

*MUTED: Between Sound, Image and Silence*

selected works and essay from MFA submission,  
Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, 2020/21

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## **ABSTRACT**

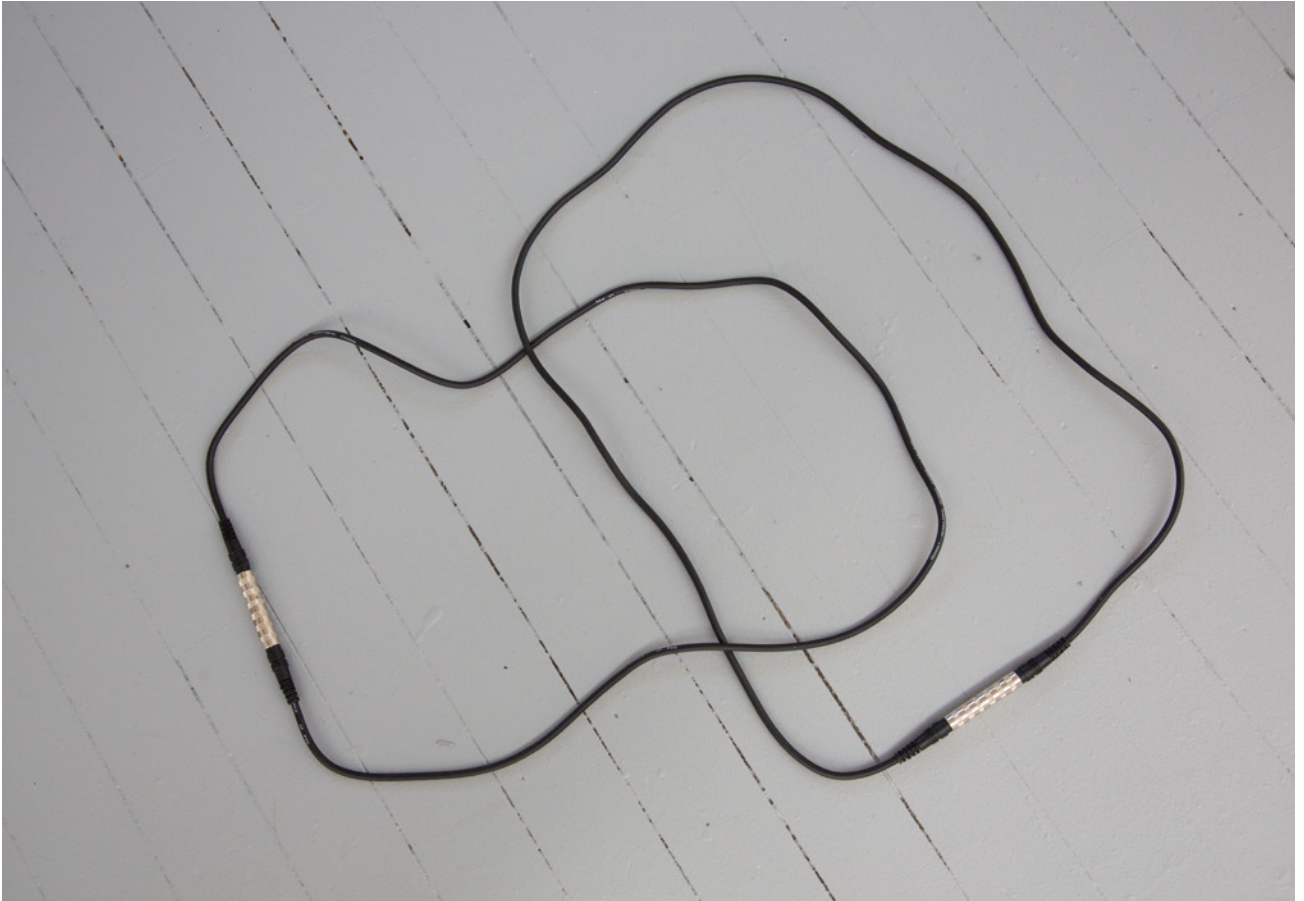
My work is currently focused on the relationship between sound and image. Shuttling between these realms in the manner that a DJ mixes between recordings serves as a precept for the arrangement of the installation. My intent is to pull these strands of exploration together in a closer harmonic relationship. Through this interweaving, sounds create images in the mind and images evoke the experience of listening. While certain works broadcast sound, others hold the potential (or transmit the loss) of doing so. Furthermore, the process of flattening sound and image through 'muting' (via analogue or digital manipulation of objects and media) generates a distancing effect.

Digital effects are given similar, sometimes identical, naming systems in both audio and image post-production, generating a synthesis between these forms of communication. In the photographic works the relationship between painting, sculpture and photography is explored through documentation of actions and objects that have been discarded. They remain purely as residues embedded into the surface of the digital prints.

During this time of upheaval, we seek new ways to communicate at a distance. Through this flattening of image and sound, paradoxically a kind of intimacy may also be experienced as the viewer/listener must 'lean in' to experience these works which are held at a remove from the vivid colour of the world.



*MUTED*, 2020/21  
installation view



*Private Life 2020, dimensions variable*  
audio cabling and adaptors



*Shun* 2020, 840×840×60mm  
flocked linen on support, steel brace, alloy, wood



*Forever I Know* 2020, 840×840×60mm  
engraved trumpet mute

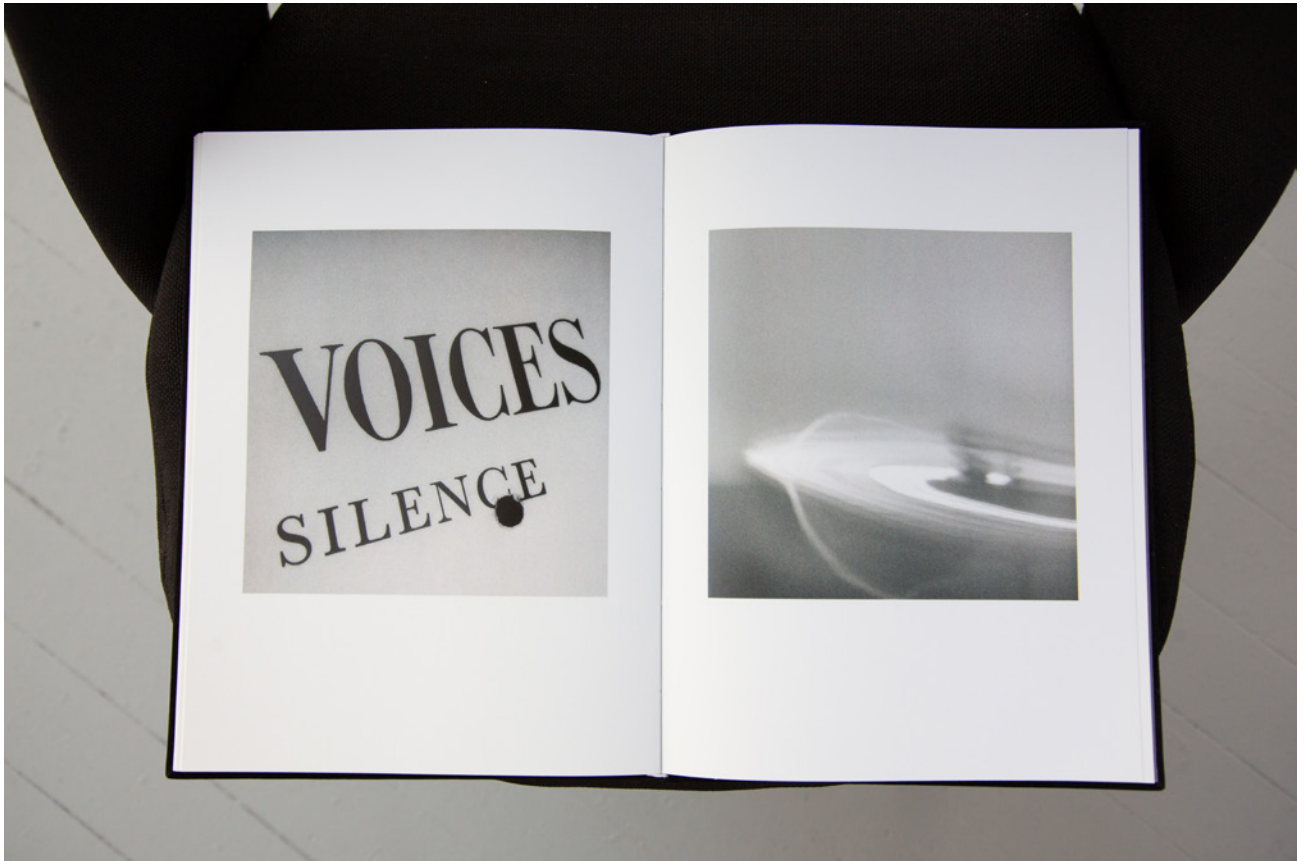


*Garden Dance 2020*  
A collaboration with Cassandra Wilson  
HD video with sound, 6 minutes



