior windows lead onto the courtyard and are wide open to accommodate Covid-19 health and safety regulations. Ironically, the door onto the courtyard was locked when I visited, and I was advised to climb through one of the open windows to access the area. I did so, amused and pleased at the informality of the process and the connection it afforded me to those who occupy the space on a daily basis. The locked door and window access to the courtyard is a regular occurrence, I was told. Incongruously, the door, offering a moment of respite, has been permanently denied its function.

The images I captured are predominantly framed at waist level. I looked down onto the ground glass of the camera to frame the image, paying careful attention to the horizontal and vertical lines and the edges of the picture frame. The surfaces and structure of the building are used to construct bands and geometric shapes within the image plane: the strip of paving, the block of bricks and the panel of windows intersected by the perpendicular window frames and supporting concrete beams. Like Cohen, I am looking for "something political or conceptual, something incongruous or pathetic". Like Cohen (2007), I am drawn to "a certain sense of strangeness, incoherence, sadness or an asphyxiating order". Photography allows me to select what elements to include and exclude within the frame, and I often try to create order through my subjective framing of the image.

Facing outwards from the Gallows Hill courtyard are three windows: one open and two closed. The open window reveals a scene that feels out of place, unreal. It looks more like one of Thomas Demand's paper constructions of space than "real" space. The second and third windows are sealed, one by the sides of a steel bookcase that look like strips of 35mm film and the other by a drawn blind or other solid material. The formal construction of the image references the photographic language of deadpan photography, emphasising symmetry, a neutral angle of view and perspective and standardised formats. The image alludes to ideas of seeing, framing and distilling a moment in time.

Framing, an intrinsic process in photography, is continually alluded to in many of my images in the inclusion of windows, mirrors and blank television screens. Windows offer views into internal or external spaces, mirrors suggest the act of looking and reflecting, and blank television screens allude to the construction of narratives. While windows and doors are prolific within the images, there is an overbearing sense of entrapment, being held or contained within the spaces. The images speak to the practice and theory of photography and framing the world through a photographic lens. The work inherently references the act of making images, of constructing images with a camera.

In *Gallows Hill Traffic Department* (2021), the potted plant, like many of the plants captured in the series, leans over to one side, its lack of symmetry contrasting the built structure that surrounds it. The plant is contained within a pot that sits within two water trays, a doubled but redundant effort to hold and care. The leafless stem of the plant is loosely wrapped in the noose of a discarded cable. It is not obvious why the noose has been positioned around the plant base – an attempt to neaten the space or a grasp at humour? The title of the image invokes connotations of hanging. Many elements of the tableaux of my images similarly provoke questions but offer no finite answers. When I returned to the same space months later, the plant was no longer being strangled by the cable and the sagging branches had been removed, leaving two upright stems remaining in the pot. In a previously empty pot, a small lush palm had found a home. The courtyard had changed.

Many signs are repeated in the images – pictorial and written signage, delineated lines on walls, floors and tiled swimming pool surfaces, all which either explicitly or implicitly signify the function of a particular space. Seat numbers, fire escapes and exit signs indicate order and control. Other spaces are more generic and ambiguous: rows of chairs suggest places of waiting, gathering or spectating. The images repeatedly show chairs, railings, swimming pool ladders, trolleys, pot plants, television screens and mirrors. These empty and still objects simultaneously invite and resist entry. But the quiet is eerily unsettling, because we know that all the empty photographed spaces relate to human activity.

Figure 25
Nicole Clare Fraser
Apartment Block
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm

Figure 26
Nicole Clare Fraser
Home
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 300 x 240 mm
Paper size 400 x 300 mm

Conclusion

I have been influenced by photographers who work with notions of place and space, such as Thomas Demand, Teju Cole, David Goldblatt, Lewis Baltz and Lynne Cohen. Cohen says of her images (2007) that "They resemble stages on which complicated stories are about to be played out, though it is never quite clear what story is being told." This statement makes sense to me in terms of my own work, where I frame a tableau that often references – or sometimes literally is – a stage or space of spectatorship.

As human beings occupying physical bodies, our lives are spent navigating and existing within built structures, being facilitated by objects. The majority of contemporary lived experience and everyday interactions occur within and are enabled by the built environment, and structures can thus narrate stories about how we exist within the world. The spaces in my project are largely bound to specific activities: swimming pools, squash courts, theatres, stadia, schools, a clinic, a traffic department, a shooting range, sports clubs and apartment blocks. Within these singular-functioning places I have looked for both the in-between and the liminal by documenting the spaces when they are absent of activity. I have sought the intermediary spaces used to assist us to get from one point or activity to another: stairwells, corridors, waiting areas and corners. I also look for mundane and ordinary details that are emphasised when made static and still by the act of being photographed.

I experience a sense of melancholy or wistfulness when I look at and reflect upon the images I have created, because these images show places familiar to me, places I occupied and visited: the City Council Building, Greenpoint Traffic Department, the Kenilworth Centre. The images speak about my geographical location in a particular city and articulate where I have gone – my frequent visits for mundane activities such as renewing my car licence, shopping to pass time between teaching at a local art centre. This speaks about my class, my family, my skin colour, my economic status, my means of transport, my independence and my freedom. They speak about my limitations: I am female and most of these spaces are interior, safe enough for me to take my camera out. They also hint at my insecurity and introversion: the spaces do not move, engage or speak back but remain static and silent. I can arrange them through my camera without engaging verbally.

