

**Uncanny Bodies: an arts practice-based
exploration of strategies to embody thresholds
between life and death**

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Abstract

My research explores strategies for creating artwork that inhabits an uncanny, liminal realm and that embodies thresholds between life and death. This thesis is a written commentary of this inquiry, which was made using an arts practice-based methodology that involves employing praxis and reflective processes in an ongoing, cyclical way. I combine this with Viktor Shklovsky's technique of *ostranenie* and a process of *not knowing*, with the intention to create outcomes which are unfamiliar or strange. Drawing, painting and writing reflectively has played a significant role in this methodology, allowing ideas to be evaluated, reimagined and propelled forward. Using this approach has enabled me to examine, appraise and develop digital video, photographic and intaglio prints in the studio and in site-specific locations. My intention is to create spectral images that blur the boundaries between materiality and immateriality, real and illusion, alive and dead.

I consider the "technospatial configuration" (M.Elcott, 2016) of phantasmagoria and examine the uncanniness of digital moving image in relation to my practice and to modes of spectatorship. Using projected images of the body that hover between the animate and the inanimate I investigate ways to rupture the boundaries of the spatial parameters of the gallery and the virtual space of the media screen. By collapsing the borders that divide these two spaces I aim to evoke the uncanny feeling of a phantasmagoric presence, a haunting by a body that is both here and there.

Through my research I build on Kate Mondloch's theory of "spectatorial doubleness", lending the conversation a Barthesian perspective and a reflection on mortality. I establish a process for the creation of site-specific video installations involving the recording of a site using a video camera and the subsequent projection of the edited video back into the same room. The use of spatial and temporal deixis enables me to embody notions of presence / absence and mortality, while my written commentary brings together research on the uncanny, indexicality, the phantasmagoria of pre-cinema and the nature of the media screen in relation to video installation. This will be of interest to artist practitioners and researchers who are exploring similar terrain.

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Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the exploration of uncanny, liminal states. Using an arts practice-based inquiry I question how to develop strategies in which to create visually ambiguous forms that inhabit the borderland between life and death. My interest in this area of investigation came from a desire to explore my anxieties connected to notions of mortality, and was also partly linked to the realisation that as my family aged and I became a parent I too entered a liminal state of my own. This research also represents a continuation of my MA in Contemporary Arts, during which I used moving image to explore similar ground.

The liminal is concerned with ambiguous, transitional states and relies on uncertainties and suggestion, the unknown and mystery rather than concrete knowledge. For this reason, I was aware from the outset of my research that a clearly articulated answer may not be forthcoming, however it was my intention to use an arts practice-based inquiry as the principal mode of investigation. There may be challenges that arise when trying to express what may be seen as ineffable and as Robin Nelson recognises, embarking on a research project which explores liminal states runs a course “betwixt and between rational argument and embodied knowledge”. An inquiry situated in this area can and should, however, be examined through praxis (Nelson, 2006, p. 108):

The case for such praxis (theory imbricated within practice) is not only that it effectively makes arguments but that the arguments are better made in the praxis...rather than in writing.

Using Robin Nelson’s *Dynamic Model for Practice as Research* as a methodology enabled new insights to emerge as I progressed. This model relies on an ongoing, dynamic interplay between different modes of knowledge production, ensuring that the knowledge acquired by my arts practice was supported and developed through the close integration of contextual research. The articulation of my praxis also relied on periods of critical reflection (Nelson, 2006).

Through my research I have used a DSLR camera and journals, both as recording tools and as a way to reflect critically on experiments and outcomes. Written reflection, automatic writing processes and drawing and painting (**Figure 1**) provided a way to think through my praxis. Audience feedback also played a significant role in the further development of my inquiries.



Figure 1 Painting in my journal, 2017

Donald Schön's theory of *The Reflective Practitioner* recognises that some types of knowledge are often difficult to explain, particularly if it is gained through an experiential process. Using Schön's theory was significant in how I engaged with the process of making, predominantly in relation to the development of new methods. I approached my inquiry in the studio using *reflection-in-action*, placing great importance on unconscious processes, recognising that in

the act of making the need to work spontaneously often arises in moments of doubt.¹ *Reflection-on-action* after the event allowed me to explore my feelings about what had occurred in order to propel ideas forward; this was complemented by experiential feedback and discussion from my peer group (Schön, 1983/2016).²

I have also approached my studio inquiry using Viktor Shklovsky's technique of *ostranenie* or *making strange* as a way to locate and draw out the uncanny, the unfamiliar and unknown in my work. I have explored strategies to enable this and also examine approaches used by other artists, looking in particular at how they engage with states of *not knowing* and uncertainty in their practice. Both Shklovsky's essay *Art as Device* (Shklovsky, 1917/2017) and *Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, a collection of essays that explores the role of *not knowing* within the creative process, have supported this aspect of my research.

Though this inquiry has used printmaking, drawing, painting and photography, I have most commonly used video as a way to interrogate the questions that my research raises. Digital moving image and sound is able to create a remarkable facsimile of the world as we experience it, but I am particularly interested in its uncanny capacity to record and preserve life beyond death. The impalpable material qualities of the projection beam also hold a fascination for me.

Contextual background

We live in a world where we seek out certainty. Since the Age of Enlightenment, the pursuit of knowledge and scientific advancements have established what we may consider to be a secular world governed by rational thinking. Despite this, belief in the supernatural, in spirits and a fascination with death still persists within our imaginations. Though we may claim not to believe in animism or the return of the dead, these thoughts may be lying dormant until something appears to support our fears. In Freud's 1919 essay *The Uncanny*, he explains that

¹ Reflection-in-action takes place during the event and as a result of intuitive or spontaneous performance. It relies on the realisation of surprising results or an unexpected encounter, which may suggest the potential for further development, be pleasing or unwanted. Reflection-on-action takes place as a way to make sense of and critically analyse the insights that have surfaced and may later be embodied in later actions (Schön, 1983/2016).

² Weekly seminars chaired by Professor Ray Lee are held at Oxford Brookes and provide School of Arts students with the opportunity to share research and receive group feedback.

it is when the “primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (Freud, 1958/1986, p. 157) that we can have an uncanny experience. Freud’s short essay was a starting point for my inquiry and was supported by Nicholas Royle’s longer and broader study that considers the wider aspects of this difficult to define theory.

The uncanny is concerned with uncertainties, with the mysterious and “all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror” (Freud, 1958/1986, p. 122). It can occur for many reasons and can arise out of a strange blurring of the familiar and unfamiliar. Central to Freud’s uncanny are notions of mortality, specifically our fear of the already dead returning to haunt the present and our inability to grasp our own death. There is fear and a human fascination in the boundaries between life and death and the uncanny deals with the intellectual doubts that we may experience when these become blurred. This may include the experience of an animate body that seems to have been stilled, an apparently lifeless object that threatens to come to life, or an apparition. This is situated in the “enthralling borderland” (Warner, 2006, p. 3) that Marina Warner’s book *Phantasmagoria* engages with. Her study of the spirit, of the supernatural and the human imagination since the Enlightenment has provided me with an understanding of the changing ways that immaterial forces have been represented through metaphor and in visual form.

Through my inquiry I looked to find ways in which to embody the uncanny threshold states between the animate and the inanimate and the material and the immaterial. Investigating related visual forms has led me to scrutinise the Phantasmagoria, the projected illusions that tricked and terrified an incredulous public. Tom Gunning’s essay on these spectral projections, *Illusions Past and Future: Phantasmagoria and Its Specters* (Gunning, 2004) provided an historical context and was complemented by his later analysis in *Uncanny Reflections, Modern Illusions: Sighting the Modern Optical Uncanny* (Gunning, 2008) in which he contemplates the idea of the modern uncanny in relation to phantasmagoria and the role of optical devices. Noam Elcott’s examination of the *Phantasmagoric Dispositif* brings a broader understanding of where contemporary phantasmagorias may exist in the art world. His description of the “technospatial configuration” (Elcott, 2016, p. 55) of phantasmagorias helped to provide further insights into theories of the image-spectator relationship, and

brought to my attention the gaps that exist in recognising this “*dispositif*” and the presence of phantasmagoria in a wider context. As Elcott states (Elcott, 2016, p. 46):

neither art history nor film studies recognizes phantasmagoria as a fundamental configuration of image and spectator—one with deep media archaeological roots and myriad contemporary manifestations.

Laura Mulvey writes about the uncanniness of the nocturnal world of the cinema and its potential to mechanically animate the inanimate, particularly in relation to the human figure. In *Death 24x a Second*, she investigates this blurring of the boundaries between life and death, examining the overlap between Piercian semiotic theory and Freud’s uncanny (Mulvey, 2006). Mulvey re-evaluates Roland Barthes’ essay *Camera Lucida*, his personal reflection on the meaning of photography, applying these ideas to modern cinema and new technology. I focused in particular on Barthes’ and Mulvey’s examination of the photographic index, an “umbilical cord” which links the material registration of an image in the past, to the present in which it is observed. Barthes describes this as “an emanation of past reality” (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 88) creating a confusing and uncertain relationship with time which evokes the shadows of the past and uncanny feelings provoked by the “return of the dead” (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 9).

As part of my further research into filmic and televisual phenomena and the evolution of these forms, I looked closely at *Installation and the Moving Image* by artist practitioner and critic Catherine Elwes. This not only presented me with a genealogy of this field from the perspective of an artist and writer, but also built on modes of spectatorship, introducing me to ideas of “seeing double” (Elwes, 2015, p. 146). Kate Mondloch investigates how screen-reliant art is experienced by spectators in gallery and museum spaces and proposes the notion of “spectatorial doubleness” (Mondloch, 2010, p. 64), whereby the use of both material apparatus such as screens and projected virtual spaces enables a kind of temporal and spatial displacement for the spectator. The potential to lead the viewer’s awareness beyond the architecture of the room whilst also remaining firmly there was particularly interesting to me in relation to the understanding of real and virtual spaces, the material and the immaterial.

Alongside the critical analysis of writers and thinkers I have explored how artists have investigated similar territory. Antony Gormley's sculptures explore the nature of having a human body and its relationship to space. It was however an installation, *Blind Light* (Gormley, 2007), which was particularly significant for me in light of my initial visual investigations. The creation of a chamber of mist in which the viewer is enclosed creates an anxiety inducing field of infinite space, where we become disembodied. Bill Viola's videos and video installations deal with universal human experiences such as birth and death and confront extreme states of being. I have considered Viola's body of work in relation to my own and reflect on his use of the figure to place ourselves within the images that we observe. Viola's work and that of Tacita Dean and Andrei Tarkovsky have helped me to consider film and video as a medium that can express duration; both Tarkovsky and Dean use natural phenomena as a way to present the passing of time. In order to further explore "real time" images and the uncanny thresholds of the material and immaterial I have turned to Gary Hill's *Tall Ships* (Hill, 1992), a video installation of ghostly figures that is experienced in near total darkness and in which "the images have been freed into the materiality of real time and space" (Elcott, 2016, p. 45). For Noam Elcott this is an example of a modern phantasmagoria. Notions of absence and presence are also explored in Cardiff and Miller's *Paradise institute*, a "doubly enclosed" video installation of a miniature cinema that requires the viewer to navigate the gradually blurring boundaries between reality and illusion. Like my videos *Margin* and *Visitor*, *The Paradise Institute* relies upon the spectator's "double consciousness" (Uroskie, 2014, pp. 1-2).

Though other artists and artist researchers have explored the uncanny and liminal experiences, a gap exists for a practice-based study that draws on the uncanny, indexicality, the phantasmagoria and modes of spectatorship in order to embody notions of mortality.

Research Questions:

Through my praxis I investigate the following questions:

- *In what ways can I use projected images and screens to explore the uncanny thresholds between the material and the immaterial and the animate and the inanimate.*

- *In what ways can I collapse the boundaries between the spatial parameters of the gallery and the virtual space of the media screen, leading to a liminal experience?*
- *In what ways can I use the process of ostranenie or 'making strange' to create a sense of the unfamiliar and unknown using visual forms.*

Throughout both chapter one and two I reflect on my methodology and the processes that I have used, using photographic evidence to support my writing. Specifically, in chapter one I investigate the projected image and the nature of the screen, finding ways to create images that hover between the material and the immaterial. My inquiry goes on to examine the uncanny nature of the moving image and the thresholds between the animate and inanimate. I then investigate the fleeting qualities of projected phantasmagoria and the ambiguous permanence of stilled, printed images. In chapter two I look closely at forms of spectatorship and focus on ways to create a kind of spatial and temporal displacement for the viewer, by simultaneously drawing attention to the virtual space of the screen and the architecture of the gallery space they are situated in. I investigate the index and in particular the use of deictic language in order to create an uncanny link between the present and the past.