Rest 2020  
96 page artist's book of photography





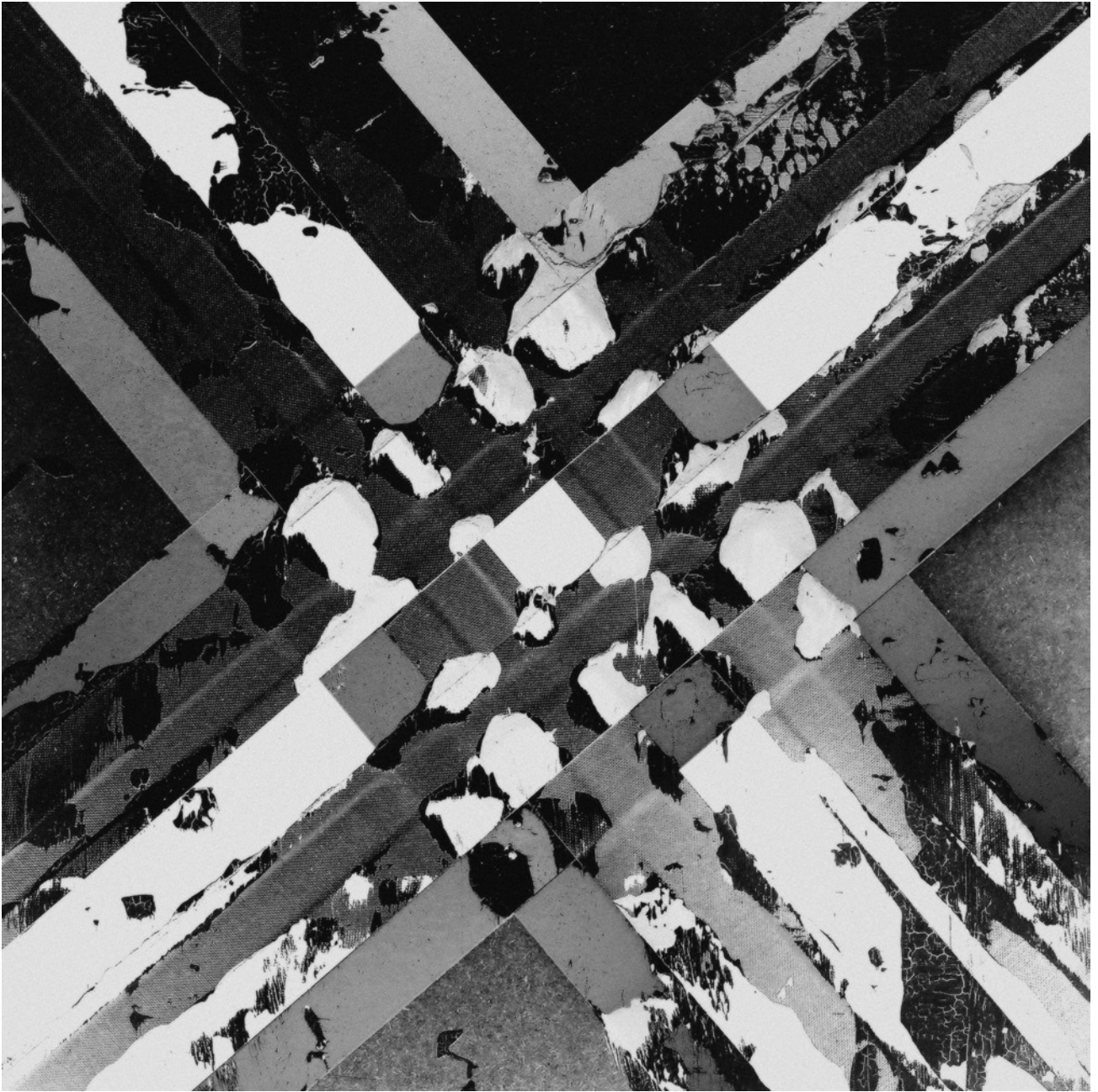
Rest 2020  
(detail)



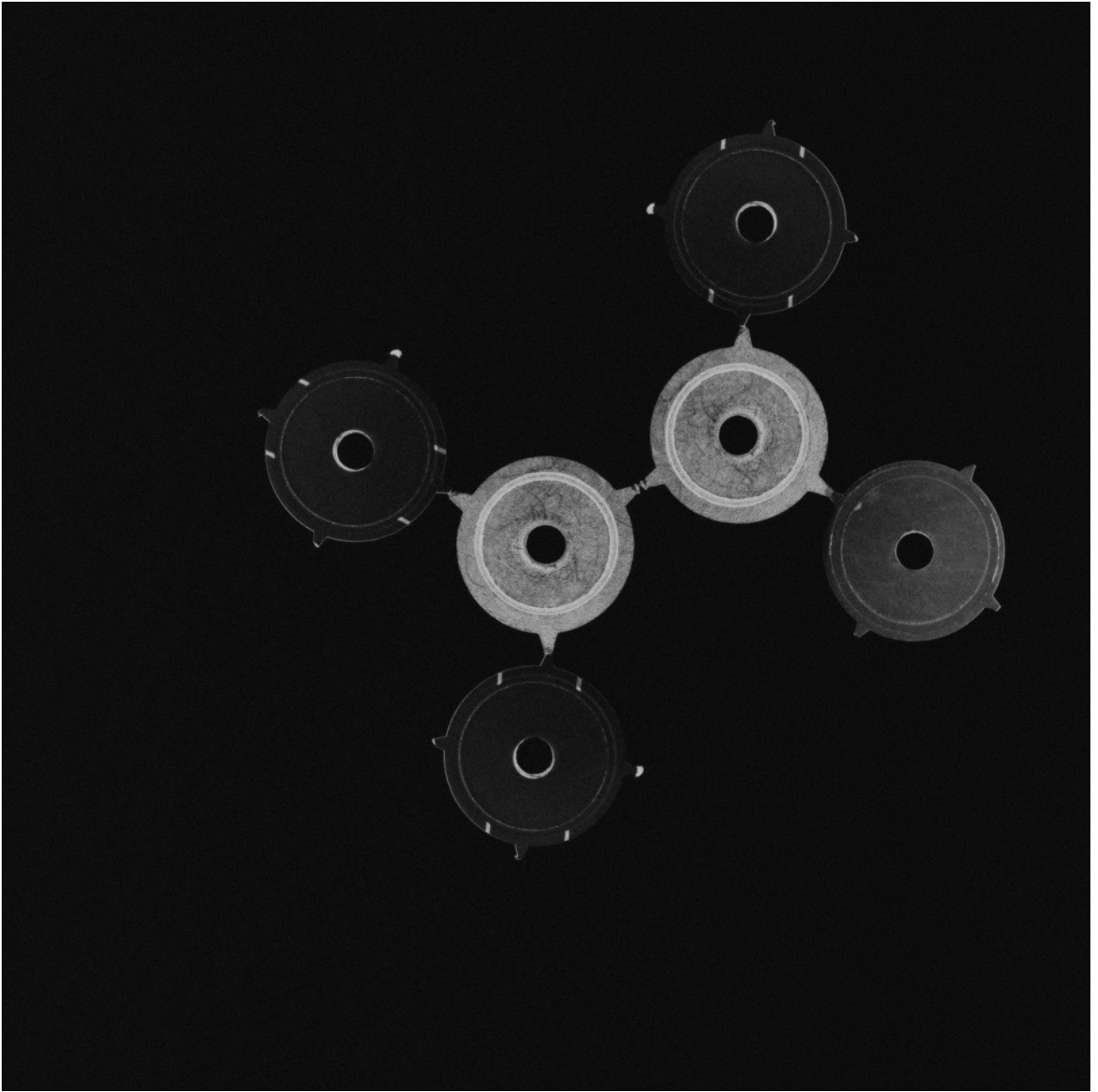
G10 2020  
camera, paint, flocking



Soprano 2020  
saxophone, paint, flocking



*Negative Capability 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 800×800mm



*Composition 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 800×800mm

page 56/57 read 'Disco'  
instead of 'Rare and expensive Records'

page 60 read 'Superstars'  
instead of 'Rare and expensive Records'

page 65 read 'Bootlegs'  
instead of 'Superstars'

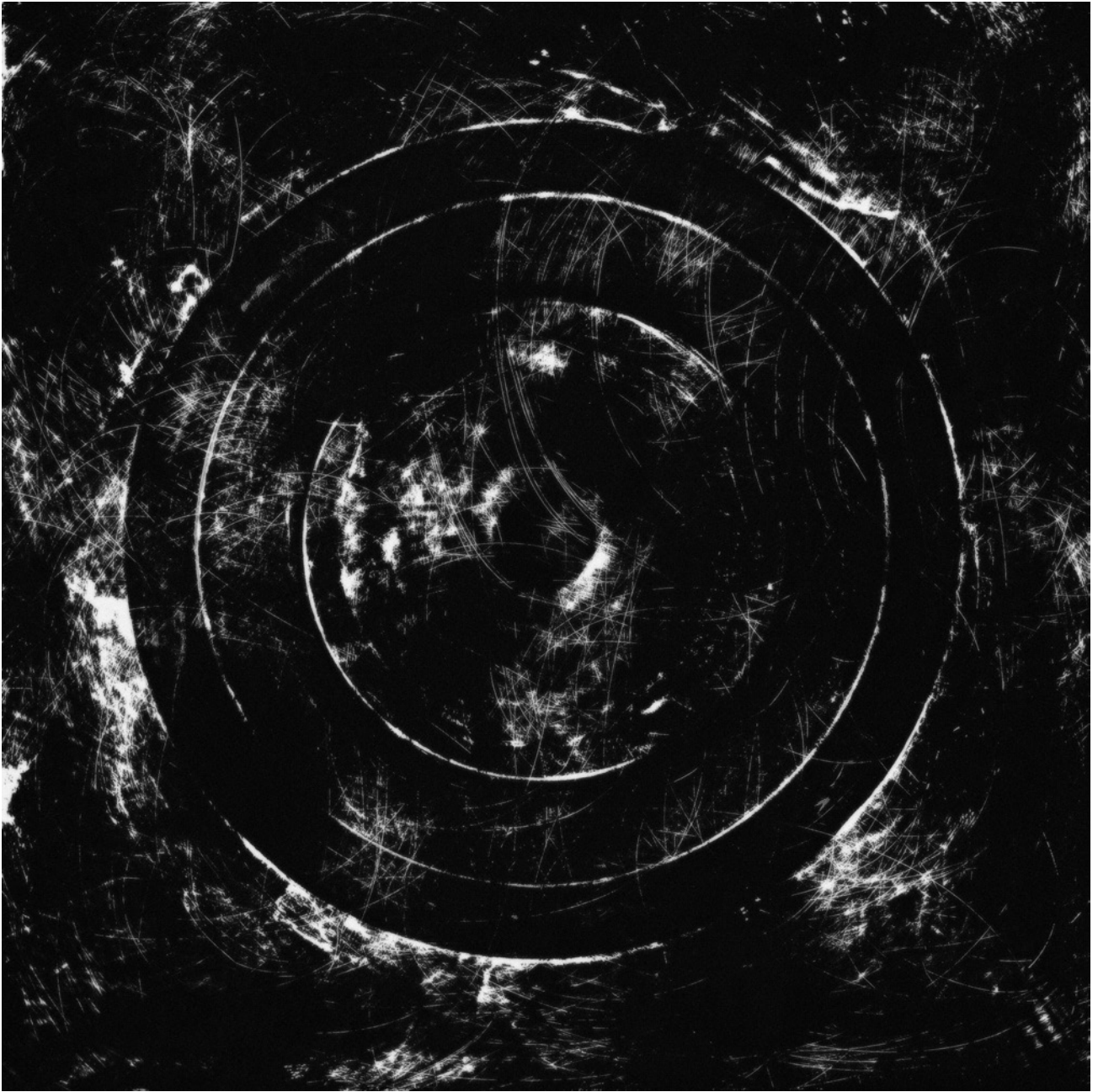
page 68 read 'Rare and expensive Records'  
instead of 'Disco'

page 69 read 'Rare and expensive Records'  
instead of 'Country & Western'