The notion of subjectivity is somewhat at conflict with the modernist ideals of the objective seeing eye of the camera. Subjectivity is at times contradictory in relation to the deadpan aesthetic, as deadpan photography has often been perceived as a neutral and objective visual language. I find this contradiction interesting in the postmodern context of questioning, uncertainty and insecurity. Considering my personal practice and visual language, which draws on the deadpan aesthetic, the images that I capture do not communicate a grand narrative that addresses consumerism or critiques modernist ideals or urban sprawl and gentrification, but they may hint at these.

In investing my time in a search for the particularities of the banal and mundane and in further committing these moments to the photographic negative, I divulge what is important and worth remembering and collecting for me, the image-maker. The public spaces in which connectivity, socialisation and engagement are enacted stand in

opposition to my introverted disposition. This contradiction is made visible by my documentation of the spaces devoid of those they were created for; without people and without activity.

The idea of the unspectacular image resonates with my personal artistic practice, which seeks to create quiet, still and unassuming images of vernacular architecture, public spaces and the banal. My project functions within this conception of speaking and observing quietly and this, in turn, reflects my personal experience of being in the world.

Space captured through the lens of deadpan photography is predominantly unpeopled and absent of activity, but the human trace remains present. Everyday traces are left behind: oil stains, wear, irregular patches in cement and brick work, all communicate the existence and industry of people. Human presence is reflected in the traces we leave behind, and the trace becomes a signal of the human body communicated by its absence.

I am intrigued by the marks and traces we leave behind. A stain is evocative of something unwanted, something to be removed. In a very simplistic sense, this illustrates a hierarchy of surfaces, where certain surfaces are given a higher degree of care. The oil stain functions very differently from the rubber marks on the squash court wall that allude to moments of violence and force. The spaces communicate the tension between presence and absence and evoke contradictory notions of anxiety and quietude and an overwhelming sense of anticipation and ambiguity of what has happened or is still to come. The structures appear functional and well maintained, suggesting time is spent on their care and upkeep.

Because the architectural spaces I photograph are devoid of activity, their functionality is not performed. Space and time are transitory, frozen in an in-between moment. At the instant of photographing and seeing, time is given to observing the occurrence of connection between objects, and emphasis is given to the structures that hold and facilitate and offer support, guidance and assistance. This is evident in my repeated documentation of handrails, pot plants, swimming pools, trolleys and chairs, suggesting an intimate longing for contact and connection. These structures have a new association now, brought about by the pandemic and this particular moment in history, where shared surfaces can be seen as dangerous and possibly contaminated.

For me, using the deadpan aesthetic to document my surrounding architectural environment communicates a sense of care and a modality of observation and being present in the world that reflects my pensive and fragile nature. By using the visual language of deadpan aesthetics to communicate a more personal and interior narrative through the documentation of space, I aim to elevate the commonplace by noticing it and affording it time and care. I extend this by taking time with each image and hand printing the work in the photographic darkroom.

The work does not give concrete answers and may raise more questions, which I will continue to grapple with in my practice going forward. I consider the work made for my MFA project to be a beginning that will continue to grow and develop through my personal practice.