In my conclusion I expand on my findings, which have come about as a response to my research questions. This also contains my contribution which includes:

- The development of an effective process for establishing site specific video installations which embody notions of presence / absence and life / death.
- Building on Kate Mondloch's theory of "spectatorial doubleness" through the use of site-specific video installations, lending the conversation a Barthesian perspective through the use of deixis. This is supported by and builds on Alison Butler's essay *A Deictic Turn: Space and Location in Contemporary Gallery Film and Video Installation* through my use of an arts-based practice and my exploration of notions of mortality.
- A broad contextual inquiry which brings together research on the uncanny, indexicality, the phantasmagoria of pre-cinema and the nature of the media screen in relation to video installation and the embodiment of notions of mortality.

- The development of a methodology which combines Robin Nelson's *Dynamic Model for Practice as Research* and Donald Schön's *Reflective Practitioner*. This involves the use of methods and processes which I found effective in embodying thresholds between life and death.

The appendix then finally documents my practice outcomes.

Chapter 1

The Subtle Body

This chapter is an account of early studio work. Fundamental to the question I had posed, was understanding how I could use still and moving image to create forms that sit on the threshold of materiality and immateriality, embodying a liminal state in between life and death. Throughout this research I have pursued images that possess these strange ambiguities and which are located in what Marina Warner describes as the “terrible, and enthralling borderland between animation and lifelessness” (Warner, 2006, p. 3). This body of work reflects an anxiety and uncertainty in my understanding of the world around me and explores my uncertain relationship with our finite existence.

The transformation of an image from a familiar object into something unfamiliar and difficult to perceive holds a fascination for me. Though it isn't clear to me why this is something that grips me, it seems to me to be driven by a desire to encounter what I don't understand and an attempt to seek out wonder, uncertainty and the unknown. Viktor Shklovsky's model of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization is one of a number of artistic approaches used by writers and artists in turning the perceived world on its head and 'making strange'.³ Video work that I had made before beginning my research sought to explore these interests and as I began my inquiry I wanted to build upon these ideas. In Shklovsky's 1917 essay, *Art as Device*, he describes the purpose of art as to present the world as something yet unseen and unknown. Its goal is to (Shklovsky, 1917/2017, p. 78):

create the sensation of seeing, and not merely; the device of art is the '*ostranenie*' of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged.

³ Viktor Shklovsky's model of *ostranenie* has been translated as *making strange* (or alternatively as *defamiliarization*, *deautomatization*, *estrangement*, or *alienation*). It has been compared with Derrida's concept of *différance* (Crawford, 1984) and more notably with Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung*. However, as Simon Spiegel notes there are fundamental differences that separate them (Spiegel, 2008).

This process of *defamiliarization* or *estrangement* has been central to my research, in making imagery that resists an immediate reading and that requires a more in-depth engagement in order to begin to perceive it. This has also lent my work a degree of tension, whereby reason and certainty become destabilised.

I began my research by acting upon to a desire to locate and engage with indeterminate, alien landscapes where my experience of the world could be unsettled. I was able to initially articulate this feeling as related to the disorientating and unnerving experience of getting lost, or of losing oneself within an unfamiliar place removed from the world; this also seemed to me to reflect a delightful interaction with what may be an unpleasurable experience. These ideas led to an interest in the potential of mist to conceal and create expansive and formless landscapes, where I might be able to encounter these feelings of strangeness, anxiety and uncertainty.

Though my decision to look for locales cloaked in thick mists was connected to my wider reading, it also came out of an intuitive sense of what felt right and a tacit understanding that layers of mist, much like freshly fallen snow, could change a landscape so that it became an unfamiliar and mysterious, liminal place.⁴ Choosing to pursue this direction was not however preceded by a rationale that I was able to articulate; before the words created a narrative and described my conscious intention, I acted on an instinctive desire to encounter these conditions and to discover what standing in a landscape covered in mist was like. I had already begun to consider this from the point of view of a camera lens; what might this look like within the frame of a viewfinder or later projected onto a wall and how could my experience be presented in such a way that my understanding of the world be communicated? My interest

⁴ A valley covered in mist transforms the landscape into an uncertain and unknowable place. What is in the mist becomes ambiguous and uncanny in its concealment and the enveloped landscape becomes a space of infinite beyonds. These dislocating and uncertain conditions may lead to an experience of what may be described as the liminal, a state of “in-betweenness”. The “liminal” was a term that was initially developed by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (Gennep, 2019) and then later conceptualised by Victor Turner. It comes from the Latin word *limen*, meaning “threshold” and relates to “a transitional or intermediate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life, esp. as marked by a ritual or rite of passage” (Liminal, n.d). This is a state that Arnold Turner described as, “a place that is not a place and a time that is not a time” (Turner, 1974). Though the emergence of liminality as a concept came from the field of anthropology, I am using it to refer to the real or symbolic threshold between two discrete spaces, existential states or times where change may occur. Threshold states such as being on the edge of sleep or wakefulness and daydreaming are liminal, as are spaces such as corridors and airports; both dawn and twilight are liminal times of day.

in looking to encounter strangeness and uncertainty in landscape was driven, I suspect, as a way to say something about how I was experiencing the world around me. It was an act of *ostranenie*, of opening myself to moments of transformation, wonder and the unknown.⁵

I associated this feeling of getting lost within vast misty spaces and the subsequent sense of diminishment of self that I had imagined, as a symptom of an encounter with the sublime. The sublime is an aesthetic experience that may be provoked by something that appears to be infinite to us and which overwhelms our capacity to comprehend it as a complete entity. Etymologically it comes from the Latin *sublimis*, meaning elevated or lofty, though according to some sources it is derived from *limen*, the threshold or lintel of a doorway, while for others it comes from *limes*, meaning a boundary or limit (Morley, 2010, p. 14).

Edmund Burke's 18th century treatise on aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime*, was extremely significant in affecting a shift in discourse from the sublime object, towards subjective experience and the limits of human understanding. Burke explained that sublime experiences may come about through an engagement with powerful aspects of the natural world that were overwhelming in terms of their magnitude or boundlessness. A powerful, sublime experience may potentially threaten our existence or sense of self, though simultaneously create a sense of delight and dread when experienced from a safe place. The sublime is, according to Burke, "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of" (Burke, 1757/1958, p. 39) and as he goes on to say, is, "tranquillity tinged with terror" (Burke, 1757/1958, p. 136). The sublime deals with elemental fears, the unknown, the failure of reason and lack of certainty. In placing myself within what may be described as a sublime landscape, I began what was at some level an attempt to grapple with, control and give order to the elusive, unknowable and sublime concept of

⁵ In Professor Rachel Jones' essay, "On the Value of Not Knowing" she explores the value of wonder and the importance of retaining a sense of otherness in our experience of the world. Citing Luce Irigaray, she describes how in making the strange familiar we avoid being, "moved, questioned, modified, enriched by the other as such" (Irigaray 2002 cited in Jones, 2013). According to Jones during our encounters with the world around us and with the people within it, it is necessary to attend to, "difference without seeking to assimilate, thereby retaining a relation to others and ourselves as never entirely knowable or graspable". In doing so and in attending to "otherness without assimilation" we can reawaken ourselves to the vitality of the world (Jones, 2013, pp. 16-18).

death.⁶ Representing our own death is, as Freud recognised, impossible (Freud, 1957/2001, p. 289) and it is within this inability to represent something encountered that we may also locate the sublime of Kant and Lyotard.⁷



Figure 2 Antony Gormley, *Blind Light*, 2007. Installation view. Artificial mist. (Gormley, 2007)

I had aligned my inquiry with the concept of the sublime, but also looked towards the work of Antony Gormley after recognising similar concerns in his work. Gormley's installation, *Blind Light* (**Figure 2**) requires the viewer to enter an architectural chamber which has been filled with a fine vapour and a strong, blinding light. This vapour takes on a materiality which

⁶ These reflections on my relation to finitude have gradually become more apparent as I have become aware over time, of the inexorable shift in the dynamics of my family and in my role as a son. This has been further heightened as I have become a father, bringing my own liminal, transitional state into sharp focus.

⁷ Immanuel Kant continued to explore these ideas of limits in his *Critique of Judgement*, emphasising the importance of subjective experience and where our capacity to understand complex ideas is beyond our control or comprehension. Like Burke, Kant also recognised that an encounter with nature may lead to an experience of the sublime, though he saw this as leading to a negative experience and a kind of "displeasure arising from the inadequacy of our imagination" (Kant, 1790/1973).

assumes the form of the enclosed space, creating an endless ground where we experience total dislocation and where, “the haptic sense replaces the optic sense” (Vidler, 2007). In conversation with Antony Gormley, Renata Salecl has described the experience of entering this enclosure and her subsequent loss of bearings, as provoking feelings of anxiety (Antony Gormley, 2008):

[*Blind Light* is] incredibly hard to navigate your way through and scary also from the outside because it looked like an empty hole, something that is seductive and horrifying at the same time. My experience when I entered that space was that I was searching for some kind of certainty

I was able to recognise after reading the transcript of this conversation, certain intentions and motivations that mirrored my own research. Gormley acknowledges the presence of anxiety in his work and its significance in navigating the disquieting and destabilising nature, of what Susie Orbach describes as, “the frailty, the impossibility of having a body”.⁸ When standing within the dense mists of *Blind Light* we experience a heightened and more intense disorientation than we would in natural phenomena, such as mist, but it may lead us to contemplate similar things. Darian Leader explains that in the absence of other perceptible figures, “we lose the specular framework of our bodies” (Antony Gormley, 2008), which incapacitates us from realising our own; we become diminished and disembodied. This enabled me to articulate more clearly what I had originally thought of as *getting lost*. I began to see this desire to experience a kind of disembodiment more as a way to encounter and perhaps exert some control over the uncertainty and confusion in being a living, embodied person. As Catherine Elwes recognises, the sense of empowerment and self-determination that may be experienced by practitioners through the creation of art, comes from the ability to exercise some influence over this aspect of their lives which they are otherwise not able to control (Elwes, 2015, p. 266).

⁸ In discussion with Darian Leader, Susie Orbach and Renata Salecl, Antony Gormley described his work as coming from, “anxiety, from a deep sense of uncertainty about my place in the world; who I am, where I might have come from, where I might be going to, and I think that one of the ways that my work works is by amplifying anxiety and infecting others with it” (Antony Gormley, 2008).

In late Autumn and in the early Winter months of 2015 I looked for sites with misty conditions, and in the Peaks and Lake District I was able to experience and digitally record these hidden landscapes. Many of these early studies were recorded with a static DSLR camera mounted on a tripod and with a GoPro camera attached to my head (**Figure 3**).



Figure 3 Alex Newton, digital video still of footage recorded in the Peak District, 2016

The recordings I made here were often marked by a lack of human presence, though at times they included people standing and waiting. I left the camera recording for long periods of time, lost in the slow-moving mists, whilst I and a friend walked and occasionally ran in and out of the field of view. Letting the camera record on a tripod and without interruption allowed me to capture moments of unexpected interaction. I had purposely set out without a fixed idea of exactly what I wanted to record and this gave me a degree of freedom and provided me with the opportunity to remain open to the unpredictability of the event. This approach required a kind of dynamic reflection and decision making, involving reviewing footage in situ and responding to that based on what my camera had recorded.

On reviewing my footage back in the studio, I purposefully chose compositions that denied any kind of coherent landscape, in order to present an entirely amorphous and formless

ground. I felt that this contributed to the overwhelming sense of dislocation that I wanted to achieve.⁹

Whilst editing the digital recordings, my intention was to create subtle yet seamless transitions of layered footage of fog and mist; the composited imagery serves to obscure and create a sense of disorientation. The mist acts like a screen as figures slowly emerge and then disappear into the landscape like disembodied phantoms. By rarely allowing the eye to settle on the horizon line the image becomes ambiguous; the lack of physical markers to orientate oneself and the slow-moving mists also contribute to altering how time flows.

With this in mind, I considered the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and artist Tacita Dean for both the sense of *ostranenie* in their work and their use of film as a way to articulate the experience of lived time. As a means of manipulating the temporal I felt that the use of slow motion had permeated the language of moving image and is perhaps now more easily assimilated, thus diluting the strangeness that it once created. Altering the speed of my recorded footage did immediately transform the way that the figures moved into unfamiliar gestures, though this was something that I was aware not to overuse. Instead, I was influenced by Tarkovsky's films



Figure 4 Andrei Tarkovsky, film still from *Solaris*, (*Solaris*, 1972)

⁹ In an attempt to remove the familiarity of the landscape further, I made the decision to alter the natural recording colour to a deep blue. This created more tonal uniformity and suggested the boundless space of the sea or the sky, where we may find what Rebecca Solnit calls “the blue of distance” and “the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles” (Solnit, 2006, p. 29); this thread of colour runs through the whole of the video.

which are, “‘made strange’, not by transferring a scene from ‘real time’ to ‘abstract time’” but instead which inhabit a liminal domain between, “abstractness and concreteness: the dream” (Botz-Bornstein, 2004).