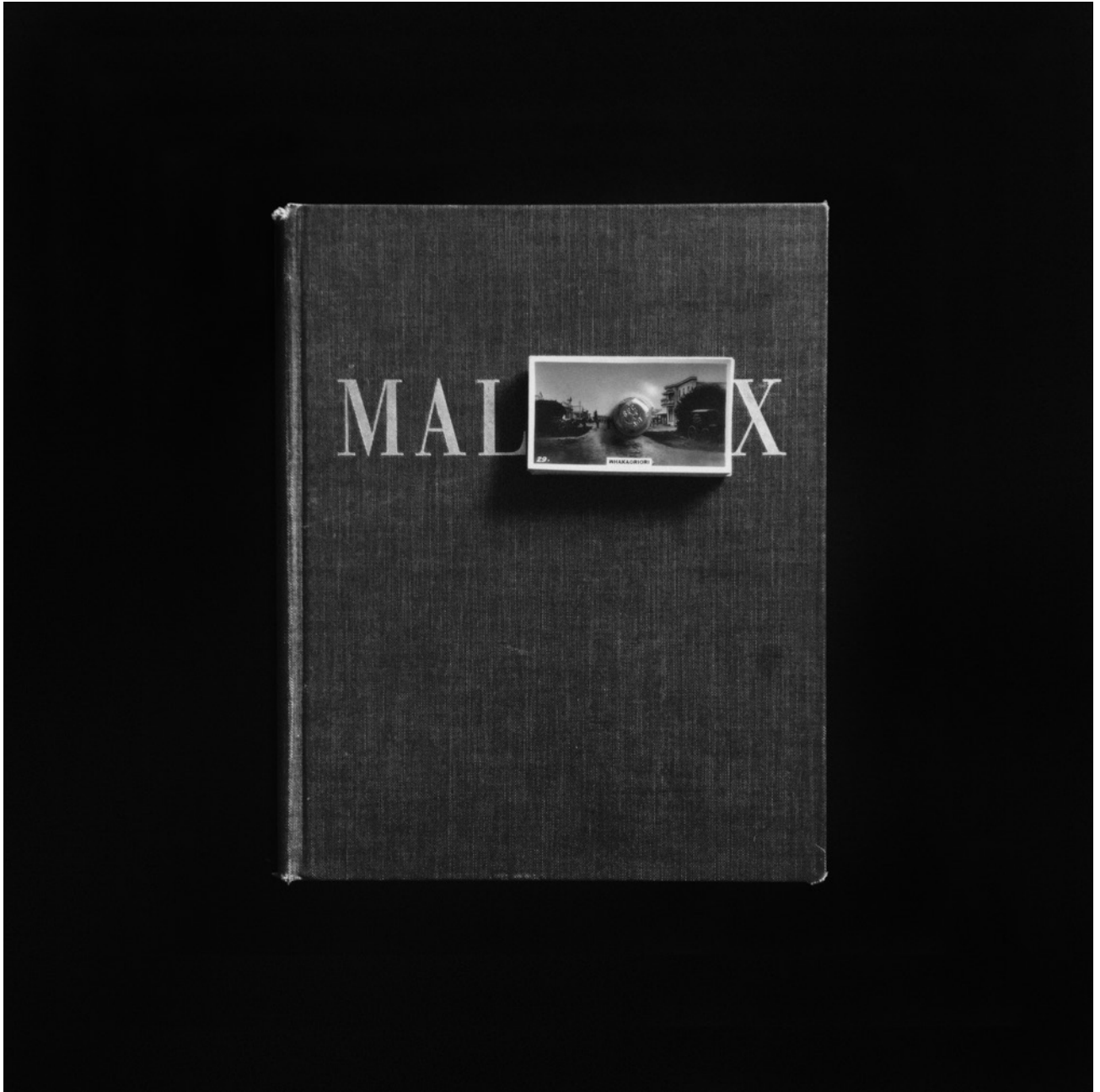
page 72 read 'Shapes'

page 73 read 'Miscellaneous'  
instead of 'Comics'

page 106 read 'Distribution-Promos'  
instead of 'Radio-Promos'



*Format 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 800×800mm

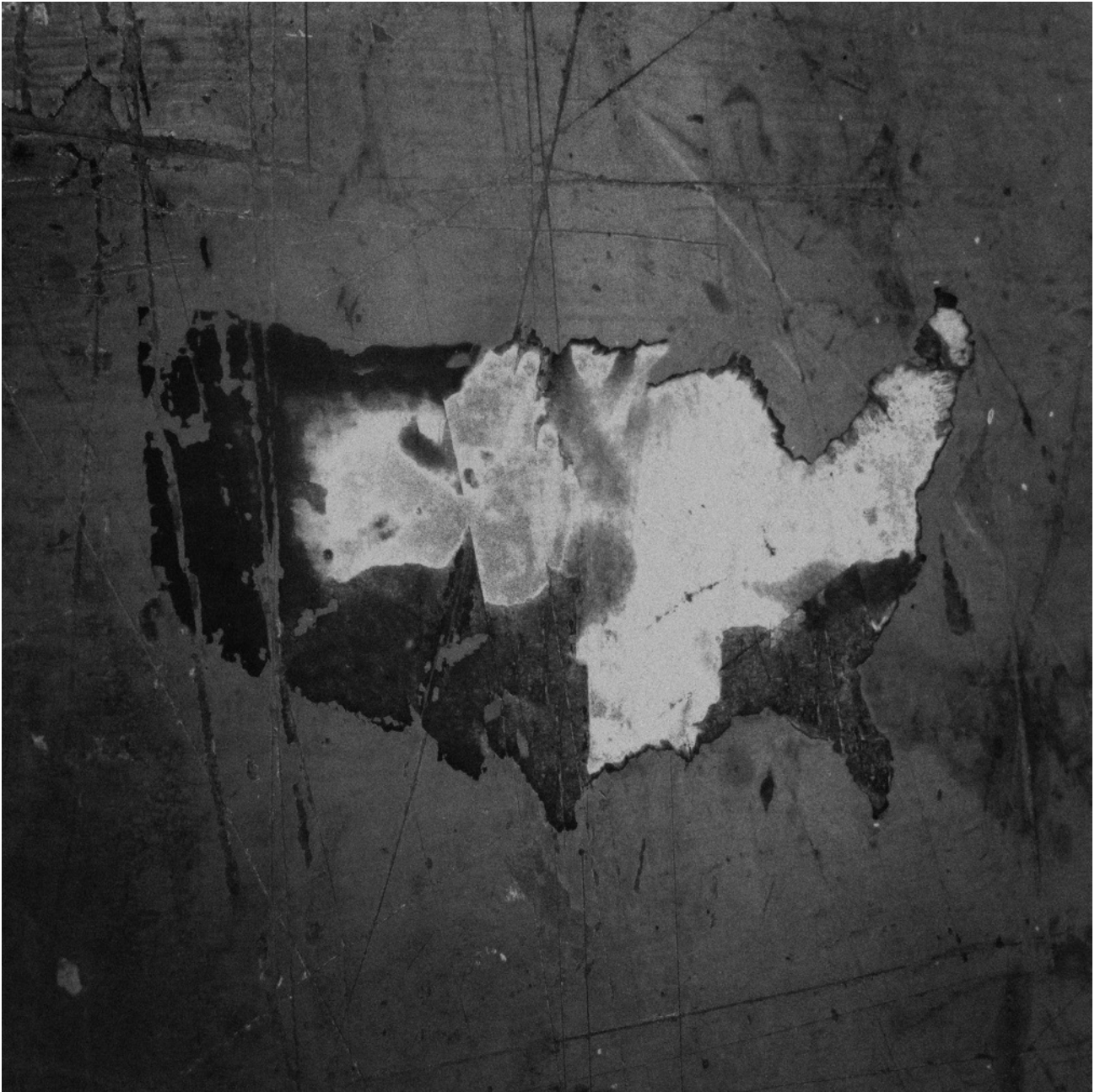


*The Voices of Silence 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 800×800mm





*The Judge 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 600×600mm



*American Music 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 600×600mm



*Haunted Jazz 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 600 × 600 mm



*Supreme 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 450×450mm



*Duration 2020*  
archival inkjet print, 400×400mm



*Still I & II* 2020  
archival inkjet print, 400×400mm each

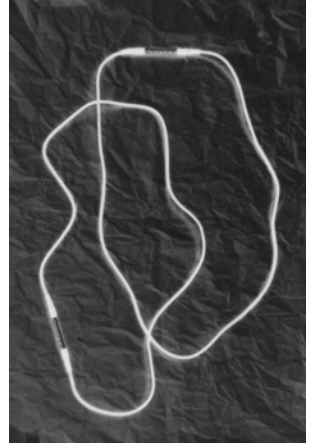


*Mute Suite 2020*  
loudspeakers, various dimensions



*Four Movements 2020*  
record box sets, music stands, 1240×1200×500mm





*Private Lives 2020*  
archival inkjet prints, 300×450 mm each



*Garden Dance 2020*, composition for video and installation  
test pressing (ed. 5), vinyl record, 305 mm diameter

*MUTED: Between Sound, Image and Silence*  
Masters thesis - text

### **Prelude: 09.11.20**

Shuttling between the realms of sound and image in the manner that a DJ mixes between recordings serves as a precept for the arrangement of this essay. In this interweaving of forms in my writing and studio practice, sounds create images in the mind, images evoke the experience of hearing, while objects broadcast sound or hold the potential (or transmit the loss) of doing so. My work seeks to fuse these worlds in an intimate dance. The ‘gift of sound and vision’, to quote David Bowie, reflects my primary sensory engagement with the world. In writing of muted forms of expression within sound and image I have sought inspiration from collections by two canonical authors who themselves shuffled between philosophy and the visual arts: Susan Sontag’s essay ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’ from *Styles of Radical Will*, 1966, and John Cage’s celebrated collection of writings gathered in *Silence* from 1961 are pivotal texts. Other contemporary writers have augmented my research – the work of Mark Fisher (1968-2017) in particular for his melding of politics and philosophy in writing on contemporary sound and image culture.