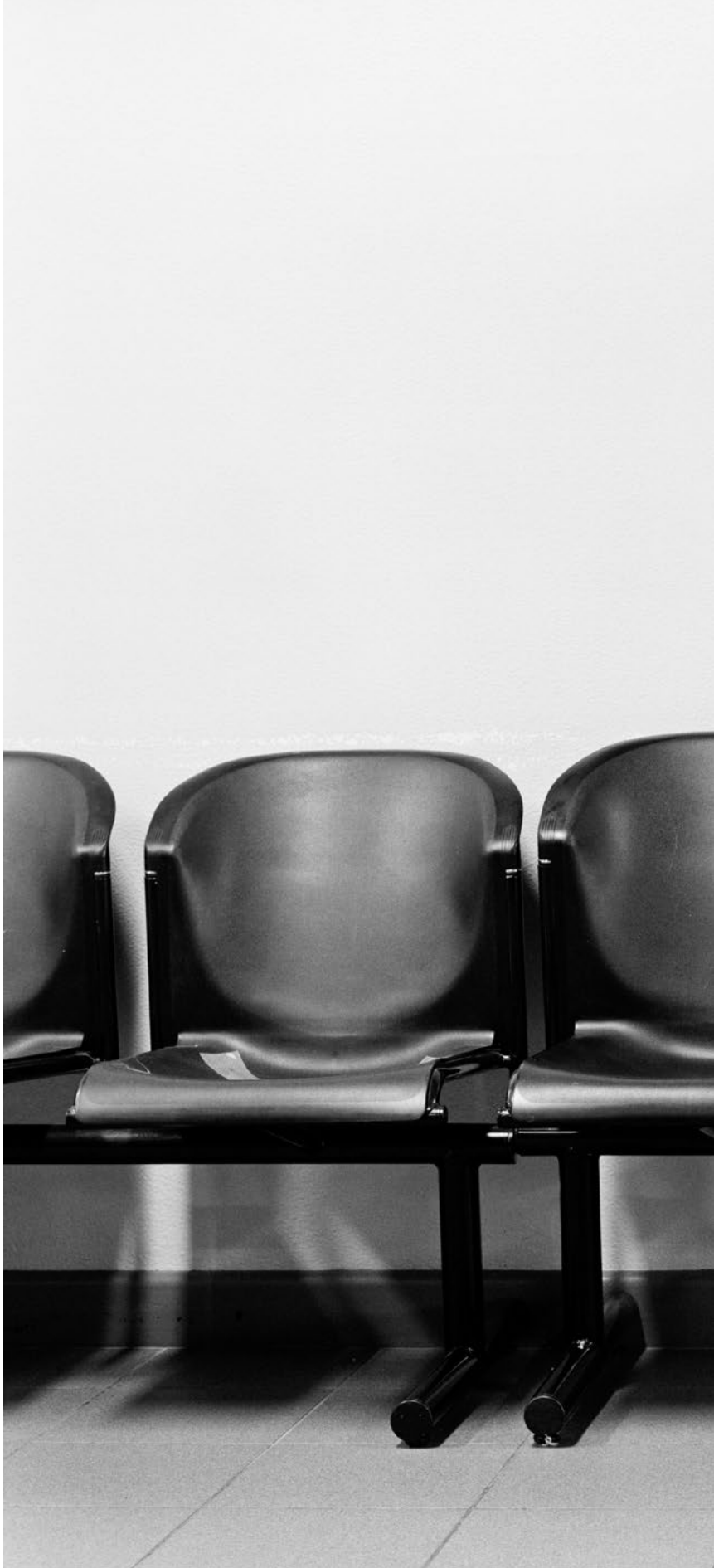

Figure 27
Nicole Clare Fraser
Line of Seating
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm

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Making Space:

Photographic Traces of Absence, Stillness and the In-Between in Public Spaces

Nicole Clare Fraser

Factory Wall Exterior
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Building Façade
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP


7
8
9

Building Exterior
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Doorway with Surveillance Camera
2021
Archival ink on Innova 300gsm cotton rag paper
Image size 704,2 x 880,2 mm
Paper size 915 x 1140 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

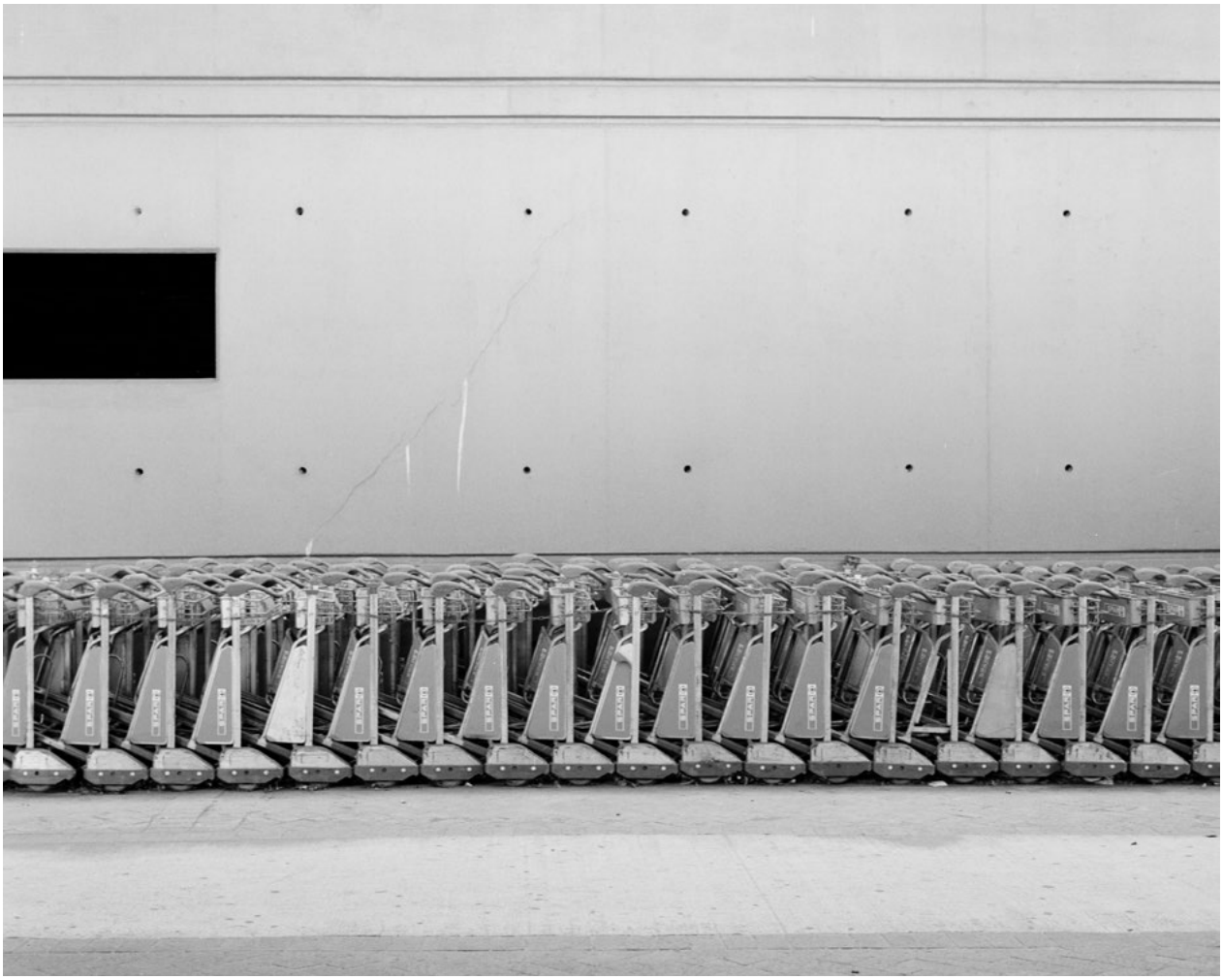
Garage Door
2020
Archival ink on Innova 300gsm cotton rag paper
Image size 704,2 x 880,2 mm
Paper size 915 x 1140 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Underground Parking
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Parking Lot
2020
Archival ink on Innova 300gsm cotton rag paper
Image size 704,2 x 880,2 mm
Paper size 915 x 1140 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