Both Tarkovsky and Dean have used extended shots, creating the feeling that the passing of time is somewhere between our experience of time in the *real world* and time in a dream. Showing natural phenomena moving as a way to present the passing of time is also present in both artists’ work, though is perhaps more apparent in Tarkovsky’s. In **Figure 4** we see a still from his 1972 film *Solaris*, which uses hypnotic footage of nature, such as these underwater plants that undulate and twist within the languid currents of a river. This contributes to the strange sense of time that we experience at a pace that feels similar to our own. The slowness of durational films such as Tarkovsky’s and Dean’s, contributes to creating a kind of meditative quality in which we may also become more, “conscious of the time and space we occupy” (Winterson, 2005). There is also arguably in both artists’ work, a sense that nothing is happening though could still happen, something that Dean recognises, describing the narrative thread in her work as “the narrative of the day passing” (Dean, 2011). I was aware that my edited video lacked any linear narrative, and this was something that was noted when sharing my work in PhD feedback sessions. The narrative, if there was one, was described by the slow transitions of mist and changing landscape.

Sonically there were similarities to the expansiveness, rhythm and speed of the imagery, which helps to mirror the slow paced, eeriness of what was referred to in the feedback group as “nightmarish or dream-like”. There are the diegetic sounds of wind and footsteps on mud, rock and gravel which we appear to be very close to, whilst softly modulating organ sounds gradually change with the images.¹⁰

¹⁰ Many sounds were recorded simultaneously while filming. Holding a digital recording device in my hand allowed me to capture the sound of footsteps on the soggy ground and the rustle of clothes in the wind. I later made field recordings in windy landscapes, suggesting the expansiveness of place. I also experimented with rubbing, dragging and scratching surfaces in order to create music that would not be directly associated with the images on screen.

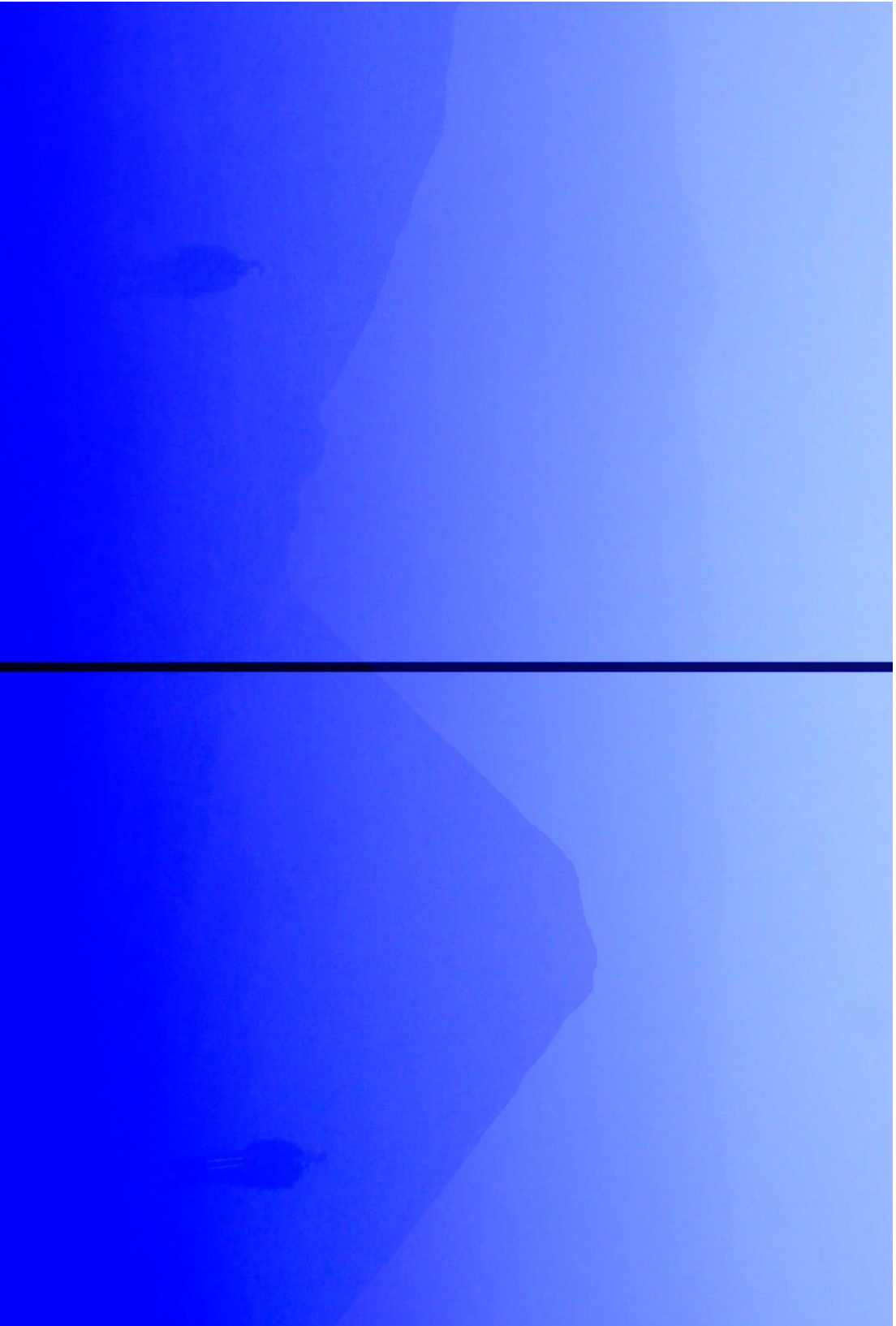


Figure 5 Alex Newton, *You Cannot Stand in the Middle of this*, 2016, Digital Video, 5 min. 38 sec.

The eventual outcome of the recordings I made in Axe Edge, and the subsequent edit, was a video titled *You Cannot Stand in the Middle of this* (**Figure 5**), the title a reference to Marianne Moore's poem *Grave* (Moore, 1984, pp. 49-50) which uses imagery of the sublime vastness of the sea. Using the slow-moving rhythm of the mist as a device helped to create a sense of duration, though on reflection the gradually changing landscape moved too quickly and the edited video was unsuccessful in representing the uncertainty and instability that I had experienced when recording the footage. The PhD feedback group stated, however, that there was potency in the image when the figures lingered in the hills without real purpose or intent; one response described the waiting figures as a reflection of the human condition, as we wait for the inevitability of death.¹¹

The decisions that I made when editing were influenced, in part, by the process of making further video work and the realisations that these processes led to. The PhD feedback group provided me with more objective distance to the work and bolstered by an extended period of reflection I was able to make these significant changes. Though predominantly led by a developed and intuitive understanding or unconscious rationale, I was also influenced by Jennifer M. Barker's book *The Tactile Eye*, which also affected the decisions I made when installing the work. Though initial experiments involved projection onto a large, white screen, I decided ultimately to use a video monitor, a screen that may be used as Kate Mondloch writes, as a way of aggressively commanding the spectator's attention (Mondloch, 2010, pp. 22, 23).¹² Placed within a darkened room, the glow of the screen is exaggerated and certainly commands attention. The longer durational edit and the use of a monitor with two pairs of headphones arranged adjacently (**Figure 6**), encourages the viewer to mirror the on-screen

¹¹ This work was re-edited several years after its initial iteration. The changes involved subtler transitions and less significant shifts in landscape; I also removed much of the music, leaving a spare diegetic soundtrack that intended to bring the viewer's imagination directly into the image and next to the bodies. This changed my video from a shorter five-minute version, to a longer looped durational piece, which was more successful in creating a more profound sense of deep space and time. In this new edited version both sound and image contribute more effectively to creating an unusual and dynamic tension between embodiment and disembodiment for the spectator, as figures appear and disappear. I was also pleased with the way the new edit established a different kind of rhythm, creating a liminal space somewhere between the experience of the real world and a dream. This new iteration allowed more space for an imaginative engagement and was titled, *The Sea is the Land's Edge*.

¹² Mondloch cites the scientist Christoph Koch whose neurobiological study explains how we are involuntarily drawn towards the video screen. Koch states that though some objects do not necessarily require a great degree of focus to be noticed, "it takes wilful effort to avoid glancing at the moving images on the TV placed above the bar in a saloon." (Koch, 2004)

figures. In doing so a different kind of experience is created whereby the spectator(s) may begin to develop an empathetic relationship with what Jennifer M. Barker describes as the, “body of the film (Barker, 2009)”.¹³ Placing the monitor in an artificially darkened room also contributed to this sense of bodily empathy, though not to the degree whereby we become completely and overwhelmingly immersed by the image. The size of the monitor and the fact that we are required to stand upright keeps us, to a degree, anchored within the gallery space and we may not forget our bodies.



Figure 6 Alex Newton, *The Sea is the Land's Edge*, 2021, Digital Video, 8 min. 30 sec. (Photographed with lights on).

¹³ In Jennifer Barker's book *The Tactile Eye*, she draws heavily on the writings of Vivien Sobchack and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception to describe the intimate and tactile relationship that we have with what she calls the cinematic body. According to Barker film lives an embodied existence in the world and is capable of both expression and perception simultaneously. This is, “a distinctly cinematic lived-body, neither equated to nor encompassing the viewer's or filmmaker's body, but engaged with both of these even as it takes up its own intentional projects in the world”. The separation of cinematic body and spectator, Barker goes on to say, becomes difficult when engaging with the immersive experience of watching a film in a darkened theatre. The boundaries that previously existed between our perception of the world and the virtual cinematic world (the “here and there”) thus become blurred as we become heavily and bodily invested in the on-screen action (Barker, 2009).

This link to Barker’s writing is just one instance of how my methodological approach has relied upon the interaction between various modes of inquiry. This is best illustrated in Robin Nelson’s *Practice as Research* model (**Figure 7**) which recognises the importance of the dynamic interplay between three different and equally valid modes of knowledge production. Nelson’s model shows how the experiential knowledge of the artist practitioner (know-how), the critical reflection of more explicit outcomes (know-what) and theoretical perspectives (know-that) all combine to create a reflexive research process that can lead to new insights.

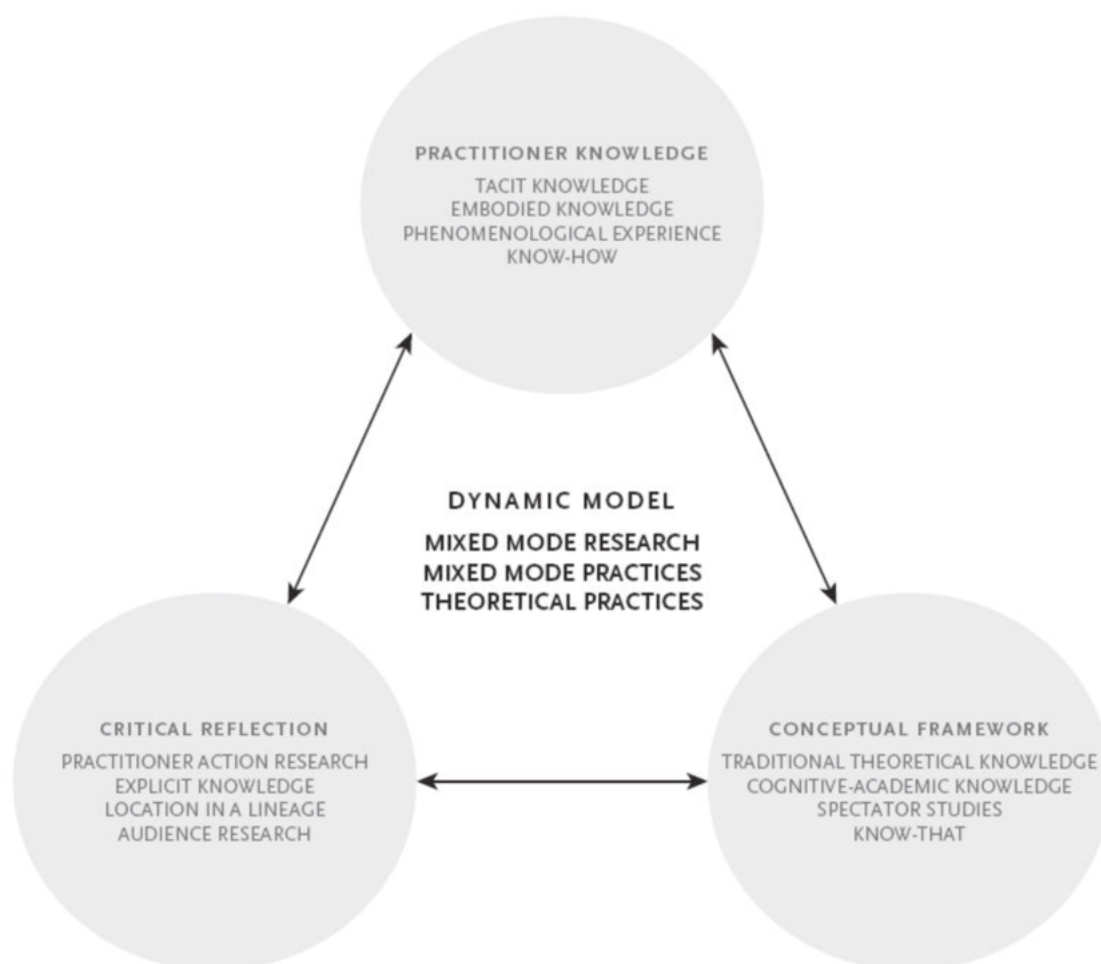


Figure 7 Robin Nelson’s *Dynamic Model for Practice as Research* (Nelson, 2006, p. 114)

Each stage of this model is potentially knowledge producing, though where one element of research on its own is not necessarily enough to make new insights evident, “the research in

its totality yields new understandings through the interplay of perspectives drawn from evidence produced in each element proposed” (Nelson, 2006, p. 115). The articulation of my praxis (theory imbricated within practice) has therefore been made manifest in the practical outcomes and in the written commentary (Nelson, 2006).