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IS NOT THE MUSIC OF THE FUTURE  
NOR THE MUSIC OF THE PAST BUT SIMPLY  
MUSIC PRESENT WITH US: THIS MOMENT, NOW,  
THIS NOW MOMENT<sup>1</sup>

John Cage is celebrated as a writer and practitioner in sound art and contemporary music. The composer, philosopher, artist and amateur mycologist is venerated for his pithy maxims and joyous attitude developed in part from his engagement with Zen Buddhism. Cage’s arguably most famous quote ‘I have nothing to say and I am saying it’, is preceded in the text from his 1958 lecture ‘Composition as Process’ by another equally pertinent passage:

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS SILENCE. GET THEE TO AN ANECHOIC CHAMBER AND HEAR THERE THY NERVOUS SYSTEM IN OPERATION AND HEAR THERE THY BLOOD IN CIRCULATION.<sup>2</sup>

This idea may function as the operating system by which he devised his infamous musical work, 4’33”. The score requires the performer to sit at a piano for the prescribed duration and play nothing, thus making the audience listen to whatever sounds accumulate within that supposed silence. Sontag’s essay ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’ regards silence as a metaphorical strategy in the visual arts, as opposed to a literal absence of sound. With the impossibility of absolute silence swiftly dispensed with by both authors, we must contend with the term as metaphor or index pointing to something other than its fixed meaning. In considering Cage and Sontag on this theme – the former primarily in regard to sound, the latter in regard to image – one must proceed with the awareness that their evocations of silence describe a quality of quietude, or a not-quite-silence that exists amongst the creative strategies of certain artists and musicians.

### **First Movement: 11:30pm, March 25, 2020.**

The sounds from my bedroom: an automobile passing on the street, and the discreet chatter of my laptop keyboard. Every few minutes as a car passes, the near-silence is punctured by a subtle Doppler effect; a flat hum followed by a longer, lower reverberation generated by rubber on tarmac (black on black). In thirty minutes the country enters a new unknown in Alert Level 4 to combat the global pandemic of Covid-19. This unprecedented governmental move – to isolate all individuals aside from essential service workers in Aotearoa New Zealand – is an attempt to flatten the curve of infection. The lockdown has blanketed the city. The weather too has shifted into autumn after a long, dry summer.

The incessant trilling of cicadas in my tree-lined street has gone quiet in synch with our national emergency.

What then to write of sound, image and silence in this new landscape? The words stare back at me mutely from the screen triggering an internal voice, soundless in the interior of my body.

By painting the colours and lines and shapes that I had seen in an emotional state – I wished to recapture the quivering quality of the emotional atmosphere like a phonograph. – Edvard Munch<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between painting and music has been much commented upon. The above quote by Munch from Karl Ove Knausgaard's 2017 book *So Much Longing in So Little Space*. The author is writing on his fellow countryman for an exhibition he is curating. I read Knausgaard's famously meandering prose as lockdown commences. Can words act as a kind of literary phonograph to document the emotional state of the writer during a time of upheaval? Writing, along with painting, may be considered the most stable forms for recording human experience before the inventions of photography and phonograph. Despite Munch living in a time of rapid technological change, little of this is seen in the hermetically sealed world of his painting. *The Scream*, arguably his most famous work, broadcasts his emotional state mutely into the void. The image's proto-expressionism acts as a launch pad for much early 20th century painterly anxiety and resurfaces later in the punk era, in the naming of English group Siouxsie and The Banshees' first album *The Scream*, from 1978. This recording, a metallic dirge of angular guitar, strident vocals and pounding rhythms was hailed for its originality, marking the beginnings of post-punk. The primal howl of Munch's painting as a kind of radioactive psychic signal was reconsidered by the US Environmental Protection Agency in the early 1990s. An expert panel sought to develop a marker system in visual language that might last ten thousand years to protect nuclear waste sites in the New Mexico desert. In his book on mankind's historical relationship to underground spaces, English author Robert McFarlane writes:

Munch's *Scream* might be taken as a model, it was suggested, on the grounds that it could still somehow communicate terror to whatever being approached it in the distant future.<sup>4</sup>

Weeks before the lockdown, I had settled upon this essay's titular idea but the potentials of sound, image and silence take on new interpretations as the ensuing months unfold. The forms of communication enabled through sound (speech and music) along with the visual (images and objects) take on new tonalities. How we use these properties to communicate the joys and challenges of our experience assumes a muted or distanced effect as we share ideas through technologically mediated spaces. Our connection via digital media becomes the primary space of interaction outside our family units. Those living in solitude have this distancing redoubled in isolation. In response to the curtailing of public gatherings – an integral aspect of any creative community – exhibitions rapidly move online. Virtual dealer shows, biennales and museums rebound on screens as the arts community attempts to maintain momentum. Meanwhile, colleagues and friends set times to video conference and share ideas in hastily improvised home studios.

11:59pm and fireworks. Across the neighbourhood someone has saved a celebration for this last minute of freedom before midnight. The sound 'paints a picture', transmitting an image to the mind's eye in a reversal of how a painting or photograph might silently display the properties of sound.

In the past, the people of the West savoured the depth and qualities of silence. They saw it as the precondition for contemplation, for introspection, for meditation, for prayer, for reverie and for creation; above all, they saw it as that inner space from which speech came. They scrutinised its social tactics. For them, painting was silent speech. – Alain Corbin<sup>5</sup>

Early in the year I entered a local bookshop and chanced upon the title *A History of Silence* by French academic Alain Corbin. Perusing the opening pages, I purchased the book as a potential reference

for my research. I read at night as emergency sirens stand out in the darkness, no longer muffled by nearby motorway traffic. Does silence belong primarily to the blackness of night? The cover of *A History of Silence* is printed edge to edge in black, covered with a velvety matt laminate. A small reproduction floats in the blackness; a monk, golden haloed in a deep blue robe, reads a scripture with right hand touching lightly on his chin as his left runs across the text. He has been clear-cut from his original surroundings in a fresco, and hovers indeterminately in the void. This figure culled from a quieter time and a calling to silent contemplation of the mysteries of existence. The book, however, risks becoming an embellished index collated from literary references in the service of the author's treatise. This small volume becomes an accumulation of pull quotes rather than developing an overarching thesis on the use of silence in arts and letters. I shuffle on.

### **Volume 2: Tables Turned, April**

In preparation for an exhibition, I was to install myself in a gallery, turning the space of showing and mercantile exchange into a studio. With lockdown, we migrate online as I make works in advance. In the past year I have developed a painting technique utilising a record turntable as a mechanism in the aid of rendering diffuse circular washes in ink and watercolour. The Technics 1200 is an industrial design classic; a robust machine for DJs in dance music culture where the turntable became an instrument itself in the hands of inventive users. The sound of 'scratching' a recording back and forth under the stylus becomes a percussive element in the performance of the DJ. In my repurposing, the turntable is as a lathe for a wood turner or a pottery wheel for a ceramicist. The rendering of hard and soft tones via washes of brushwork echo sonorous tonalities. I make this a daily practice through lockdown as a kind of meditation – like a musician sequestered away practicing scales and improvising to develop stronger technique and an embedded affinity with one's instrument.

I conceive of silence as a space with absolutely no sound. But this, as we know, does not exist. Even if we enter spaces which claim to provide absolute silence, our human body negates it. Our body produces sound, our body is sound. – Carsten Nicolai <sup>6</sup>

The contemporary German sound artist, DJ and musician Nicolai's quote in a MoMA catalogue from 2013 is essentially a rewording of Cage in regard to the anechoic chamber and the subtle sounds one's body emits. As I considered working quietly in the gallery-as-studio, thoughts of limiting numbers, or working behind the velvet ropes of a nightclub came to mind, conjuring up the inverse of a space of silence.

### **Third Movement: Muted Modalities**

The earliest musical score asking for a muted trumpet appears in 1607 for an opera by Monteverdi. Fast-forwarding to the modern era this technique of muting (by the insertion of a brass cup into the bell of the instrument) was exemplified by jazz legend Miles Davis. This simple device changes the sound by lowering the volume and altering the timbre. On recordings such as the soundtrack to the Louis Malle film *Ascenseur pour L'échafaud* (Elevator to the Gallows) 1958, these qualities of the mute can be heard. Davis was freshly tasting the freedoms of continental living outside the historical burdens of American life. (He was famously beaten by a New York policeman the following year while taking a cigarette break outside the Birdland jazz club in Manhattan.) In a Paris studio he developed a set of sketches for the film based around a central theme as a painter might work over a number of canvases fleshing out a thematic concern. Davis arrived with loosely written charts to share with a group of local musicians who then improvised around the themes, playing live to the projection of rough cuts of the film. Here we see the visuals defining musical interplay. This process produced a collection of subtle blues-inflected variations. Digital-era releases and vinyl reissues contain two versions of the soundtrack. The complete session recordings without additional production effects are followed by selected takes chosen for the final film edit drenched in reverb to create a muted haze

over the music. This treatment doubles down on their ambient effect, embedding them more deeply as emotive backgrounds into the scenes. I have used similar approaches, making variations on a theme for soundtracks constructed inversely to Davis's approach: the music itself is used as a cue for a performance which is then documented on video. This score for the video work is then reinterpreted or remixed: it is time-stretched with elements harmonically pitched down to generate an ambient version for the room installation.

#### **Volume 4: Intimacy and Distance**

With a mute the flattening of tone creates a sense of distance in the sound emanating from the trumpet; a kind of plaintive, haunted quality that flattens the attack from the notes and renders the sound at a remove as if floating in another time or place. Conversely, a degree of intimacy is gained in the recording by the close placement of the microphone as the muted instrument has a volume closer in range to the human voice. With Davis, the playing register of his solos was often kept within vocal range, rather than the fiery high notes of some of his jazz contemporaries. This restrained approach was dubbed 'cool jazz'. Miles was noted for the economy in his playing. His oft quoted line is that 'music is as much about the notes you don't play'. Davis's thinking was perfectly expressed in 1969 on an album of minimal compositions that ushered in the era of electric jazz-fusion entitled *In A Silent Way*. These reductive works of the late sixties may be seen in correlation to similar movements in the field of contemporary art.

#### **Fifth Movement: Slouching Towards Silence**

Cycles of influence return and scatter their contents through culture like a low hum on the outer spectrum of audible frequency. I named a 2019 painting *Low* to acknowledge its genesis in a poor resolution digital image while acknowledging David Bowie (his Berlin-era album *Low* from 1977) as an ongoing inspiration. Bowie's chameleon-like reinventions were a kind of performance art: rock-n-roll as bastardised musical theatre that borrowed freely from mime, Japanese Kabuki theatre and the performative provocations of the early C20th avant-garde.