High School Locker Room
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Airport Trolleys I
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

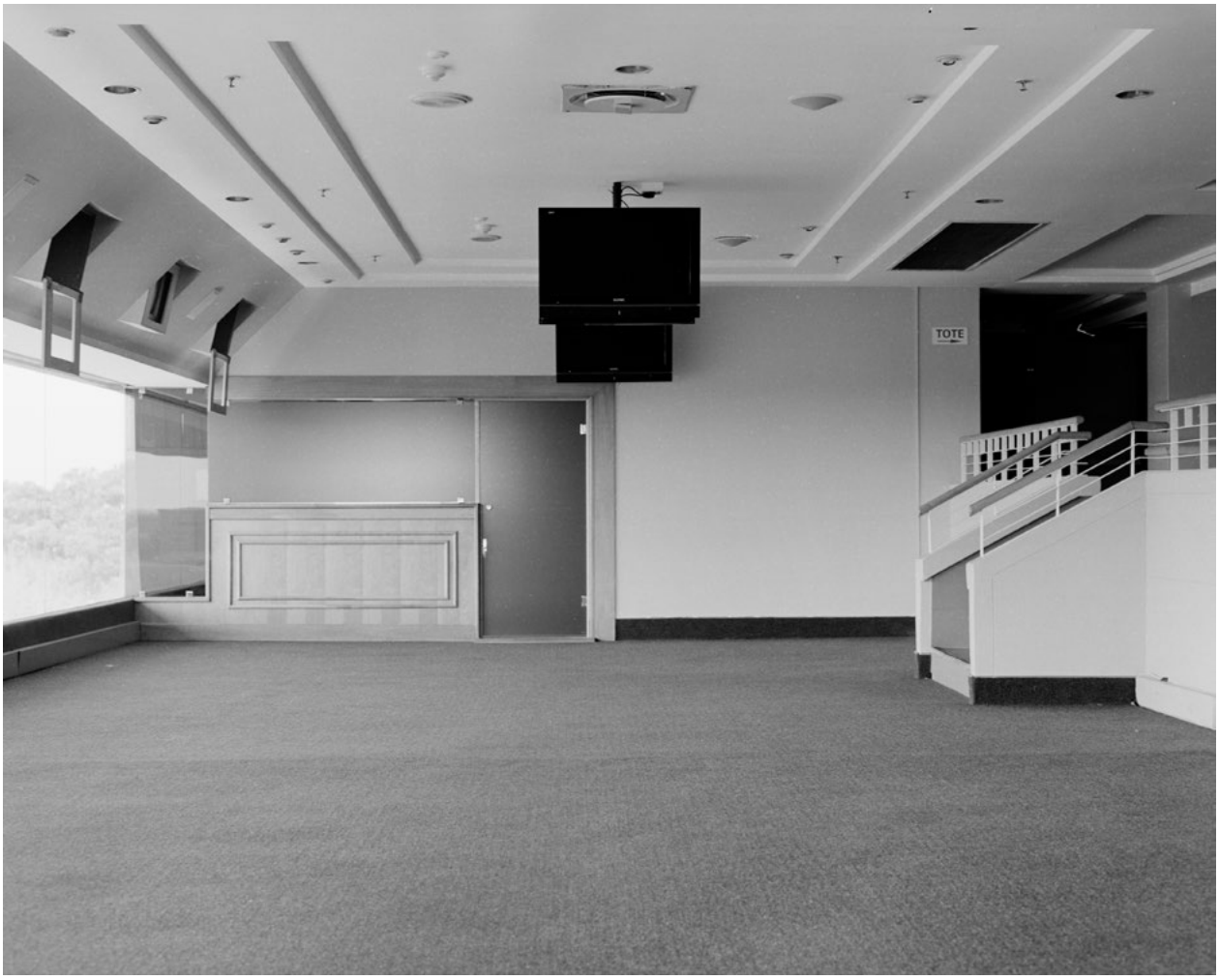


Airport Trolleys II
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Swimming Pool
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Civic Centre Dining Hall
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Racecourse Hall and TV Screens
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP


TOTE

Factory
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 300 x 240 mm
Paper size 400 x 300 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Racecourse Staircase
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Stadium
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP


108
109

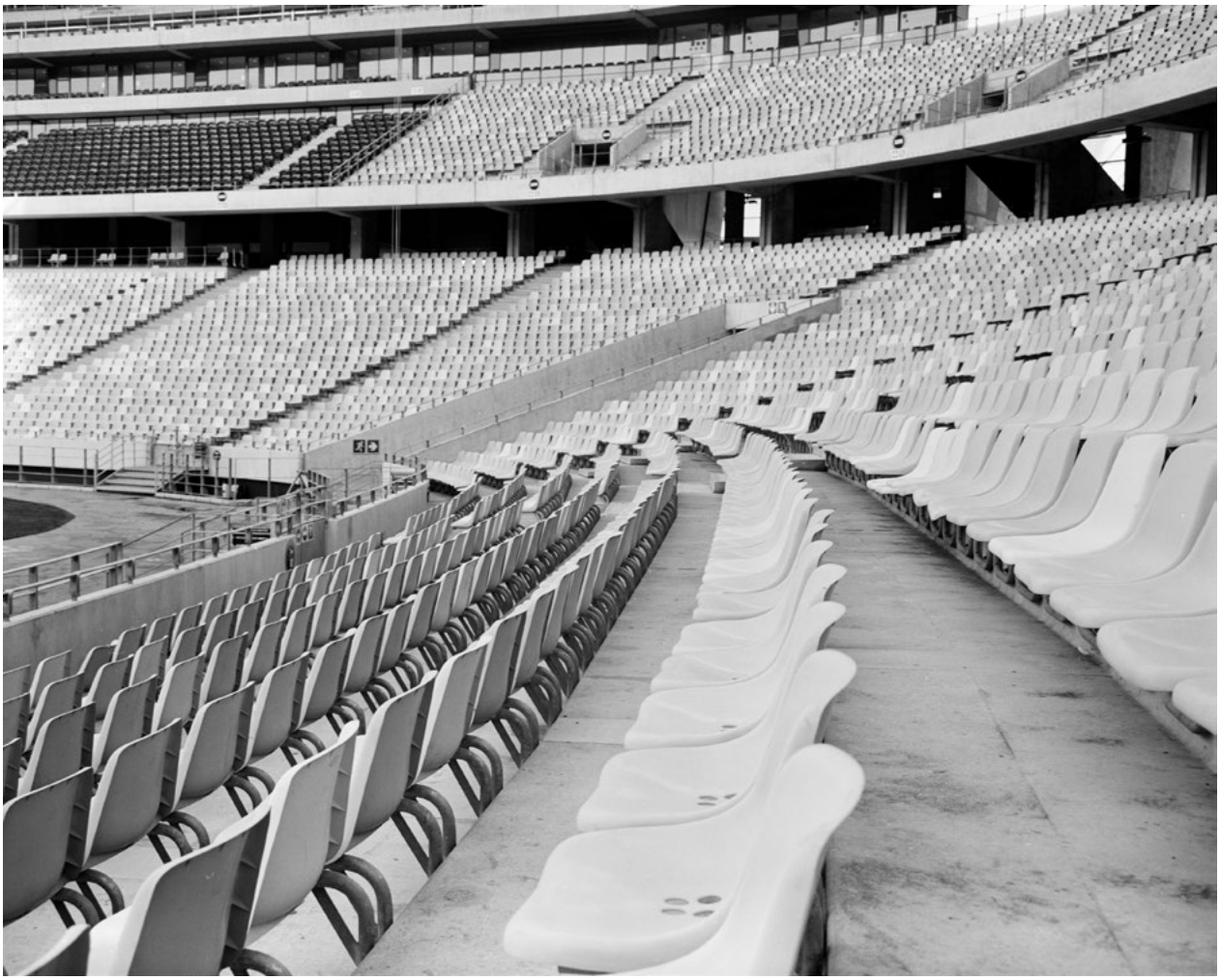
Baxter Theatre
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

The Little Theatre
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP


EXIT

Shooting Range II
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Stadium I
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP



Stadium II
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Fertility Clinic
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP


HANAULUX FRANKFURT

Two Chairs
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Line of Seating
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Campus Benches
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Gallows Hills Traffic Department I
2021
Archival ink on Innova 300gsm cotton rag paper
Image size 704,2 x 880,2 mm
Paper size 915 x 1140 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Gallows Hill Traffic department II
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