Though I have realised new visual and processual outcomes through making video, digital images or prints, I have also relied on ‘academic’ knowledge which I have integrated into my approach to making. This has occurred most significantly when there has been an imaginative engagement between different forms of investigation; contextual and theoretical research has influenced the decisions I have made when editing videos especially after a period of critical reflection. This reflective process has predominantly consisted of the use of journals in which I have gathered photographic images, written about outcomes, considered methods and used drawing as a way to explore forms in a different way. Re-reading my journals has helped me to notice emerging ideas, as has the use of a studio space where I have been able to display outcomes or texts. Alongside this, using audience feedback has enabled me to reflect objectively on presented work and has contributed towards the development of new insights.

Similarly, Donald Schön’s theory of *The Reflective Practitioner* which he likens to a, “reflective conversation with the materials of the situation” (Schön, 1983/2016, p. 175) has been significant in how I have engaged with the ‘know-how’ of making. Schön’s reflective practice recognises that artistic knowledge is often difficult to explain as it is often experiential and present in the way that we interact with the material with which we are using; in other words, “the know-how is *in* the action” (Schön, 1983/2016, p. 50). Artist practitioners are often faced with situations of uncertainty in the process of making and therefore need to work spontaneously. This knowledge enables makers to respond, not based on rational thinking, but instead through an intuitive feeling that has grown from experience (Hébert, 2015, p. 364). *Reflection-in-action* requires practitioners to bring their awareness to an action and to observe, think about or notice aspects of it whilst performing it; it is essentially thinking about “something while doing it” (Schön, 1983/2016, p. 54). This relies on the artist or performer to extemporize and as Bleakley recognises is performed in “the immediacy and heat of

practice, the sticky moments of indecision, feeding on sudden shifts in circumstances – the unique and irregular and forcing improvisation and risk.” (Bleakley, 1999, p. 319).

In terms of my own research this has been relevant in how I have recorded and later used collected material. Letting the camera run when recording has been something that I have continued to do and is a process that embraces uncertainty and spontaneity; this is an approach that I reflected upon in more detail as my research progressed. The way in which I have gathered recorded image and sound and then subsequently reviewed, experimenting with different edits and arrangements has also required this kind of intuitive and dynamic reflection that Schön’s *reflection-in-action* describes. Monitoring recorded material on a viewfinder allows me to make changes whilst in progress. This may mean changing camera settings to allow more or less light to hit the sensor or altering composition. Sitting with this recorded material for some time when editing can then give me a sense of what it is I am trying to make, even if this is not necessarily something I am able to immediately articulate.

When forms are arranged satisfactorily however, I can best describe this understanding as a physical experience of what feels right, almost like getting goosebumps or a kind of nervous excitement; artist Alison Wilding articulates this feeling as, “a visceral kick” (Fortnum, 2005). This also appears to me as a sense that I have revealed something that is unknown, unexpected and strange, emerging through an intuitive feeling that both Michael Polanyi and later Schön refer to as *tacit knowledge*. This is a kind of understanding that can never be completely expressed, because “we can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1967, p. 4). According to Kristina Niedderer and Linden Reilly, in terms of artistic research practice this experiential knowledge is gained through expertise, significant experience of handling materials and engaging with processes (Niedderer & Reilly, 2010).

Relying on tacit knowledge has required me to follow and trust my instincts, an important working process that has significantly led the direction of my research over the past five years, both inside and outside the studio. As Rebecca Fortnum recognises, the word “intuitive” may suggest “uncritical, overtly personal practices”, though it becomes crucial when used alongside critical thinking (Fortnum, 2013, pp. 76-77). In trying to respond to or engage with an emerging idea that I was not yet able to articulate, following an unconscious rationale has

helped me to locate myself in unfamiliar territory, creating the conditions for the unexpected event.

Though I worked predominantly using digital image, In courting the unexpected I have tried to engage with my research material without a predetermined outcome in mind. There is a significant degree of uncertainty in this process, which Emma Cocker describes as “not knowing” and as a valuable methodology in artistic practice. She does, however, recognise that it is an approach that is not necessarily about “the conversion of the not known towards new knowledge, but rather involves the aspiration to *retain* something of the unknown in what is produced” (Cocker, 2013). It is also through the process of *ostranenie* that I have aimed to preserve or locate what is unknown; more often than not it is through repeated viewings that I am able to identify whether this degree of unknowability has been retained or whether its newness has eventually been assimilated and no longer as potent.

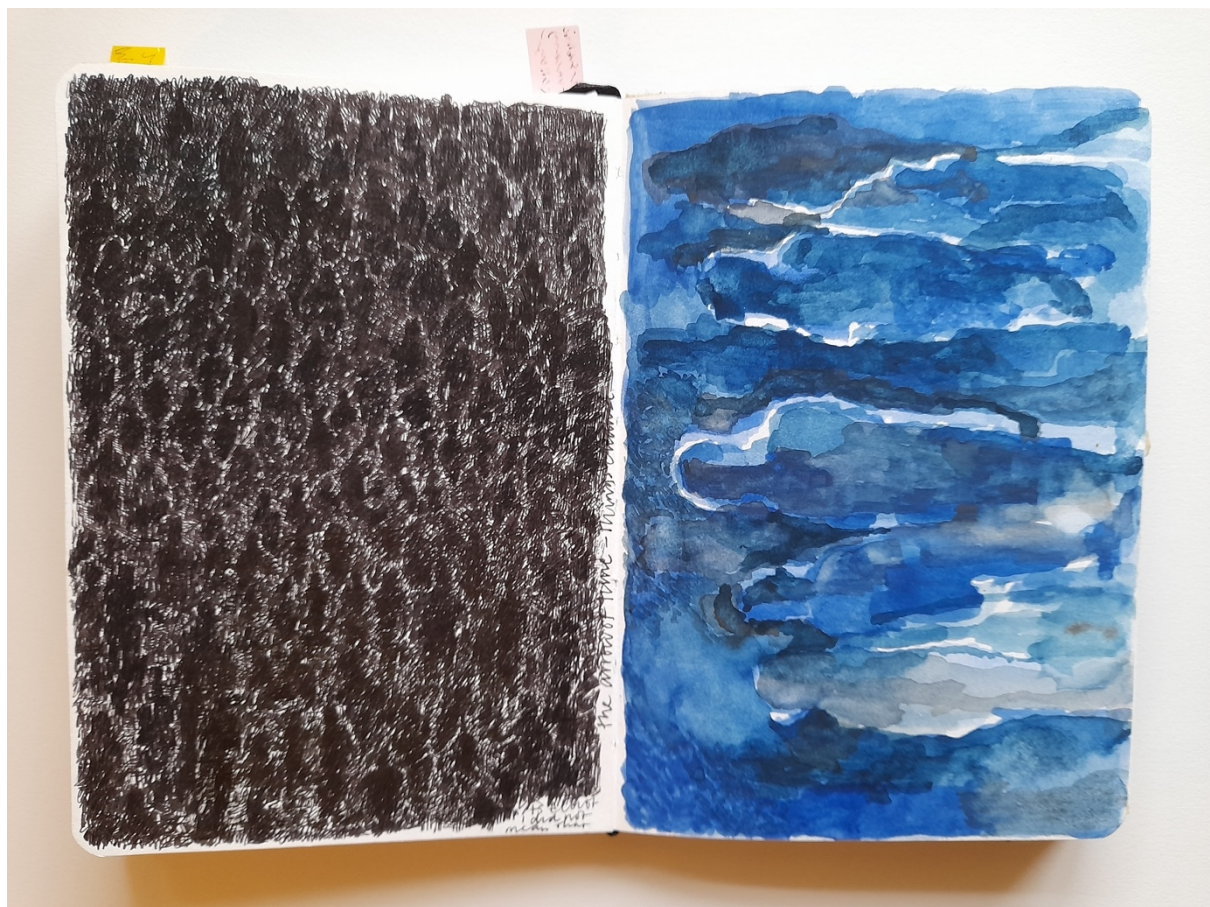


Figure 8 Drawing, painting and collage from my journals 2015/6

Using this approach of “not knowing” has involved reflecting on my recorded imagery by writing descriptively and by using methods such as streams of consciousness writing as a way of analysing and contemplating what I have produced; this is also a strategy that I have used in order to encounter unfamiliar images or ideas. Whilst editing, I have also maintained a visual response to my video work in my journals (**Figure 8**) and by using printed photographic video stills placed on my studio wall. I have used drawing, painting and collage as a way of thinking around visual ideas and as a way to process the things that are going on in my life. Doing this has helped me to disrupt what I have been doing and to make creative leaps from one form to another. This process has given me a way to critically reflect on and to reconsider the forms that I have made, in a new way.

Moreover, this approach has often led to the development of new work and it was in fact by interrupting the momentum and flow of the image that propelled my ideas forward. By adding digital lines to divide the framed filmic space of my video *I Cannot Stand in the Middle of This* I was able to disrupt the illusion of the image as a single virtual window onto the world. This caused me to consider the screen in a different way and reading an interview with Tamarin Norwood (Brown, 2014), an artist and researcher, allowed me to reflect on this further. Her research investigates the nature of the drawn line as a representational device, and her series of videos entitled *A Fine Line* (Norwood, 2014), explores the relationship between the surface and the drawn line. Using the lead of a retractable pencil (which at times resembles a digitally drawn line) and a digitally animated line, a visually ambiguous and unusual dialogue arises between these various layers of meaning. It occurred to me that this was an inquiry that I was making tentative excursions towards. This engagement with Norwood’s research led me to consider the material nature of the screen and its experiential consequences further.

The frame as a window onto the world is a well-established idea and deeply rooted in art history, particularly in terms of the pictorial and perspectival traditions of painting. We may consider the painting surface of Leon Battista Alberti’s “open window”, in the same way that we understand the virtual space that we see on mass media screens such as televisions, computer monitors, laptop screens and within the expansive, never ending cinematic

frame.¹⁴ When a screen is struck by a light beam, covering the surface with a projected skin, we enter this imaginative illusionistic space, though without the image the viewer may be encouraged to engage with the screen's surface in a phenomenological way, transforming it into a sculptural object (Elwes, 2015).

You Cannot Stand in the Middle of This is shot from just one point of view/camera angle but there is the suggestion of boundless space beyond the edges of the screen. Though I later chose to use a monitor to show this first video, I wanted to investigate the potential to free the image from the frame so that it might become integrated with the architecture of the projection space.



Figure 9 Projecting onto sheets of mylar in the studio, 2016

¹⁴ In the 1950s Andre Bazin wrote specifically about the spatial qualities of the moving image, which he termed “boundless” due to the potential for an ever-expanding reality outside of the screen’s edge. The moving image is, according to Bazin, “centrifugal”, as opposed to the “centripetal” nature of painting, so that it moves beyond the frame creating an ever-expanding alternative space (Bazin, 1959).