Sons of the silent age

Pace their rooms like a cell's dimensions <sup>7</sup>

In the present time we pace our respective rooms, staying indoors and listening to broadcasts on the state of the crisis. In the late 1970s David Bowie turned away from a personal crisis brought on by a life of excess, making West Berlin his home and living there virtually incognito. In his Berlin-era works (often in collaboration with audio-visual artist and musician Brian Eno and proto-punk provocateur Iggy Pop), muted references to art from earlier times surface. Eno used his card system *Oblique Strategies* – themselves inspired by John Cage's chance procedures using the *I Ching* – to create fresh working approaches for studio sessions. The cards contain short textual commands to promote lateral thinking and breaking creative blocks.

The cover of Bowie's *Heroes* and Pop's *The Idiot* owe their performative gestures to expressionist paintings and woodcuts by the German artist Erich Heckel, a founder of Die Brücke movement. Much of Bowie's theatricality was based in his early study in London of mime with Lindsay Kemp – an actor, dancer, mime and teacher. The proof sheet for the *Heroes* album cover photo session shows Bowie improvising for the camera, testing an array of gestures like an actor blocking movements for a stage play. In one frame he holds one hand over his mouth and the other over one ear in a mute 'hear no evil, speak no evil' gesture. Here Bowie's study of mime with Kemp surfaces overtly, that voiceless and somewhat passé theatrical form. The frame used for the cover, shot by Masayoshi Sukita, with its expressionist choreography of hands and glazed countenance was inspired by Heckel's 1917 painting *Roquairol*. Echoes of the exaggerated hand gestures in self-portraits of Egon Schiele, a victim

of the 1918 influenza pandemic, resound here also. Bowie in turn painted portraits of Iggy Pop in an expressionist style during their productive Berlin sojourn.

Instead of raw or achieved silence, one finds various moves in the direction of an ever-receding horizon of silence — moves which, by definition, can't ever be fully consummated. One result is a type of art which many people characterize pejoratively as dumb, depressed, acquiescent, cold. But these privative qualities exist in a context of the artist's objective intention, which is always discernible. To cultivate the metaphoric silence that's suggested by conventionally lifeless subjects (as in much of Pop Art) and to construct "minimal" forms which seem to lack emotional resonance are in themselves vigorous, often tonic choices. — Susan Sontag<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Pop's cover photo from *The Idiot* has him gesturing in unison with Bowie, with body language also inspired by Heckel's paintings. The title of Pop's *Idiot* is both a literary reference to Dostoevsky and a projection of dumbness (someone 'dumb' – a mute). This dumbness or blank lack of expression was a common trope in punk, a gesture of feigned stupidity to reflect the supposed meaninglessness of late 20th century life, this stance inspired by the antics of Dada. Graphic design and fashions of the punk and post-punk moment borrowed freely from the avant-garde with Dadaist collage, Situationism, Expressionism and Minimalism all fodder for the reductive ethos of this incarnation of art rock that followed in the footsteps of Glam with Bowie and Eno being the embodiment of Glam Rock's art school aesthetics. In Pop's hand gestures and blank face, the mute character is a perverse allusion: a vocalist struck dumb. Both albums by Bowie and Pop resonate with a coldness that mirrors the climate and political landscape of late '70s Cold War Berlin.

### **Volume 6: May 09, A Monotone Archive**

As the world enters into the thick of pandemic, memes disperse across social media. People post images and recollections of 'the top ten albums that changed my life', or of 'an image of me aged twenty'. These games of association and connection play across the internet via Facebook and Instagram. Facing collective trauma we cloak ourselves in nostalgia and the security of (past)times that seemed more certain. The personal archive is raided and shared.

I consider the growing number of photographs on my phone from which I post regularly to two Instagram feeds. The larger one operates as an informal visual diary while the second acts as an archive of sorts where I post, in black-and-white only, images relating to popular music's symbiosis with visual culture. The simplicity of black-and-white creates a seamlessness in the second feed. The post-punk or indie-era notion of the fanzine is evoked; of xeroxes, cheap copies and of cut-and-paste. I begin raiding the archive of these images to arrange in pairs for an artist's book. The collection considers images that relate to sound in muted depiction, in both their content and in monochrome. In my teens I was exposed to art-historical movements and ideas via music as much as through the visual arts. Savvy record sleeve designers raided art history as Post-Modernism arrived in the design field. Music packaging, associated fashions and in some cases more (in)formal approaches to life and work shifted under this influence. This democratisation of the avant-garde arrived via a deluge of punk and post-punk records that made their way to New Zealand. The ethics of DIY washed ashore in this small island nation.

How might we perceive the difference between a screenshot image from a social media post or a scanned medium format 120 negative when both are digitally doctored in Photoshop? Using filters I hide the poor qualities of the low resolution images to sit alongside those from more 'reputable' formats. In doing so a mutability takes place – a democratisation of the image. The supposedly high or low attributes are flattened within the pictorial space via software manipulation. This is similar to the manner in which poor quality samples and random noises – aspects of musique concrète – are used in avant-garde or electronic music. No sound is forbidden. By extension of this Cagean idea, no image quality is forbidden. In certain musical practices, deleterious noises are used as markers of authenticity,



like the raw brushwork in a painting transmitting the vigour of the painter's transference of idea to canvas. In the realm of digital manipulation, Photoshop filters are given names such as 'noise' or 'dust and scratches'. Both terms now applying themselves equally to the degradation of photographic and sound recordings. Certain Photoshop effects evoke a kind of synaesthesia to reverb in audio recordings.

A digital image to be seen, should not be merely exhibited but staged, performed. Here the image begins to function analogously to a piece of music, whose score, as is generally known is not identical to the musical piece—the score itself being silent. For music to resound, it has to be performed. Thus one can say that digitalization turns the visual arts into a performing art. – Boris Groys<sup>9</sup>

I realised I had gained proficiency to render a photographic ruse perhaps 15 years ago while living in New York. An artist-photographer was visiting the apartment and enquired as to what film stock and format I had used to create a series of large sepia-toned prints hanging in the living room. I told him it was made with a low resolution digital camera and Photoshop. The haunted qualities of Peter Peryer's Diana camera images were now accessible via the ghost in the machine.

To make a photo from a painting that you can put up on a wall again is comparable to making a painting from a photo. – Gerhard Richter<sup>10</sup>

The rendering of an image in black-and-white is a muting of reality. A photograph gestures indexically towards a time/place/event that is elsewhere and always in the past. With colour drained from the image, the photograph holds our perception at a distance from the vivid colour of the world.

I look to my photo archive for studio experiments over the past decade. In these is the genesis of an idea relating to my theme. This archive as a record/collection. A number of these works have been 'silenced' by my destruction of the original, only to be reanimated through reproduction in the present. I had worked with materials that could not guarantee archival quality: for example the colours used in the industrial dying of gaffer tape used in some works would bleach under the intense levels of local UV. The idea of destroying to create which was central to the punk ethos is recycled. In this approach also a nod towards Richter's slippages between photography and painting. A photograph of a destroyed painting becomes a primary image, a spectral stand-in for the discarded original.

It is inevitable that more and more art will be designed to end as photographs. A modernist would have to rewrite Pater's dictum that all art aspires to the condition of music. Now all art aspires to the condition of photography.<sup>11</sup>

Susan Sontag's work *On Photography*, with its philosophical enquiry into the ways in which the camera has altered modern consciousness in relation to time, memory and visual perception stands as a canonical text since its publication in 1977. I return to it as I return to my archive.

In 'The Aesthetics of Silence', a younger Sontag turned her mind towards silence as a strategy in art. This premise received a surgical dissection in a bravura display of her thinking in a tightly packed thirty pages. Sontag began by making a case for modern art practice as a site for reconciling the contradictions of exploring "spirituality" [the author's quote marks] in contemporary life. Given that pure or direct expression had become passé, a secondary approach arose relating to the artist's need for self-estrangement – to themselves and to their audience. This turning away she defined broadly as an engagement with silence.

The newer myth, derived from a post-psychological conception of consciousness, installs within the activity of art many of the paradoxes involved in attaining an absolute state of being described by the great religious mystics. As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject" (the "object," the "image"), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.<sup>12</sup>

Here Sontag nods to Cage's use of chance operations, by evoking it's opposite via intent while in subsequent essays in the collection she references him directly in quotation. Her text is composed as if the contents are under pressure, with more ideas per page than many writers might hope for in an entire essay. Sontag's tone in 'The Aesthetics of Silence' is simultaneously high-minded and wryly tongue-in-cheek. She celebrates these turns within art practice as she fires salvos into the contemporary art world's corpus.

Modern art's chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience can be regarded as a limited, vicarious participation in the ideal of silence which has been elevated as a prime standard of seriousness in the contemporary scene.

But it is also a contradictory form of participation in the ideal of silence. It's contradictory not only because the artist still continues making works of art, but also because the isolation of the work from its audience never lasts.<sup>13</sup>

### **Seventh Movement: September 18, Whither Walls?**

French writer and politician Andre Malraux's encyclopedic tome *The Voices of Silence (Les Voix du Silence)* 1953, posited the idea of the universal humanism of art, and how this experience shifted via photographic reproduction. He describes the development and the growth of art books as a moment that irrevocably changes the viewing of artworks, describing them as a 'Museum Without Walls'.

Indeed reproduction (like the art of fiction, which subdues reality to the imagination) has created what might be called "fictitious" arts, by systematically falsifying the scale of objects; by presenting oriental seals the same size as the decorative arts of pillars, and amulets like statues.<sup>14</sup>

What is achieved in the digital world of images that slide away from their sources into a silicone-generated uniformity? What becomes of their original scale, format or fidelity? This new landscape of image mutability in the digital realm may be seen as either democratic or destructive.

In looking at my archival images I uncover oblique autobiography, hidden histories. A photo of what appears to be waves coming upon a shore is in fact the excretions of plaster between the sarking boards of the walls in a colonial building at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds. The undulating forms imply the ongoing (and initially catastrophic) waves of new migrants to these shores along with their descendants, of which I am one. Floating in a black sea the composition echoes the record sleeve of Manchester band Joy Division's 1979 debut *Unknown Pleasures* and designer Peter Saville's reproduction of a data visualization of radio signals broadcast from the first discovered pulsar (CP 1919). This image-become-meme eloquently evoking the existential angst of the band's music and lyrics again repurposed to local history.