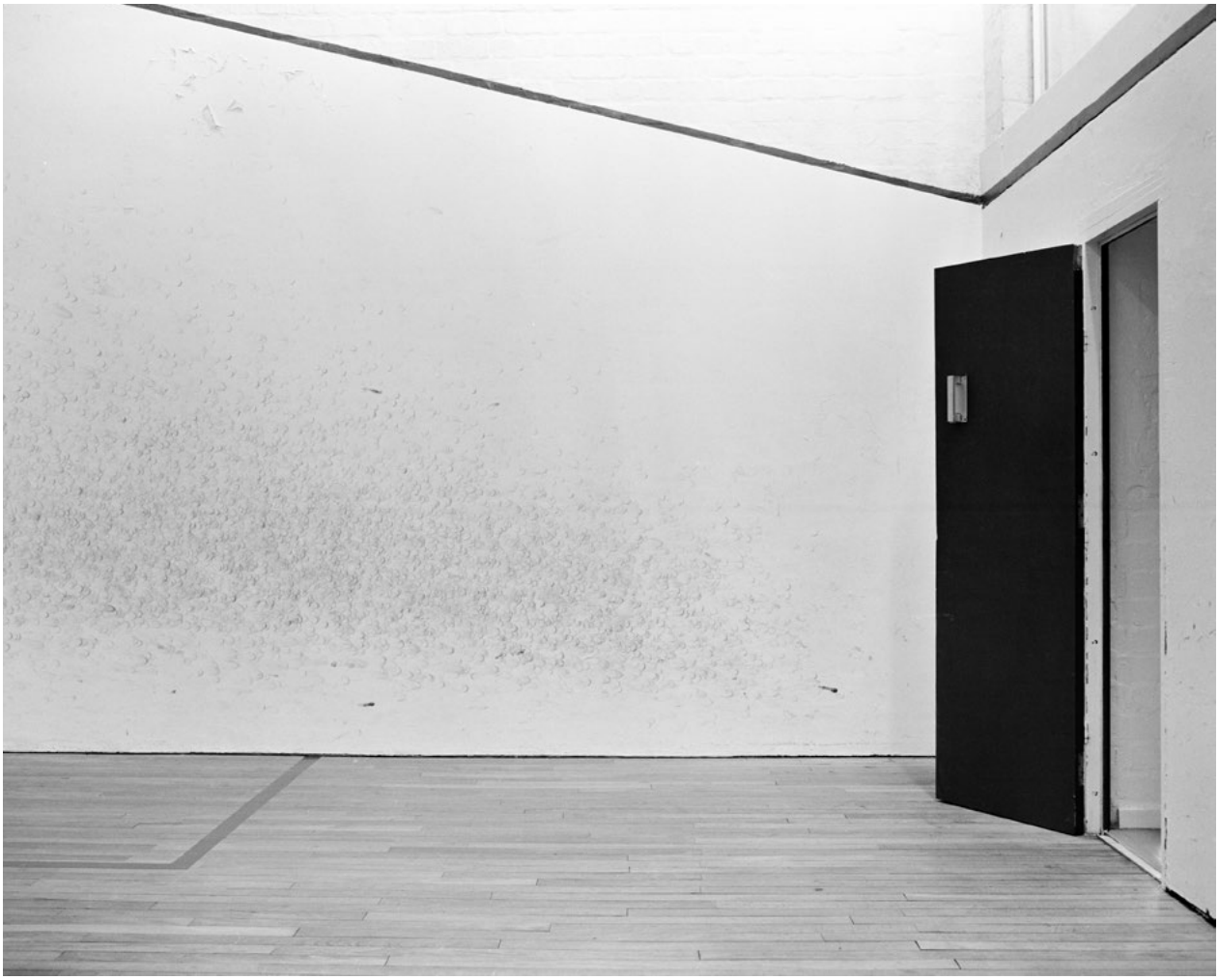

GoldStar

Pillars and Chairs
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

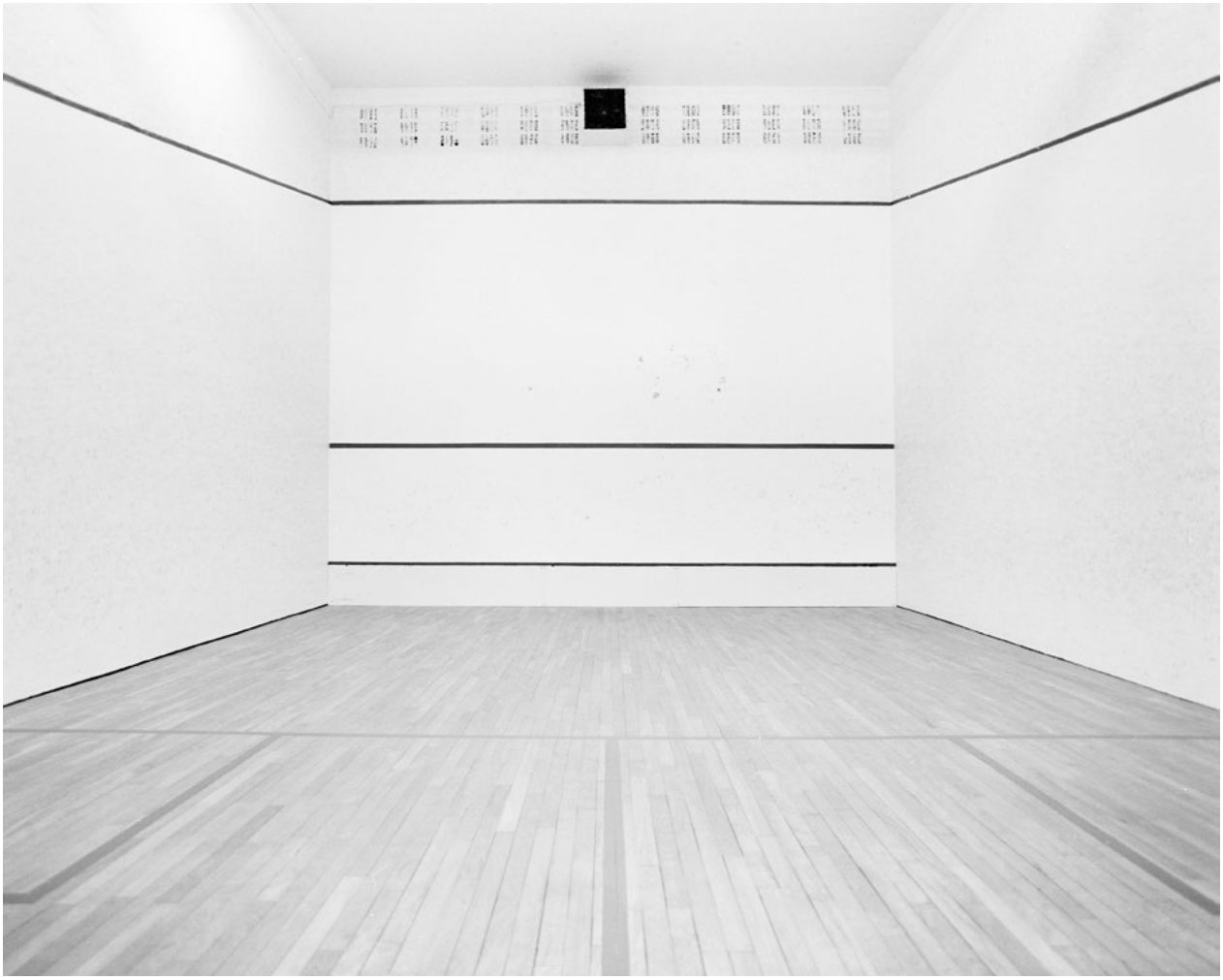
Sports Centre
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Changing Room
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