These questions led to further explorations in the studio, looking at how projected moving images behaved when seen within a flat, discretely defined frame, but also where the specific textural quality of a screen created a degree of decay, allowing fragments of the image to penetrate the surface or exceed the bounded edge. I began by projecting onto mylar (**Figure 9**) which captured the image well but also allowed a good deal of light through. This showed the potential of using both a screen and the spatial parameters of the room as a surface to project on, in order to enhance this sense of boundless space.



Figure 10 Overhead projector lens. 2016

I also experimented with other surfaces including an overhead projector lens (**Figure 10**) to see how the images would behave. Using several lenses for both projection and as a screen, created in my mind the potential for visual disruption and perceptual uncertainty, this

connection emerging partly through reading stories where lenses carry the potential for supernatural events.¹⁵

These initial experiments with unorthodox screens also drove my contextual research, leading me to explore cinema's pre-history of illusion and deception; I found images that tantalised the human fascination with the supernatural and which tapped into human fears of the possibility of life after death.

The reanimation of bodies through the use of magic lanterns was a striking example of this and began to influence the direction of my experiments. Projecting through the lens and casing was problematic but produced some exciting photographs, evoking the vastness of space in some and a sense of animation in some static images (**Figure 11**).

However, my engagement with this process of experimentation was disrupted after I began to film people in front of a green screen. Having attempted to create images of figures in a decontextualized and vast landscape, removing it entirely seemed intuitively like the obvious next step. This was an image that I had visualized and I wanted to find ways of bringing the figures more directly into the projection space so that they would share it with the viewer, creating a phantasmagoria as described by Noam Elcott. Using a green screen and editing with Final Cut Pro allowed me to film people and then easily remove all context, placing them in a black void (**Figure 12**).

¹⁵ Glass lenses and mirrors have been used in the realms of magic and artifice for many years, providing the capacity to create illusions that may cause us to doubt the veracity of an image and our perception of it. Like Fanshawe's binoculars in M.R. James' ghost story, *A View from a Hill* and the telescope that Nathaniel buys from Coppelius in E.T.A. Hoffman's tale, *The Sandman*, these devices have long been seen in literature as devices for "unsettling our confidence in vision and raising the possibility that supernatural forces are determining events" (Gunning, 2008, p. 72). In M.R. James', *A View from a Hill* (James, 2011, pp. 326-342) and in both of E.T.A. Hoffman's stories *The Sandman* (Hoffmann, 1992, pp. 85-118) and also *Master Flea* (Hoffmann, 1992, pp. 239-376), optical devices are used as a way to mediate the creative imagination and to introduce the Fantastic (a literary genre originated by Tzvetan Todorov). On writing about vision in Hoffman's stories, Todorov explained that "it is not vision itself that is linked to the world of the marvellous, but rather eyeglasses and mirrors, those symbols of indirect, distorted, subverted vision." (Todorov, 1975, p. 122).

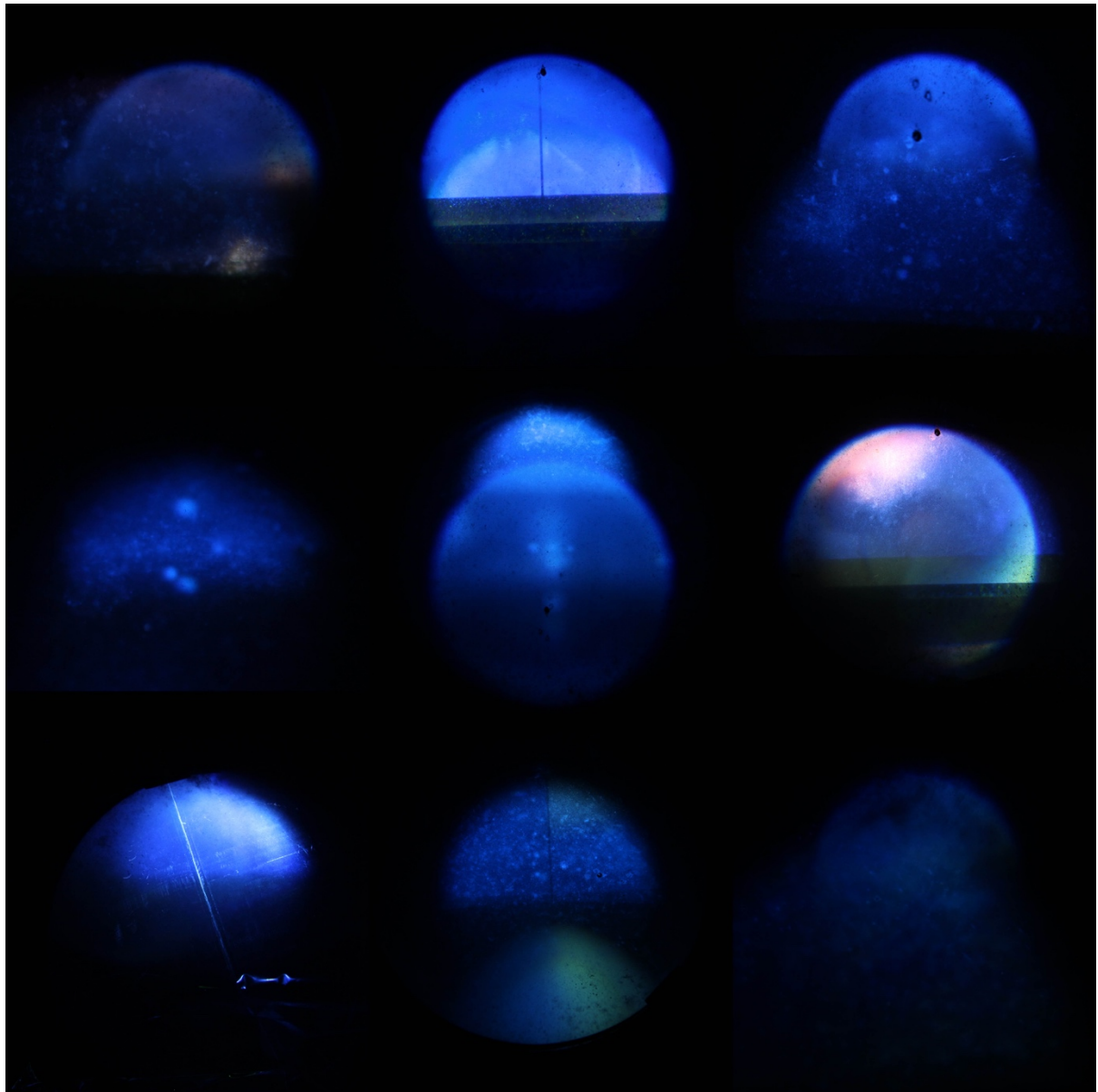


Figure 11 Alex Newton, *Untitled*, 2016, Digital Print, 420 mm x 420 mm.

Using black tulle as a projection screen carried funereal associations and the figures hung suspended in the webbed fabric, suggesting corpses. I had initially recorded people standing, but after seeing the projected image and having made this connection I decided to film people on the floor in an attempt to capture the illusion of bodies falling.¹⁶

¹⁶ Reading Alice Oswald's book *Falling Awake* had an impact on my research at this time. This collection of poems deals with the instability and mutability of natural matter, when confronted by mortality. There are themes of flux, falling and the struggle to counteract gravity and the inexorable and eventual decline of life (Oswald, 2016).

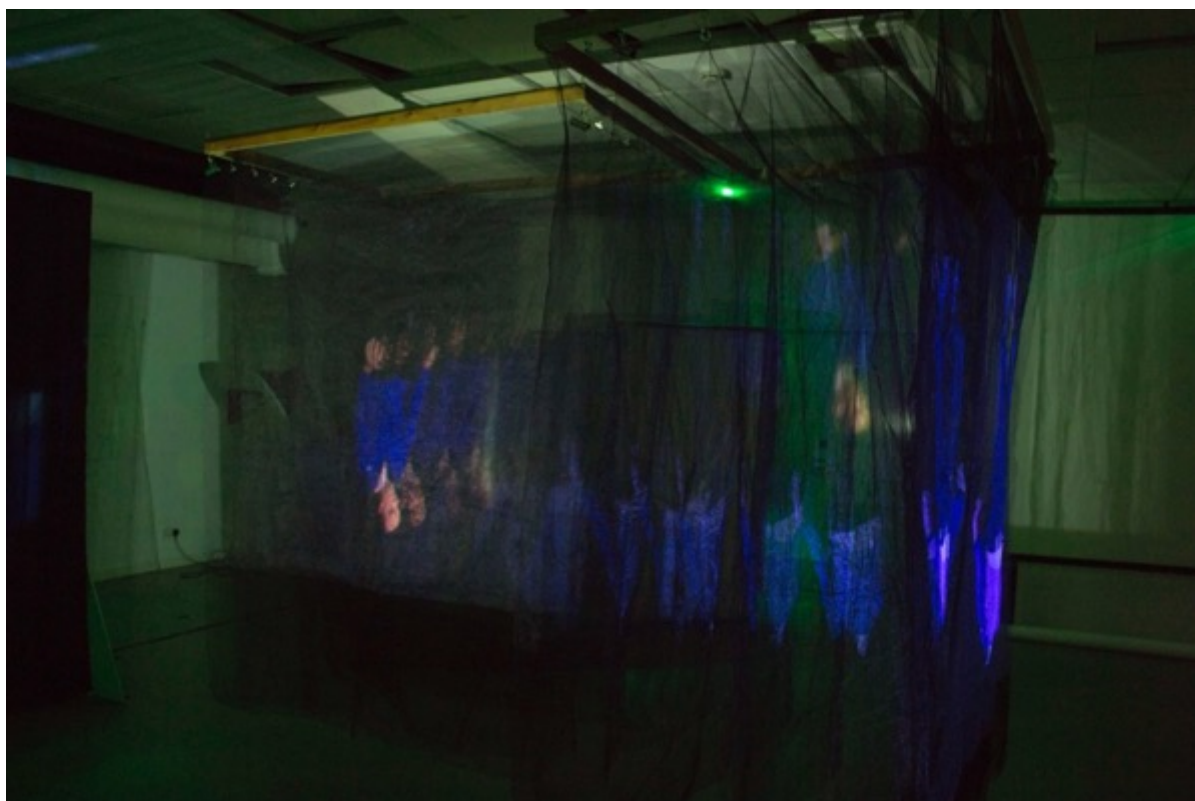


Figure 12 Projecting onto black tulle in the studio, 2016.

Similar to when I used my DSLR in the misty Peaks and Lake District, I left the camera filming for long periods of time giving my collaborators very minimal direction. In order to capture a broad vocabulary of movement and behaviour I encouraged them to move in a natural way and attempted to distract their attention away from the camera pointing directly at them. This experience inevitably elicited performative behaviours, though I hoped that by leaving the camera recording for long stretches at a time I would apprehend moments of surprising or unexpected movement; as before I was in search of the strange and the unfamiliar.

On reviewing my footage, I reflected on what I was looking at and explored ways to draw out these unexpected and undefined instances. Slowing down the playback speed allowed me to look closely at the movement of the face and body. I picked out gestures that appeared strange when observed in isolation from the natural flow of time and repeated these in order to create unusual movements that gave the figures an unusual presence. These hidden and



Figure 13 Bill Viola, *Five Angels for the Millennium*, Video 5 Projections, Colour and Sound (Viola, 2001)

unexpected movements that emerge in figures when the frame rate is manipulated, display what Bill Viola calls “an unexpected field of action” (Viola, et al., 2003, p. 40). Through this act of *ostranenie* we are able to see what Kris Ravetto-Biagioli describes as existing “outside of the iconography of human experience” (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2016, p. 11). Though I would not have necessarily said that Viola’s work was a direct influence on my research there are clear similarities and it would be remiss to ignore the significance of his video installations which carry with them such a firmly established visual language.

Typically, Viola’s life-size figures inexplicably rise or fall (**Figure 13**) within darkened, obscured fields of view, where there are confrontations with extreme states of being. His use of anonymous bodies manages to place us in the images that we see, making our engagement with his images more participatory than passive. His work is a reminder that we are embodied and that we inevitably encounter fundamental human experiences that are at the

edge of our understanding, primarily “the human’s relation to finitude” (Arya, 2013). Birth, death, fear, and wonder is expressed in images that we recognise but which elude comprehension; these are images that, according to Cynthia Freeland “convey conscious and perceptual states that are in but not of the world” (Freeland, 1999).