This evocation of sound via an image – photographic or painted – is mute. Like Bacon's *Screaming Pope* in painting, or Roy De Carava's wonderful collection of early 1960s jazz photos in the publication *The Sound I Saw*. Both image types mute(d) within the medium of their depiction, yet with the potential to sing to (or scream at) their audience.

### **Volume 8: A Recording Session, May 22 – Garden Dance.**

Traditional forms of social interaction are held at a remove for safety amid the global health crisis. In this 'once in a century' event, to speak of the face mask as a form of muting seems spurious, given it's simple yet potentially life-saving capacities.

A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, is not feasible — either conceptually or in fact. If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something

dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

I develop an idea for a short video using one of my music compositions that requires a dancer. I invite Cassandra Wilson – a former professional ballerina – to be my collaborator. The music is six minutes in duration for her to improvise to. There is no discussion about what she will do before we record the movement and there is an agreement that if either is uncomfortable with the result they may veto further development of the work. The staging addresses how we communicate during lockdown and links to the bigger thematic. The tempo is 128bpm, a tough but melancholy rhythm and melody, with saxophonist Michael Hall as the improvising soloist in parallel to the dancer. The music is intricately constructed as much as it is composed, almost entirely from individual sound sample library files. This structure is overlaid with minimal keyboard parts and saxophone. I work primarily on my laptop computer with an audio interface and a small keyboard. This was my portable home studio as I moved in recent years between New Zealand and The Netherlands. I work in a Studio Without Walls, on recordings that evoke no particular terrain even if they imply a sense of a physical or psychological space. The saxophone performance was recorded in London while on vacation from Amsterdam, the composition developing over time in three different countries. The sax parts are cut, pasted and rearranged from original takes recorded with another variation of the music. In doing so, the soloing has an inherently distanced or muted relationship to the finished music which supports it, creating a ghostly ambience.

Music is inscribed between noise and silence, in the space of the social codification it reveals. Every code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the same time reproduces them – Jacques Attali<sup>16</sup>

As such the music conveys a sense of a globalised, borderless culture, lost to the flow of late capitalism. In a simple one shot, one take film, the collaboration is constructed with distance between the players/performer as an integral aspect. My intent was not to engage a working professional who might deliver an impeccable performance, rather via an open-ended process where a certain fragility is possible, with small mistakes or faltering adding humanity to the work. In setting up the framework, a 'silent conversation' takes place under current conditions and between supposedly different stylistic worlds. A document emerges illuminating how we re-engage with ourselves and each other during the lockdown with creativity as a way of breaking through the constraints, necessary as they may be. The work is in chorus with the many lockdown videos that proliferate as communities seek new ways to connect.

My small back garden has a gate that opens to a wide public lawn and the street. The dancer enters through the gate into the small courtyard and dons a pair of headphones. Only she can hear the music. She presses play on her phone and dances to it in one continuous six-minute take. When the track finishes she exits back through the gate having performed at a safe distance from the camera. The work of English choreographer Michael Clarke who in the 1980s fused classical ballet to post-punk music is a reference point, along with Yves Klein's *Leap Into The Void* as a depiction of a risk taking physical feat set against a prosaic urban backdrop. The dancer herself as a muted character, using only body language to communicate while I as the composer converse with her via the music.

In the installation a pair of headphones allow one viewer at a time to hear what the dancer hears, a one-to-one exchange, while the sound in the room is a slowed down, ambient remix of the headphone recording. The sliding space between the dancer's movement and the slower audio engenders a feeling of silence. The deliberate lack of synch between the ambient audio and the video make the two elements shift constantly, opening up a sense of social dislocation while maintaining a fragile connection.

### 9th Movement. Virtual Tape Splicing: Hauntology and Lost Futures.

In the editor's introduction to *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher*, editor Darren Ambrose describes the UK political and cultural theorist, as someone who 'provided original, savage, and stylish dissections of our moribund culture, and continually observed how popular modernist films, books, television and music had a lifelong effect on him continue to "haunt" our collective present'.<sup>17</sup>

Taking the term coined by French theorist Jacques Derrida, 'hauntology' shifted from its origins in Marxist deconstruction theory, reappearing in contemporary music writing in the early 2000s to describe a number of artists whose work was:

...suffused with an overwhelming melancholy... preoccupied with the way in which technology materialised memory – hence a fascination with television, vinyl records, audiotape, and with the sounds of these technologies breaking down.<sup>18</sup>

In the audio for *Garden Dance*, the reworking of a theme and variation borrows from the compositional approach used in cinema, with its roots in classical symphonic structure. My music is an attempt to evoke elegiac Manchester post-punk grafted onto the warm/cold futurisms of Detroit techno. My own family roots run back to Northern England and I have spent time in Detroit in my work as a designer/photographer. Both cities produced Ballardian influenced sound worlds that embody a sense of urban alienation and decay. Dystopian Sci-Fi was at the core: Manchester and Detroit, both cities being exemplars of what Fisher describes as 'lost futures', a key phrase in his articulation of hauntology in a musical context.

In hauntological music there is an implicit acknowledgement that the hopes created by post-war electronica or by the euphoric dance music of the 1990s have evaporated – not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible. Yet at the same time, the music constitutes a refusal to give up on the desire for the future. This refusal gives the melancholia a political dimension, because it amounts to a failure to accommodate to the closed horizons of capitalist realism.<sup>19</sup>

Five years before Ian Curtis recorded his haunted lyrics on Joy Division's first album – 1979's *Unknown Pleasures*, the quintessential English alien of the prior decade, David Bowie, decamped to Philadelphia to record his album *Young Americans*. Bowie's early and ongoing love for black music was reaffirmed in what he dubbed his 'plastic soul' period. In naming the work thus he acknowledged his debt while foregrounding an incapacity for authenticity. His lip syncing performance of *Golden Years*, a smiling yet disconnected presence in front of a live audience on the TV show *Soul Train* in 1975 is a watershed moment in cross-cultural exchange in modern pop music.

Throughout the 20th century, music culture was a probe that played a major role in preparing the population to enjoy a future that was no longer white, male or heterosexual, a future in which the relinquishing of identities that were in any case poor fictions would be a blessed relief.<sup>20</sup>

Here Bowie mimes to his own voice as he bares his plastic soul, the latest guise in an ongoing stream of self-inventions. With an emaciated body sculpted from psychosis-inducing levels of cocaine use, he looks haunted. Bowie as the self-professed 'thin white duke', a spectral character who shape shifts between joyous engagement and ghostly presence. Similarly, Curtis's performances are often described as haunted or possessed after his suicide at twenty-three, brought on by the pressures of performance, a failing marriage and his epilepsy – which was often triggered onstage. In mid-performance with whirling arms he seems to be channelling spirits from another time – this haunted quality retrospectively seen in relation to his illness and the dark, personal subject matter of his lyrics. Bowie, in his *Soul Train* performance – an inversion of the cultural paradigm where black performers regularly played to all-white audiences on US television – understands the import of his moment, grinning as he breaks down barriers in a culture reversal. As an art pop performer he tore through stylistic conventions, gender norms and the racially segregated cultural landscape of America.

These days Bowie stands for all the lost possibilities going by the idea of art pop – which is to say, not only pop plus art, or pop as art, but a circuit where fashion, visual art and experimental culture connected up and renewed each other in unpredictable ways.<sup>21</sup>

In the current multidimensional crisis unfolding in the USA, footage of an early 1980s MTV interview with Bowie recirculates on YouTube showing him excoriating his befuddled white host for the lack of black music being broadcast on this new popular channel. At his best Bowie was transmitting to a future audience.

### **Volume X: June 06, American Music – Powderhorn Park, Minneapolis**

One's own silence begets the space to listen. Days after the death of George Floyd, social media posts implore users to 'BE MUTED | & LISTENING | #AMPLIFYMELANATEDVOICES'. What do I see and hear? The rush of crowded streets in the aftermath of yet another murder documented on camera, committed by a policeman in broad daylight. What does the sound of a nation tearing itself apart sound like? Sirens (again), mass chanting and wailing, the smashing of glass, of property, of bodies. The pop of small firearms and the heavier thuds of teargas cannisters. The involuntary sounds that emanate from a body shaking off tears of shock, rage and terror. This barrage of imagery piles up on the barricades of one's sensibilities, a raw, low resolution broadcast across social media in the unfolding crisis. The current wave begins in Minneapolis, hometown of the musician Prince. *Sign O' The Times* indeed.

An artist's negative reaction to repressive, state-organised power is something that almost goes without saying.

Artists who are committed to the tradition of modernity will feel themselves unambiguously compelled by this tradition to defend the individual's sovereignty against state oppression. – Boris Groys<sup>22</sup>

I was brought to tears at the election of the two previous American Presidents. Number 44, for the fact that Obama could rise to be 'Leader of the Free World' in a nation whose history was bound in shackles. Watching the election results on CNN in Shanghai, I joyfully text messaged friends in New York City where I had lived for the preceding decade. As for number 45, on the day of his election I was working in Northland, Aotearoa. Stopping at the small town of Ahipara for the night, I entered a bottle store and into conversation with two women working behind the counter, one Māori, the other Pākehā. They planned to share a bottle of wine at closing and commiserate as the results rolled in. They spoke with clear-sightedness of the dark symbolism of the moment with a lucidity in contrast to what Trump had already shown himself incapable. Two working women in a small town with a clear view of the moment, worlds away from the bellicose man who took the podium later that night, obviously stunned at the result. A racist (remember the Central Park 5 press ad) assumed a role to which he was profoundly ill-suited. Four years later the United States is in tatters. Witness the brandishing of a bible in front of a church with its own pastors tear gassed so the President can stage a photo opportunity; or a rally in Tulsa, the historical site of the 1921 white-supremacist razing of a black community and the murder of over 100 of its citizens. Trump's Tulsa event was to be staged on June 19th, known as Juneteenth, the day which commemorates the freeing of the last slaves almost two years after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862. Daily injustices pile atop injury as the pressures of pandemic, ecological collapse and the global return of autocratic leadership threaten us on an existential level. The current situation in the US being the most urgent example for those living in a predominantly Western paradigm. For others in Russia, Belarus, or Hong Kong – who breathes, who speaks and who is silenced are daily dilemmas.