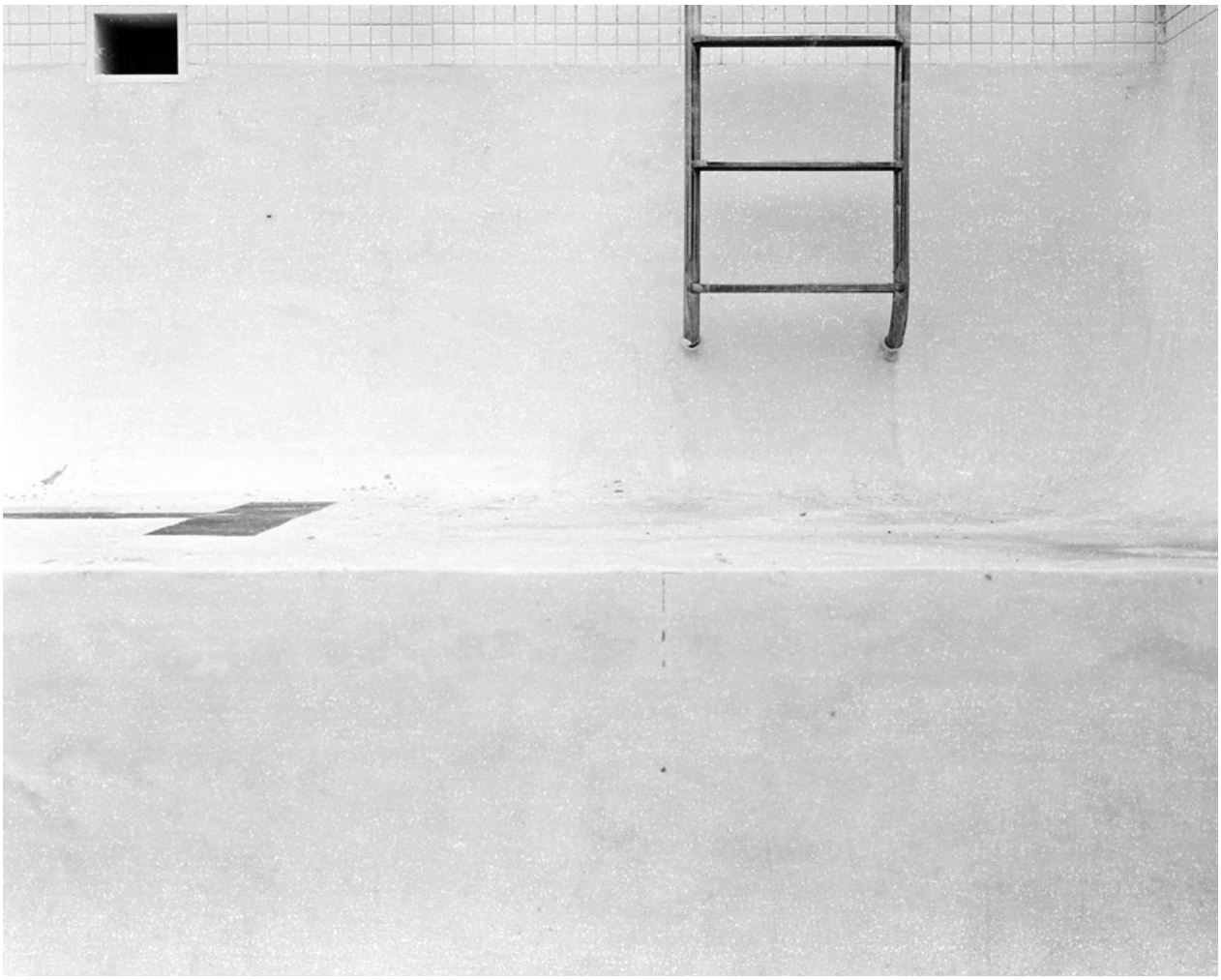
Squash Court I
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP



Squash Court II
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP



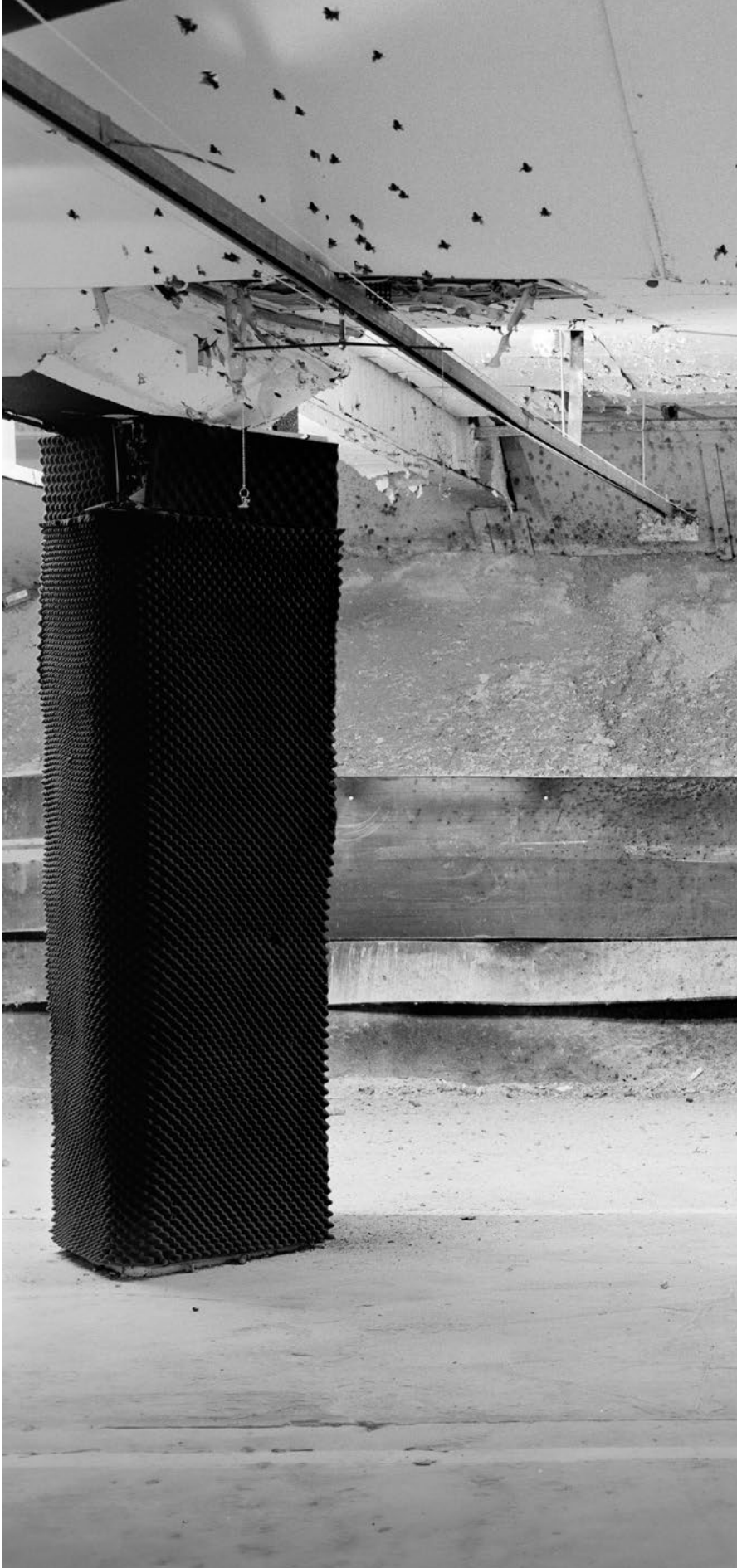
Empty Pool
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP



Stacked Plastic Chairs
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 300 x 240 mm
Paper size 400 x 300 mm
Edition of 3 + AP


Congratulation

Gallows Hills Traffic Department III
2021
Archival ink on Innova 300gsm cotton rag paper
Image size 704,2 x 880,2 mm
Paper size 915 x 1140 mm
Edition of 3 + AP



Shooting Range I
2021
Archival ink on Innova 300gsm cotton rag paper
Image size 704,2 x 880,2 mm
Paper size 915 x 1140 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Ladder
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 300 x 240 mm
Paper size 400 x 300 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Pool Ladder
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 300 x 240 mm
Paper size 400 x 300 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Fertility Clinic Bed
2021
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Dressing Room
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Reclining Beds
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 240 x 300 mm
Paper size 300 x 400 mm
Edition of 3 + AP

Apartment Block
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 140 x 175 mm
Paper size 200 x 250 mm
Edition of 3 + AP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Home
2020
Silver gelatin handprint
Image size 300 x 240 mm
Paper size 400 x 300 mm
Edition of 3 + AP