I began to experiment further by interrupting the forward, linear progression of my digital recordings and by punctuating the illusion of movement with freeze frames and repeated gestures. In doing so I aimed to find a blending of movement and stillness that explored the meeting point between the animate and inanimate, creating a sense of uncertainty in how time flows. This series of falling figures was titled *Shroud* (**Figure 14**).

Viewed on a laptop or on a media screen the figures appeared strange, though when projected in a dark room and onto the hanging tulle that was suspended on several wooden frames, the images were transformed into something altogether stranger. The qualities of the material allowed a certain amount of decay in the projection and unlike the monitor that I had used previously to show my last video, it enabled the image to detach from the screen to a degree, placing it in the room in the same space as the spectator. This lent the figures a ghostly nature reminiscent of Phantasmagoria, the gothic light shows of the 18th and 19th century.

The depiction of the human figure using light, shadow and optical lenses has consistently provoked a lingering doubt in the rationality of what we are seeing. Performed in darkened theatres in order to disorientate and disquiet, a concealed optical device called a magic lantern was used to project nightmarish images of light and shadow onto the wall, placing spectre and spectator directly into a shared time and space. Without any apparent mechanism projecting the images and without a screen to contain them, the phantasmagoria occupied the same space; it was as if the undead had entered the darkened auditorium. The age of enlightenment and reason was gradually being ushered in, but the residues of superstitious belief remained ensuring that these miraculous yet horrifying shows manipulated the senses and overcame rational conviction.



Figure 14 Alex Newton, *Shroud*, 2016-18, Digital Video, 25 min. 6 sec.

According to Tom Gunning, the nervous excitability and thrill provided by Phantasmagoria “involved simultaneity of belief and disbelief, an experience by which the senses contradicted what you know to be true, by means of experiences we simply cannot deny” (Gunning, 2004, p. 6). This obvious confusion and fascination was not, however, to be found only in the illusionary qualities of the Phantasmagoria. Our ever-present preoccupation and fear of ghosts, superstitions and the possibility of life after death may also come from an experience of the *uncanny* (Gunning, 2004).

The first mention of the uncanny, came from Ernst Jentsch in his essay, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (Jentsch, 1906), though it was Freud's 1919 essay that developed these ideas further and helped to give them more cultural prominence. Freud describes this unusual feeling as a peculiar commingling of the strange and the familiar, relating it to the unconscious mind and the compulsive return of what has been repressed or hidden, suggesting that the uncanny may create a feeling where something is familiar and alien simultaneously.

Like the sublime, the uncanny is related to limits and boundaries.¹⁷ According to Nicholas Royle, the uncanny “has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality” (Royle, 2003, p. 2); it is concerned with the other and what is not oneself. In encountering the uncanny we may feel a sense of estrangement from the world or even from ourselves. For Julia Kristeva, Freud’s essay does in fact teach us “how to detect foreignness in ourselves” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 191).

Freud's explanation of the uncanny goes on to refer to archaic concepts such as animism, the double, coincidence and déjà vu, and describes an uncanny world as shrouded by shadows where our sight is diminished and where what we imagine to lurk is concealed. This is a realm where we may encounter dread and disorientation and where our existing knowledge of the world is thrown into confusion by a new and unexpected confrontation with a transformed

¹⁷ The sublime and the uncanny share many similarities and can both be described as liminal; both are concepts that relate to the existence and destabilisation of boundaries or limits. Though the sublime is a concept that has been written about extensively since the 17th Century, the uncanny is a younger, less developed notion, however Anneleen Masschelein recognises in her genealogy of the uncanny that they are closely related (Masschelein, 2011). Both of these concepts carry a sense of anxiety, unease and a reminder of our own mortality. This is a similarity that art critic Thomas McEvelley also notes, describing the sublime and the uncanny as both leading “immediately to a contemplation of the death and decay of the body” (Kelley, 2003, p. 67).

reality; this is a place where “the distinction between the imagination and reality is effaced” (Freud, 1919/1990, p. 367). The uncanny is a place of anxiety, fear and, “...undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible - to all that arouses dread and creeping horror” (Freud, 1958/1986, p. 122).

Though, as Freud states, the uncanny occurs for many different reasons he also claims that it can arise from our inability to reconcile our primitive and irrational fears with what we believe to be true. These irrational fears were exploited by the illusionistic nature of the Phantasmagoria, but as Tom Gunning recognises succumbing to the uncanny requires more than the illusion and is instead activated by the return of repressed ways of thinking (Gunning, 2008, p. 85). The animation of seemingly inanimate bodies and the deception provided by the haunting ghosts of the Phantasmagoria (and subsequently, by the cinema) unsettled and blurred the boundaries between doubt and credulity, and the living and the dead.

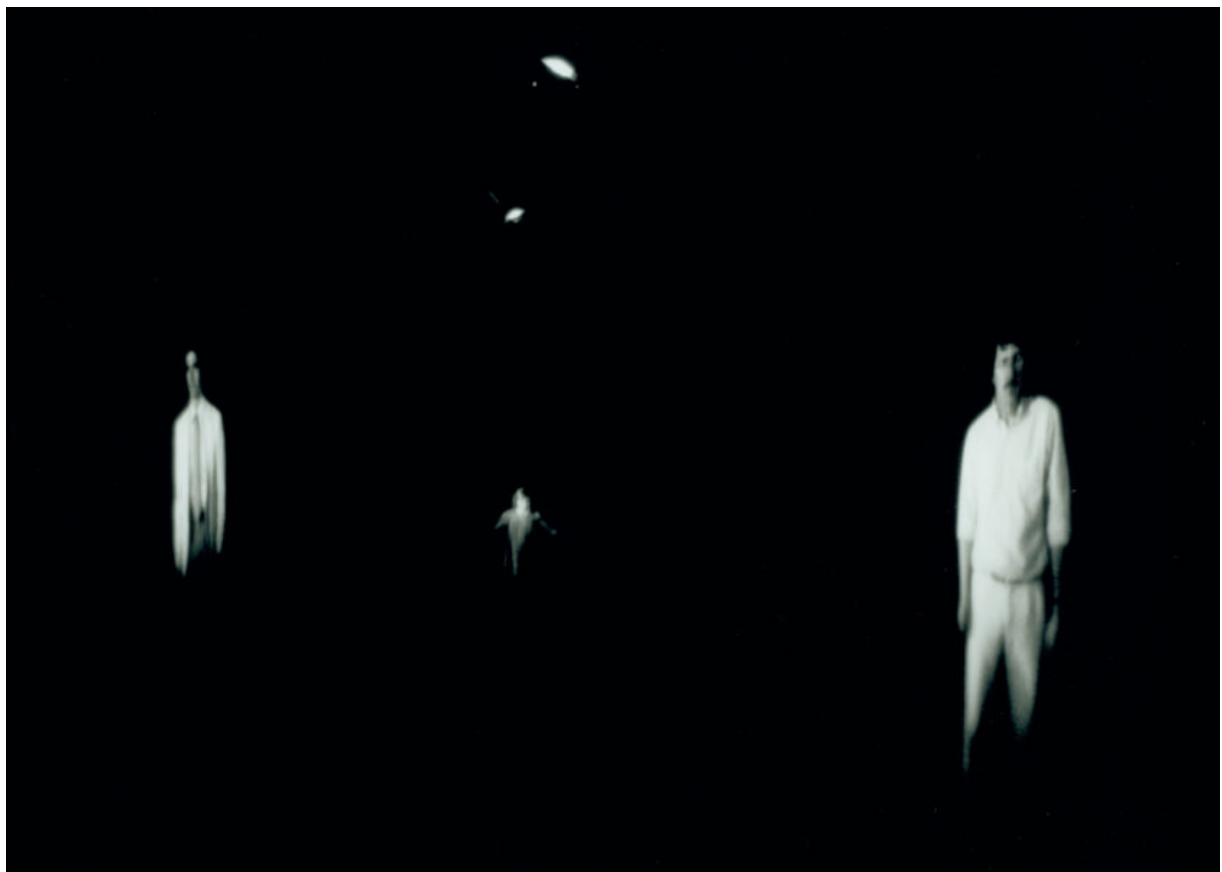


Figure 15 Gary Hill, *Tall Ships*, Sixteen Channel Video Installation. (Hill, 1992)

For Noam Elcott, Phantasmagorias are not specifically 18th or 19th century phenomena, there are countless film, video and installation art works that should be defined as thus. Elcott cites Gary Hill's 1992 installation video work *Tall Ships* (**Figure 15**), as one such example. Experienced in near total darkness and installed in a long gallery space, Hill's video work consists of twelve different and colourless, spectral figures that upon approach will walk silently towards the spectator, pausing as if regarding us and our world with curiosity. According to Stuart Morgan these ghosts "exist in a state of limbo. Unable to go any further they seem to regard the screen as a frustration" (Morgan, 1993, p. 26). This encounter continues until the viewer moves away or until a certain time has elapsed.

Like the gothic phantasmagoria, Hill's work uses the same *dispositif*,¹⁸ the same "sepulchral" darkness, the same material specificities and involves the same technical set up (albeit without digital video) to enable the images to be freed from the frame of the screen and to enter the dark void of the gallery space.¹⁹ As a result, an encounter with an image becomes closer to an encounter with a ghost. As Elcott acknowledges (Elcott, 2016, p. 45):

the video image is a frameless continuum: in *Tall Ships* the images have been freed into the materiality of real time and space...In fact, one forgets the image as an image.

¹⁸ In Elcott's essay "The Phantasmagoric *Dispositif*: An Assembly of Bodies in Real Time in Space" he uses the Foucauldian term *dispositif*, a "system of relations" which is established between "discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" (Foucault, 1980, p. 194). Elcott's *dispositif*, in this context, refers to the arrangement or assembly of differing elements that constitute the creation of specific forms of spectatorship (Elcott, 2016). His *dispositif* refers more to the sites of creative action and the elements that contribute to their creation, rather than the specifics of media. Elcott describes three media *dispositifs*, "the cinematic, the domestic and the phantasmagoric" and their subsequent spectatorial implications. While "the cinematic" immerses the spectator directly into the virtual world of the film and displaces them from their environment, "the domestic" implies the home and places us directly into spaces where we might find the TV screen, laptops, iPads and other media devices; we are no longer displaced by the darkness of the cinema auditorium and we cannot ignore the familiarity of the space that we are anchored in. The phantasmagoric *dispositif* is a less culturally established form than the cinematic and the domestic and therefore not as widely recognisable. While we may *forget* our bodies in the enveloping darkness of the cinema and become more aware of the image confining object while in the realms of the domestic, in the phantasmagoric both spectator and image are assembled in a shared space and time. Elcott elaborates, "Here we are hyperaware of our bodies and surroundings. In a reversal of the cinematic, the phantasmagoric must guarantee the highest degree of image detachedness...the phantasmagoric must occupy the same space we occupy" (Elcott, 2016).

¹⁹ Elcott draws comparison between the Phantasmagoria and Hill's work, citing Etienne Gaspard Robertson use of the word "sepulchral" to describe the atmosphere of the room in his magic lantern shows and Stuart Morgan's use of the same word to describe Hill's installation at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1993 (Elcott, 2016, p. 44).

Like *Tall Ships*, my video *Shroud* was installed in darkness, transforming our perception of space and largely obscuring the parameters of the room. The filmic tradition of the screen as a virtual window onto the world is expanded and like the Phantasmagoria the frame is dissolved into the darkness of the projection space. Instead of a bounded flat picture plane the many layers of black netted material which hang from the ceiling create echoes of the moving image, around which the spectator may walk encouraging an engagement with the many screens.

There is nothing that anchors us within the natural world, and instead we see iterations of bodies that float, hover or fall endlessly in a groundless black void.²⁰ They are untethered by markers that orientate us, such as the horizon, and the visual and temporal certainties that are established by the dominant paradigm of Western image making, linear perspective, are removed (Steyerl, 2011). In eliminating the images that help to create the illusion of pictorial depth, our experience of both measurable space and linear time is transformed so that it approaches the real time experience of the *phantasmagoric dispositif*. Phantasmagorias provide a real time encounter with a virtual but all too real presence, where according to Thomas Elsaesser “the senses are anchored and the body situated in a ‘here and now’”. For a fixed period of time in the cinema we forget our bodies and the surrounding auditorium that we are seated in and enter in exchange, the virtual world of the cinematic frame. Within the Phantasmagoria however we experience a real time encounter with an assembly of bodies in a location, “where no clear spatial divisions between inside and outside pertain” (Elsaesser, 2015, p. 70). It is in this experience that according to Paul Virilio in his account of virtuality and image perception, a *paradoxical logic* means that “the real-time image dominates the thing represented, real time subsequently prevailing over real space” (Virilio, 1994, p. 63).²¹

²⁰ Echoing sublime notions of the destruction of self, Dylan Trigg describes voided space as a spatial and temporal confrontation with a “logic of annihilation, a displacement of place and a reconstitution of orientation.” (Trigg, 2012, p. 121). My pursuit of the representation of voided or obscured space, was influenced partly by Jonathan Glazer’s memorable and haunting depiction of a terrifying oily, black void in his film *Under the Skin*, but also after reading H.P. Lovecraft’s story *Dagon* in which the protagonist finds himself stranded on “a slimy expanse of hellish black mire” where he is overwhelmed by a “nauseating fear” and “the unutterable hideousness of...a vast reach of black slime” (Lovecraft, 1999, pp. 1-2).