And together we'll stare into silence

And we'll try to imagine what it looks like

Yeah, we'll try to imagine what, what silence looks like<sup>23</sup>

### **11th Movement: The Province of Silence**

In art photography in Aotearoa New Zealand one cannot look beyond Laurence Aberhart who has practiced at the forefront while looking back, working almost exclusively in the vintage 8×10” glass plate format. One image alone from his oeuvre encompasses a vast array of silences from a Pākehā perspective. In his astonishing photo *Nature Morte (silence), Savage Club, Wanganui, 20 February 1986* we see:

A carved Māori figure, cut off half way through its face by the frame, stands centre right. At the far right are drapes, on the far left is a section of plank with kowhaiwhai painted on it and to the right of this some wooden tree trunks sharpened like palisade uprights. A sign reading “silence” is placed at the top left and a loudspeaker in a box sits on the floor directly below this.<sup>24</sup>

The above description comes from an overview of the work from the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa website. This photograph was Plate 1 in a sequence of 223 exquisite reproductions in the survey exhibition publication *Aberhart* organised by City Gallery Wellington and Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2007. Curator/writers Gregory O’Brien and Justin Paton selecting this image as the portal into an illustrious grouping of his contact-printed works. The image opens up multiple interpretations in relation to sound/image/silence as well as local culture and history. The cropping of the ersatz whakairo (carved) figure excludes the eyes to highlight the open mouth with its whētero (protruding tongue) sitting alongside the sign reading ‘SILENCE’, which in turn is placed directly over, and partially obscuring a takarangi spiral; a customary form which may be interpreted as depicting the beginning of creation. The speaker box on the lower left, a low-fi cabinet forlornly sits in stark contrast to the fidelity of Aberhart’s camera and his unerring eye. The photographer’s selection and cropping gathers together the elements in the mise en scène from what was likely the side stage of a kind of vaudeville entertainment space. The Savage Clubs were formed in New Zealand in the late 1800s as outposts of English literary establishments that became light entertainment halls. In New Zealand Savage Clubs the raw appropriation of Māori visual forms, customs and performances were crudely grafted to Pākehā social rites. The etymology of the name Savage Club itself an ironic ode to a little-known English poet. Given this information, one is left to ponder the connection between the clubs’ namesake and local appropriative cultural practices. Times and attitudes change yet Aberhart’s colonial-era technology remains steadfast as he illuminates a way forward while looking slowly and deeply at the pasts embedded in our landscapes and architecture. The Wanganui Savage Club closed after 125 years with dwindling numbers in June 2016. The building ownership was transferred to the Whanganui Musicians’ Club upon closing of operations.

### **Volume 12: June 10, The Whisper of White Tears**

We live in a colonised place. Aotearoa New Zealand with its own specifics. From the early 1800s a whisper into a scream, with the Land Wars ushering in a landslide of property thefts, along with repressive acts of parliament and other crimes against tangata whenua. This escalation happening after the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840.

In my most recent return to these shores I see two recently erected bilingual welcome signs at the southern entry to my home town, crossing the Waingawa River. The name of my Wairarapa birthplace is Whakaoriori, (the pre-colonial name for the Masterton area) the meaning in te reo Māori is a lullaby composed upon the birth of a chiefly child. The songs of the landscape rise up for those with an ear for their cadences.

In the American epoch, colonisation’s aftermath lurches between horror and farce. From Powderhorn Park to the Hollywood bizarre of Space Force. Even the original satellite that orbits Earth was colonised in symbolic fashion by The United States with the planting of the flag in 1969 in what Buzz Aldrin described as “magnificent desolation”. Fifty-one years later the flag is bleached white, surrendering itself to moon dust.

This is a doomed country, it seems to me. I only pray that, when America founders, it doesn't drag the rest of the planet down too. But one should notice that, during its long elephantine agony, America is also producing its subtlest minority generation of the decent and sensitive, young people who are alienated as Americans. They are not drawn to the stale truths of their sad elders (though these are truths). More of their elders should be listening to them.<sup>25</sup>

In her 1966 essay 'What's Happening in America', from the same collection that holds 'The Aesthetics of Silence', the bleak tone of Sontag's writing could equally describe the present.

### Coda: November 29

Words move, music moves  
Only in time; but that which is only living  
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence.<sup>26</sup>

We broadcast our truths and fictions into spaces: of the page, the canvas, the screen; the gallery, the street, the intimacy of domestic environments. Like the gold record on the 1977 Voyager mission with its embedded sounds and visual marker systems, we transmit towards an unknown audience. The disc is now roughly twelve billion miles away in interstellar space. We move within the unknowable vastness of an increasingly mapped silence into which we are noisily and briefly suspended. In considering a muted thematic in sound and image, I do not imply the impossibility of enriching discussion in this current turbulence; on the contrary, in doing so I hope to construct a place for quiet contemplation and conversation in a world that is being constantly formed under intense pressure.

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*Turntable Paintings*  
Visions Gallery Auckland  
10 June – 11 July 2020





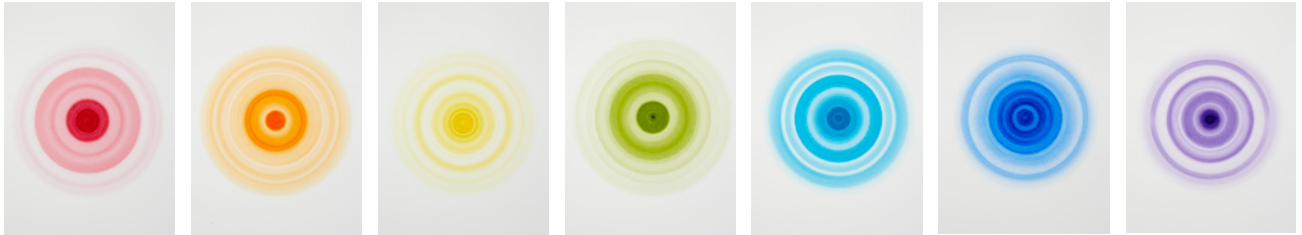
*Turntable Paintings*, installation view



*Turntable Paintings*, installation view



*Turntable Paintings*, installation view



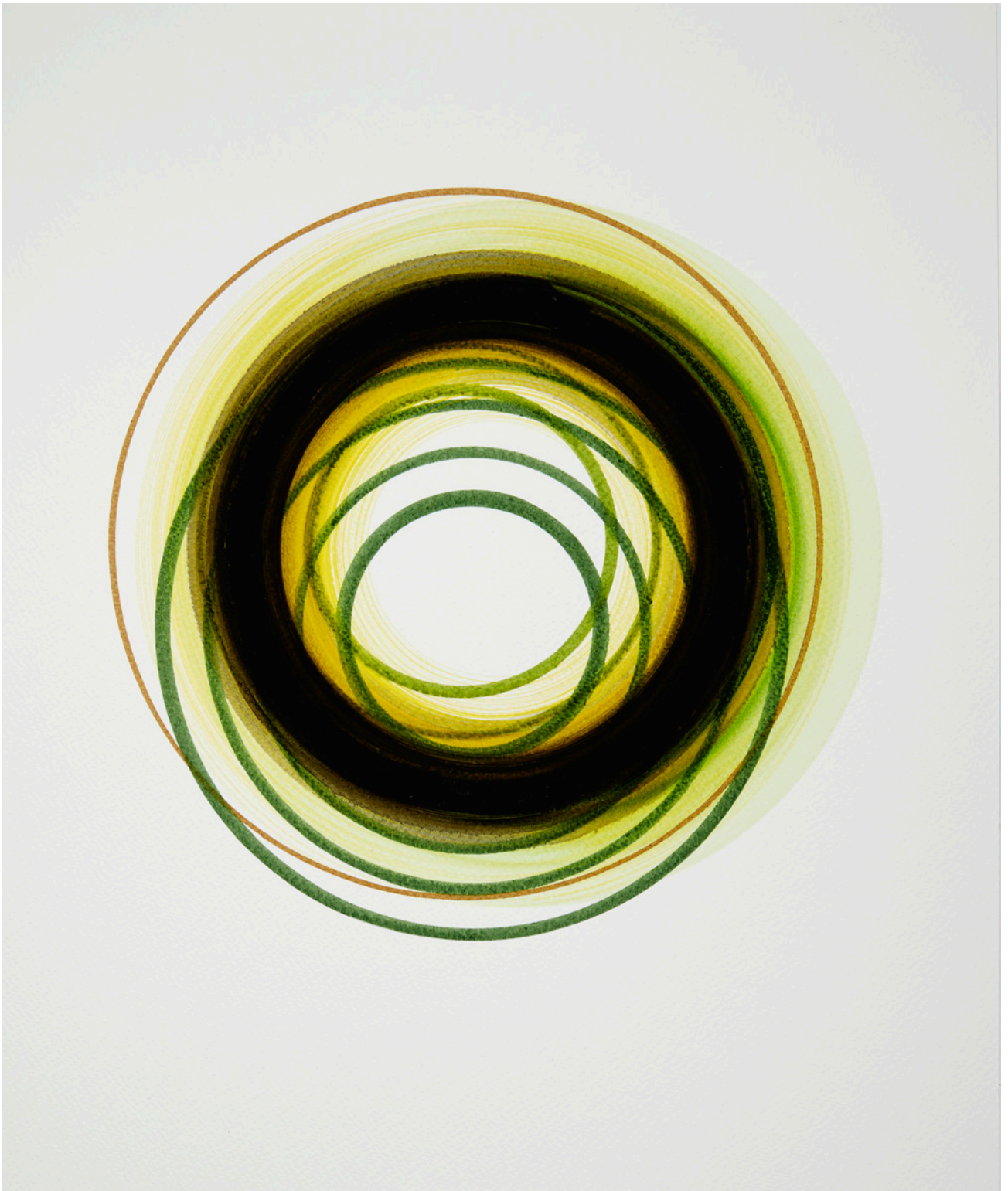
*Monotone I-VII 2020*  
watercolour on 300gsm watercolour paper, 210×290mm e ach



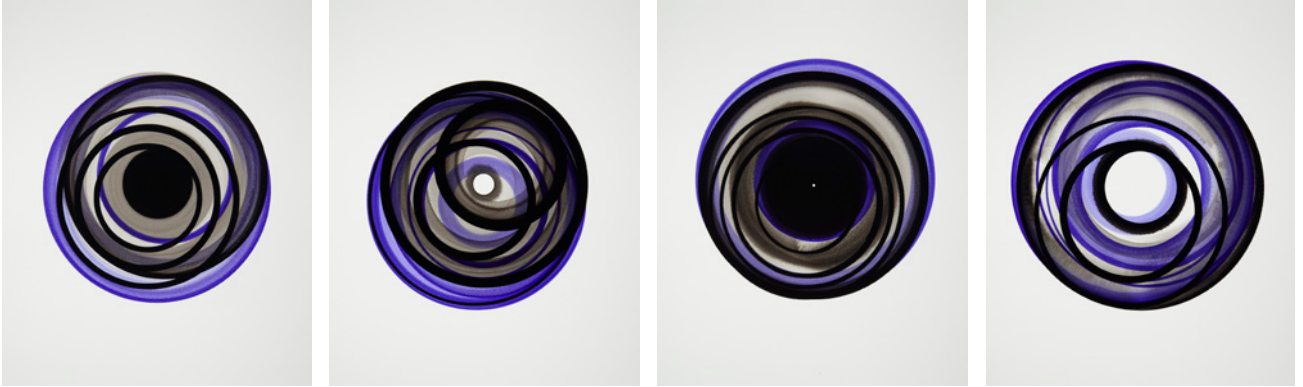
Monotone V 2020  
watercolour on 300gsm watercolour paper, 210×290mm



*After Nature I-IV* 2020  
ink on 300gsm watercolour paper, 320×390mm each

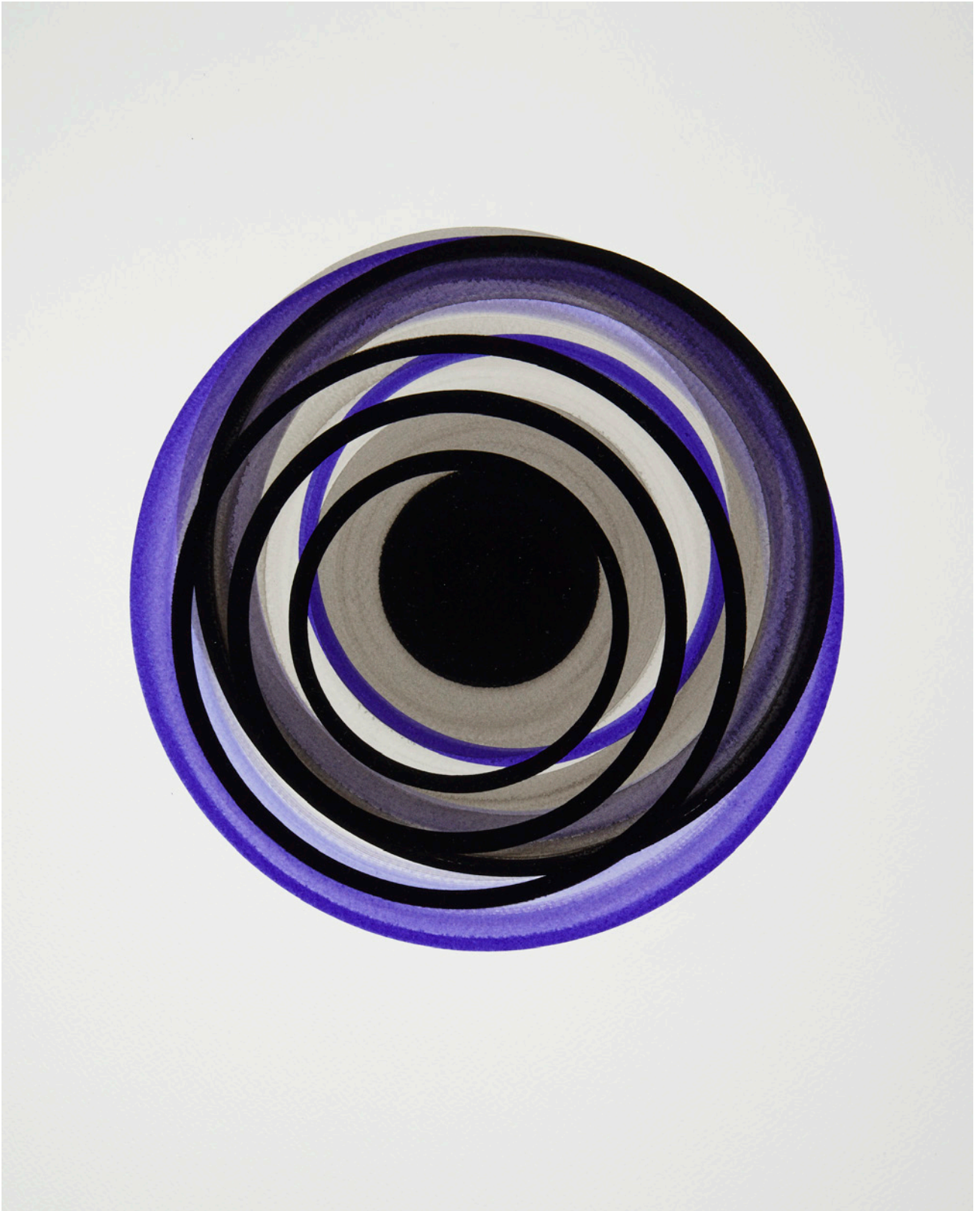


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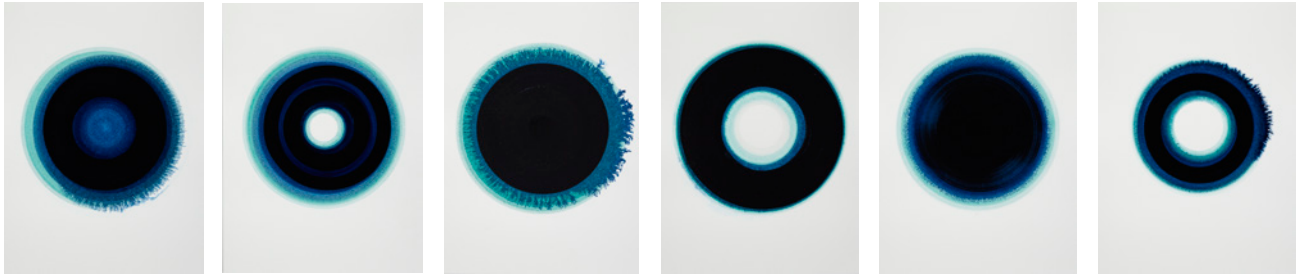


*Wild Violet I-IV* 2020  
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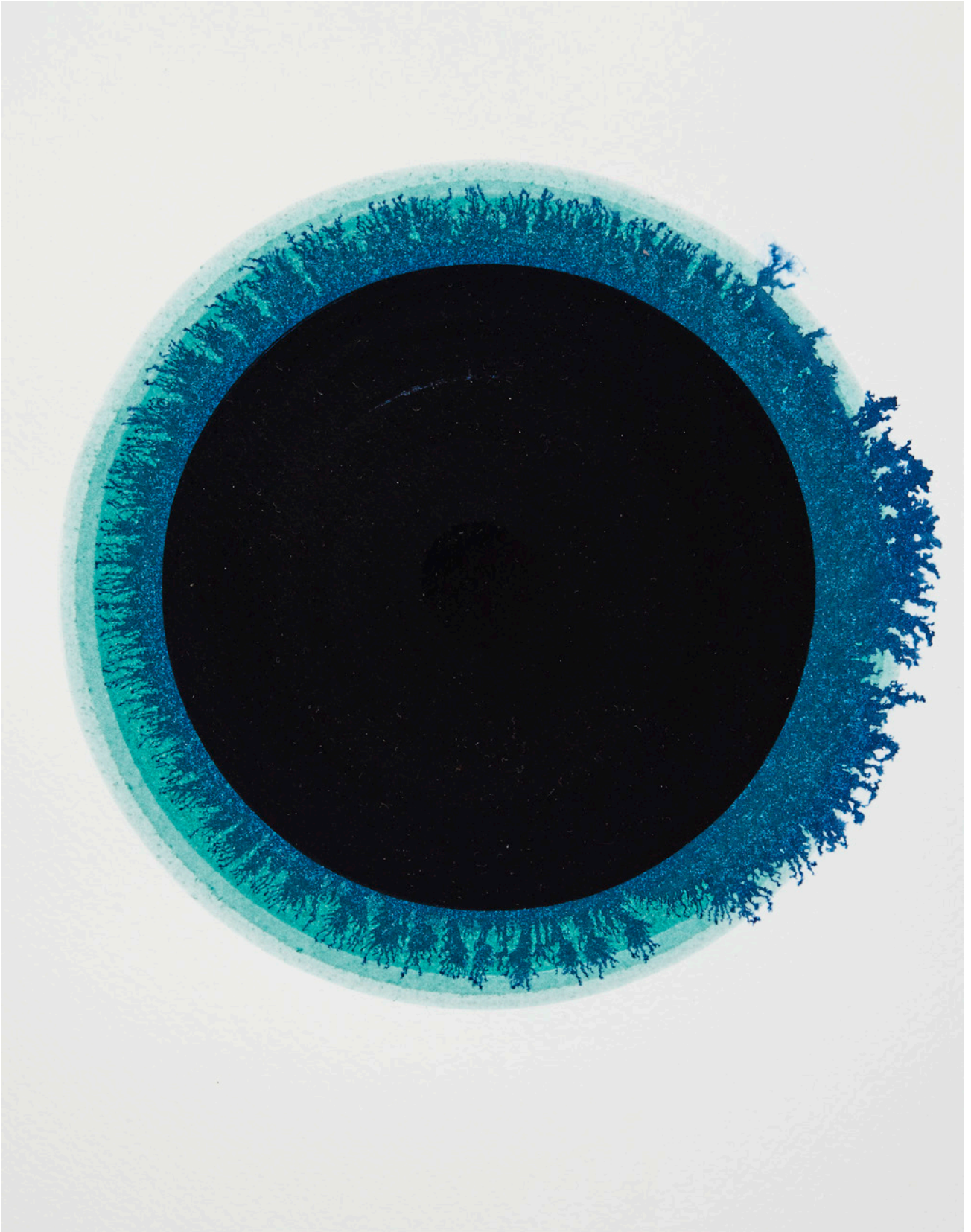




*Wild Violet I 2020*  
ink on 300gsm watercolour paper, 320×390mm



*Soft Worlds I-VI 2020*  
ink on 300gsm watercolour paper, 210×285mm each



*Soft Worlds III 2020*  
ink on 300gsm watercolour paper, 210×285mm