²¹ Virilio explores the history of image perception, identifying three separate “logics of perception”: The *formal logic*, including the age of painting which ended in the 18th Century; the *dialectical logic* which begins in the 19th

Projected onto the layered screens of black tulle is the image of a life size figure (**Figure 16**) which tilts forward, flits from side to side and reaches toward us. The bodies of my friends and relatives (dressed in their own clothes) appear to float or fall, their appearance altered by the netted material, creating a gradual sense of digital decay as the screens get further away. The ghostly nature of the projected image suggested presence, creating the illusion of matter, whilst at the same time implying absence, the immaterial and the imaginary. Like my previous video it also seemed to say something to me about the strangeness of having a body. I was also pleased to note that these peculiar, floating bodies carried with them a strong sense of Freud's uncanny as they hovered between living and dead.

As a step forward in my research this was an engaging experiment that had created some striking and curious images, however as a phantasmagoria it lacked the real time urgency of the gothic magic lantern shows and the directly immersive qualities of Gary Hill's *Tall Ships*. I wrestled with achieving a balance between capturing enough of the image on the tulle to create a spectral presence, but not too much that it would not represent the person filmed too completely. Though the qualities of the screens caused much of the image to pass through the netting, creating a pleasing amount of image degradation, it also allowed the projection to settle too crisply onto the wall behind. This clear representation of a body removed any ambiguity or strangeness in the projection and with it any doubt in its status as an image. The sculptural presence of the layers of tulle also ensured that there was not this "high degree of image detachedness" that Elcott describes (Elcott, 2016), and so as a *real-time* image occupying a shared space with the spectator it was ultimately unsuccessful. Viewing *Shroud* in the artificially darkened space of the studio was exciting and there was a sense of a phantasmagoric presence entering the room, though like Elcott's *cinematic* and *phantasmagoric dispositif* there was no real sense of bodily immersion in the space. My use of freeze frames and repeated gestures when editing the footage however, contributed more successfully to creating temporal uncertainty, reinforcing its strange and uncanny nature.

Century with the invention of film and photography; and finally, the *paradoxical logic* which has enabled the creation of computer generated "real-time" images in virtual form.

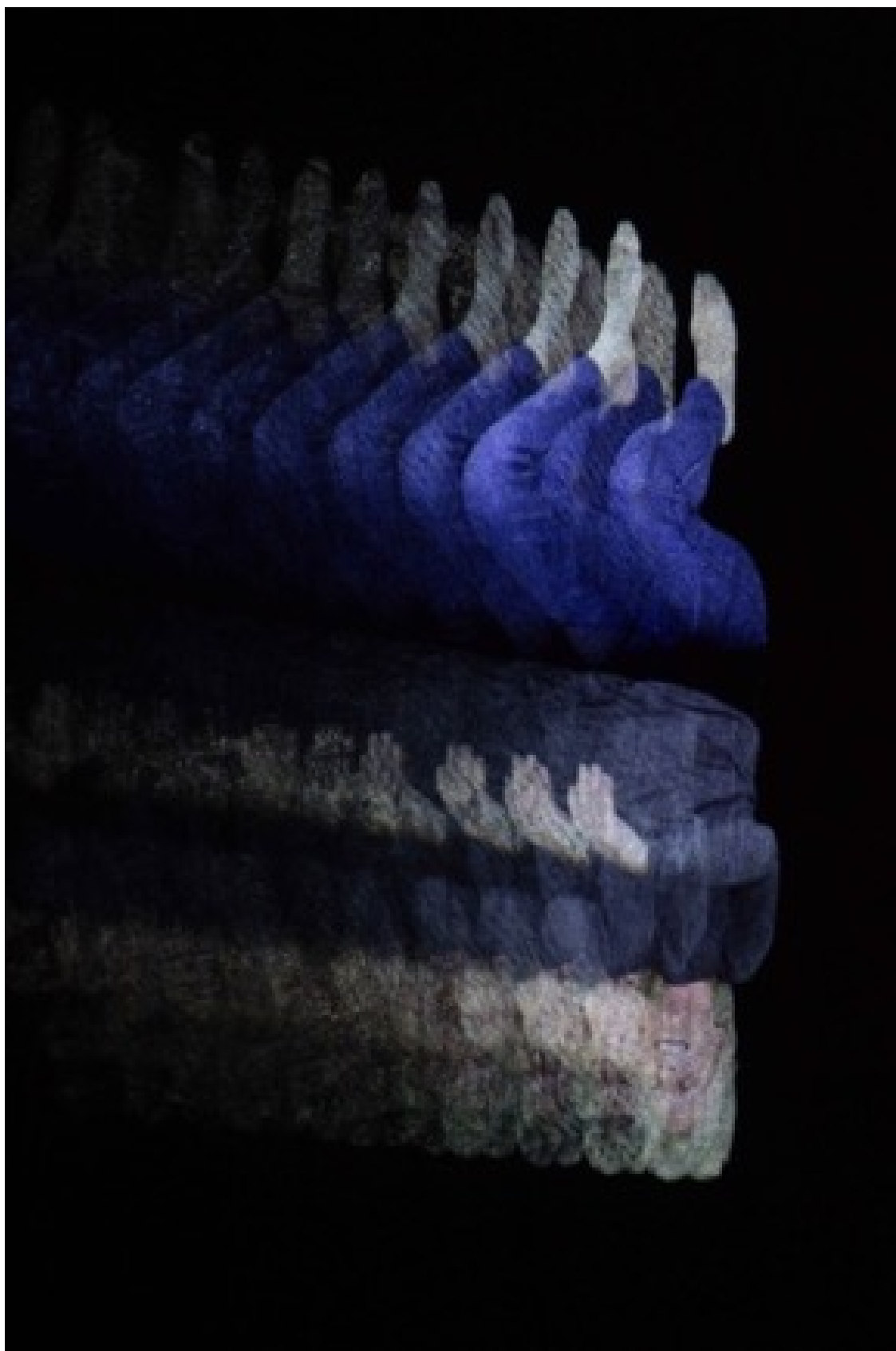


Figure 16 Alex Newton, *Eidolon, Eidolon*, 2017, digital print, 420mm x 594 mm.

The projected body moves slowly and haltingly, at times possessing the fluidity of movement that we recognise as an accurate representation of our own world, and at others appearing motionless. The continual and unsettling shift between animation and stasis contributes to the disruption of the filmic representation of time as flow and lends the figure the uncanny and jerky movements of an automaton.²²

When still, there is uncertainty as to whether we are looking at a freeze frame or a motionless figure captured in 'real' time. In slowing down the speed at which the figure in *Shroud* moves, the digital mechanisms that create the illusion of dynamic flow are exposed and we are reminded of the deception that recording devices afford; this was a very direct example of how *ostranenie* might pierce normality so that we look longer. Upon reaching stillness we look upon the individual unmoving 'frame', which contains the phantom like quality of an inanimate body that lacks the fundamental and defining sign of life, movement. In Laura Mulvey's book *Death 24x a Second*, she investigates this tension between cinematic movement and stasis, describing cinema's apparent ability to breathe life into the inanimate human body as a reminder of our inability to comprehend the passing of time and our inevitable death. It is the experience of seeing movement on film which asserts the "presence of a continuous 'now'", whilst stillness reminds us of the past, bringing "a resonance of 'then' to the surface" (Mulvey, 2006, p. 13). Mulvey goes on to describe the potential of both the photograph and the film still to represent a "meeting point between a physical document and a twinge of uncertainty in rationality" (Mulvey, 2006, pp. 31,32). Though we may now perceive a projected digital film with the benefit of a more secular and rational understanding, the presence of the past in the recorded image may still provoke confusing feelings, not least our inability to fully comprehend the passing of time and the concept of what it may mean to not exist.

For both Roland Barthes and André Bazin, the photograph and cinematic still created an uncanny and unnerving link with the past and associations with life after death. Barthes and

²² Describing examples of "things, persons, impressions, events and situations" that may cause us to experience uncanny feelings, Freud begins by referencing Ernst Jentsch, who suggests that the uncanny may arise when we are unable to determine whether an apparently inanimate being is actually alive. This can include automata, wax-work figures and artificial dolls (Freud, 1958/1986, p. 132).

Bazin saw this connection existing through the presence of the index, which directly links the photograph and its referent.²³ The index is a sign of Peircian semiotic theory, a material trace caused by light striking the camera film and its subsequent photochemical imprint.²⁴ This physical inscription is fixed at a precise moment in time and persists into the present, leading to a confusing temporal link between the now of registration and the now in which we gaze at the photograph. It is through this uncertain temporality that we may experience uncanny feelings associated with looking at the stilled ghostly figures of the past, *reanimated* in the present. We may therefore consider the freeze frame in the same way that Roland Barthes spoke of the photograph and its link to the past, as “containing that rather terrible thing...a return of the dead” (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 9). This recurring motif of the photograph and celluloid film as overcoming death was present from cinema’s early beginnings. Marina Warner cites a journalistic review of the Lumière brothers’ first projected screening that contains a reference to this conquest, “When everyone can photograph their dear one no longer in a motionless form in their movement, their activity, their familiar gestures, with words on their lips, death will have ceased to be absolute.” (Warner, 2006, p. 18).²⁵

Though my digital recordings lacked the indexical link that celluloid film possesses, there was a fascination for me in exploring the tension between time and movement. Even in the stilled image the potential of movement and of passing time was present and despite the absence

²³ Though Bazin does not explicitly name the index he does cite certain examples that are comparable with Charles Sanders Peirce’s list of suggested indices. The death mask is one such example, an indexical imprint of a human face that bears a direct resemblance to its referent. For Bazin, the making of a likeness marked the human desire to overcome death, whilst the creation of an indexical image “is to snatch it from the flow of time”, a process Bazin describes as embalming time (Bazin, 1960).

²⁴ The indexicality of a photograph is dependent on the physical link between the object photographed and the image created, though it does not necessarily need to resemble the object signified. The photograph combines two types of sign, the index and the icon, though it is its iconicity that refers to the likeness between the object and the photograph.

²⁵ The uncanny qualities of both proto-cinema and early cinema ‘making strange’, created “properly irreducible alien” (Gaudreault, 2006, p. 99) experiences for startled audiences. In resurrecting the spectres of the past into the present and in gazing upon them as apparitions, the boundaries between life and death become blurred, creating a space of uncertainty and confusion. Laura Mulvey addresses Roland Barthes’ and Andre Bazin’s writing on photography and time in her book *Death 24x a Second*, in which she explores this experiential hesitation. According to Mulvey there are two factors that determine this; primarily an “intellectual uncertainty associated with death and the uncanny contained within the human imagination’s engagement with the photograph”, but also the “intellectual impossibility’ of reducing the photograph to language and a grammatical system of meaning’ (Mulvey, 2006). These ghostly images raised for me many questions about our relationship between the moving image and time and reading Mulvey’s work enabled me to explore this more deeply.

of a direct physical inscription of light upon emulsion so was the temporal displacement and associations with mortality.²⁶

Thanks to Elcott's writing, I had begun to reflect on the technospatial specifics of *Shroud*, though despite these engaging insights the direction of my research altered when I began photographing the projected images. The decision to do this came about partly through a desire to document the process, but soon became a way of looking at or capturing the bodies in a different way, specifically by *making strange*.

This change in direction or kind of disruption was, I noticed, inadvertently becoming a significant feature of my methodology, and was occurring fairly frequently throughout my research. It appeared that in order to seek new insights I would need to find new media in which to explore ideas. This echoes Rebecca Fortnum's claim that for artists to develop a visual artwork they will design certain "parameters and procedures", which are inextricably linked to the medium they are using. These procedures tend to arise out of the limits of the medium and can provide the conditions for new and unexpected encounters. For Beth Harland there are instances when the medium that she is using has been pushed to its limits, and in order to propel ideas forward she needs to find a fresh approach with new materials, "I think new mediums bring with them different ways of looking and thinking and they disturb your habits" (Fortnum, 2005); using a camera to look at and record the projected images provided this for me.

²⁶ Nostalgia for analogue holds traditional photographic processes in high esteem, with digital photography (and by implication, digital moving image) somewhat lacking in its ability to truly represent "reality". This "truth claim" as Tom Gunning calls it, is based upon the suggestion that digital media and its lack of an indexical, physical link to its referent devalues the image. Paul Levinson subscribes to the idea that the photograph's reliability as an "unbiased witness of reality" (Levinson, 1997, p. 41) is threatened by digitisation; however, Gunning argues that both analogue and digital processes require some degree of mediation, meaning that neither process is truly indexical. He goes on to suggest that rather than considering the photograph in terms of semiotics and reducing its reference to signification, we may engage with it imaginatively whereby we may reflect on "something else, something behind it, before it, somewhere in relation to it" (Gunning, 2008). Though the index may be a convenient way to explain the curious power of the photograph to confuse our senses and understanding of time, it may be useful to consider the photograph more as "an emanation of a *past reality: a magic*, not an art" (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 88). I would posit that an imaginative engagement with a still or moving image can bear this power in order to create an unsettling fascination and an uncanny relationship with time.

Using my camera to view *Shroud* installed in a darkened room allowed me a period of *reflection-in-action*, leading me to entirely black out the space by altering the amount of light entering the device. This created a void behind the projected image and I was then able to analyse and capture the micromovements of the falling bodies. Pausing and then moving the video forward slowly, transformed the bodies almost at every new frame; at times the people would be recognisable and at others they appeared profoundly altered or deformed. This process revealed the kind of ghostly gestures or “micro-movements” that Kris Ravetto-Biagioli describes (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2016, p. 11), and which gave the images a fascinating degree of ambiguity as to whether I was looking at a living, breathing body or a corpse.²⁷

The photographs exist as images that have been highly mediated, from their initial recording and edit to their projection on to the gauze like fabric; the image settles partially onto the initial surface but passes through onto subsequent layers of tulle, creating a kind of echo. I printed these preliminary photographs onto paper (**Figure 17**) and then subsequently onto acetate. Seeing these images on a larger scale emphasised the apparent decay that the bodies were subject to as a result of the screens I had used; this appeared to me as a kind of fine pixellation or as a gradual disintegration or shedding of bodily matter. This effect was accentuated when printed onto acetate. Layering the sheets of printed acetate (**Figure 18**) created uncanny, spectral figures with ghostly emanations, their strangeness heightened by a moiré effect caused by the overlapping halftones of the printed image.

As a way of looking at these photographic images differently and to provide further mediation and decay I also experimented with photopolymer intaglio prints. I had initially identified my motivation to explore this medium as an intuitive attempt to give the images a degree of *authenticity*, creating some distance from the mechanical reproduction of the digital

²⁷ Though I had initially just intended to document the images this became a reflective process, giving me an opportunity to engage with the projections in a new mediated way. I saw this as a good example of a *reflection-in-action* which enabled the creation of new outcomes and highlighted the value of the cyclical model of action-reflection-action. This was the result of an intuitive decision which yielded a pleasing and surprising outcome.

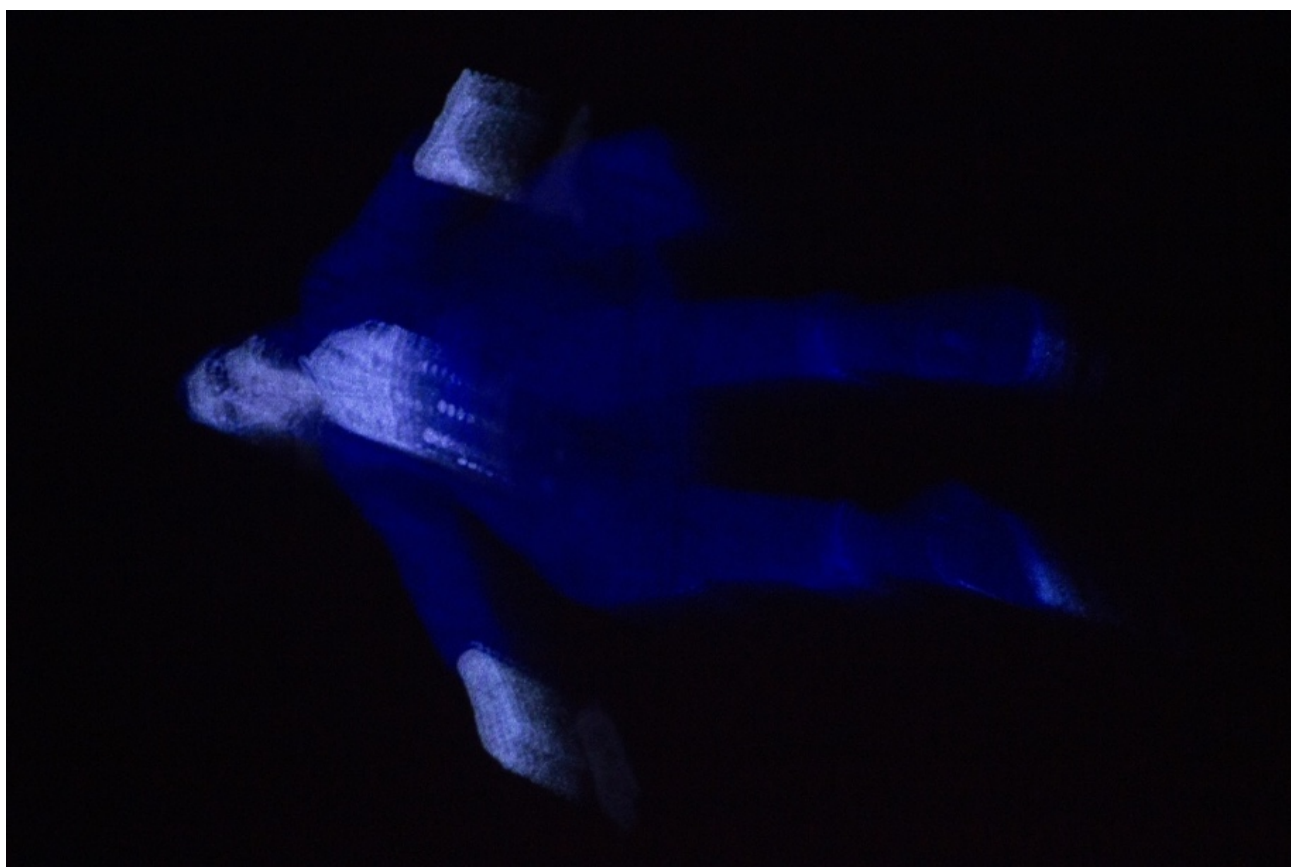


Figure 17 Alex Newton, *Drawn Under Gravity I & II*, 2016-18, Digital print, 420 x 594 mm.



Figure 18 Alex Newton, *Untitled*, 2017, Digital photograph on transparencies, 297 mm x 420 mm

process. Notions of authenticity were on my mind as I reflected on the significance of the index, as well as digital and analogue processes.²⁸

The outcome is a body of highly mediated images (**Figure 19**) that hover between the photographic and the quality of a hand drawn etching. They have undergone a significant degree of manipulation and I discovered whilst making them that they degraded as a result of repeated production or duplication; from digital recording to digital photograph of a stilled

²⁸ Like the index and its “truth claim”, the traditions of analogue printmaking are, perhaps misleadingly, bound up with notions of authenticity, while the digital and its potential for technical reproduction is mistrusted. Using a technique and materials that are associated with craft and the touch of the hand, as opposed to a mechanically reproduced digital image, involves a human and artistic intervention and the creation of an object that is unique; Walter Benjamin went as far as to associate “aura” with original artworks, stating, “That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (Benjamin, 1936/2007, p. 221).



Figure 19 Digital video still (a), photographed projected still (b) from *Shroud*, and intaglio print (c), 2016-18.

projection onto netted screen - to image printed onto transparency - to exposed photographic plate - to the reproduction of the image onto paper.²⁹ Ultimately though it is the visual characteristics of the prints which distance them from their digital genesis, imply artistic mediation and hint at their uniqueness. This intervention defamiliarizes, muddies the waters and has helped to create images of ambiguous origin and meaning.³⁰

There are a series of tensions at play in these visual interrogations, which have emerged through my engagement with the impalpable nature of the projection beam and a desire to still it, to give it a material form. Compared to the fugitive and ephemeral nature of the projected images, the intaglio prints carry a notable sense of gravity, material weight and permanence in the thick, black layers of ink used. In creating them from the projections, there is a sense of transformation from an unstable, animated luminescence, to fossilised darkness; a transformation perhaps, from *subject* to *object*.

Though there is certainly a resemblance in my intaglio prints to the people that have posed, the gradual degradation of the image has meant losing visual information that is vital in recreating an accurate likeness, so much so in some cases that it would be more accurate to describe this as a trace or residue of their presence. The faces are deformed to a degree, lending them a strangeness and ambiguity and the resemblance to corpses in several of them is undeniable. There is without doubt an uncanniness to these prints that sees the moving image stilled to become a, "form from which life has just departed, or might just be about to

²⁹ Though these prints were made using a digitally mediated process, their appearance aligns them more closely with the traditions of printmaking which are associated with notions of credibility and authorship; these kinds of images possess, according to Ruth Pelzer Montada, a more elevated hierarchical status than the easily reproduced digital image (Montada, 2008). Despite the images' digital provenance, the lack of uniformity in the surface tone and grain hints at an older process and suggests a decaying image, also contributing to their sense of *authenticity*. In *Loving a Disappearing Image*, Laura Marks' essay exploring the disintegration of film and video in relation to the body, she suggests that the disappearance of visual information creates uniqueness and "restores aura to the work" (Marks, 1997), whilst mechanically reproduced images may lack authenticity and authorial presence. Whilst my intaglio prints appeared to show a decaying or disintegrating body, it was also interesting to note that the plates I used also decayed every time they were used to produce a new image.

³⁰ Though the prints can be understood as figures, their meaning is far opaquer; it is not obvious when and where these people have come from and in fact how the image was created. How we see each of them though is undoubtedly affected by our relationship to time. One member of the PhD feedback group felt that were clearly references to the museum and archival presentation, where artefacts and documents are preserved as items of cultural, historical or scientific interest. This affected how I considered they might be viewed in a gallery setting. Though these 'artefacts' may be seen as portraits, Victorian grotesques, memento mori, documents of forensic science or perhaps scans (an apparatus that uncannily reveals that which is hidden to the naked eye), they remain temporally ambiguous.

depart” (Kelley, 2003, p. 66).³¹ One member of the PhD feedback group felt as though they resembled negatives or x-rays (both uncanny processes in revealing something concealed) and that we read a body, but only through the whites and greys. Another described them as articulating something which was invisible and considered them evidential reminders of an animate body stilled. There was from most, a feeling that they referred to death and the macabre (**Figure 20 & 21**), something permanent in comparison to the continuity of the projected form. There was also an interest in the prints’ relation to the printing plates which I had also shown the group, something that I saw as mirroring the unstable and ever-present tensions between presence and absence, alive and dead, that had existed throughout my research.³²

I felt that these prints should be shown in an artificially darkened, spot lit room, resituating the figures back into their original context, so that they gradually emerged out of the surface of the white paper. Using a vitrine in a dark space with dark walls and a dark floor created further possibilities; I experimented with a variety of formats that allowed me to vary how many glass shelves on which to place the prints.

Using a spotlight above the vitrine illuminated the print closest to the light source, whilst the images below gradually became harder and harder to see (**Figure 22**). The focused light also meant that the majority of the room remained in the dark, apart from some residual over spill from the downlight. The darkness transformed the space and allowed the eye to lose the contours of the room, plunging the surroundings into a limitless and potentially disorientating

³¹Citation taken from a conversation on the relation between the sublime and the uncanny, involving artist Mike Kelley and critic Thomas McEvilley. The quote used is McEvilley’s description of Kelley’s recent work that focuses on the uncanny; he goes on to describe Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny as “the interface between life and death or animate and inanimate” (Kelley, 2003, p. 64).

³² The dual nature of the printmaking process carries, according to Clare Humphries, “an uncanny trace of the unseen” (Humphries, 2010). The visible printed image marks the contact between the now removed matrix, creating a series of tensions between here / not here and now / then. Ruth Pelzer Montada relates Georges Didi Huberman’s description of the *imprint*, to the dual nature of printmaking. Huberman calls the imprint the “dialectical image”, something that “as well as indicating *touch* (the foot which impresses itself into the sand) also indicates the *loss* (the absence of the foot in its imprint)” (Didi-Huberman, 1999 cited by Montada, 2008).

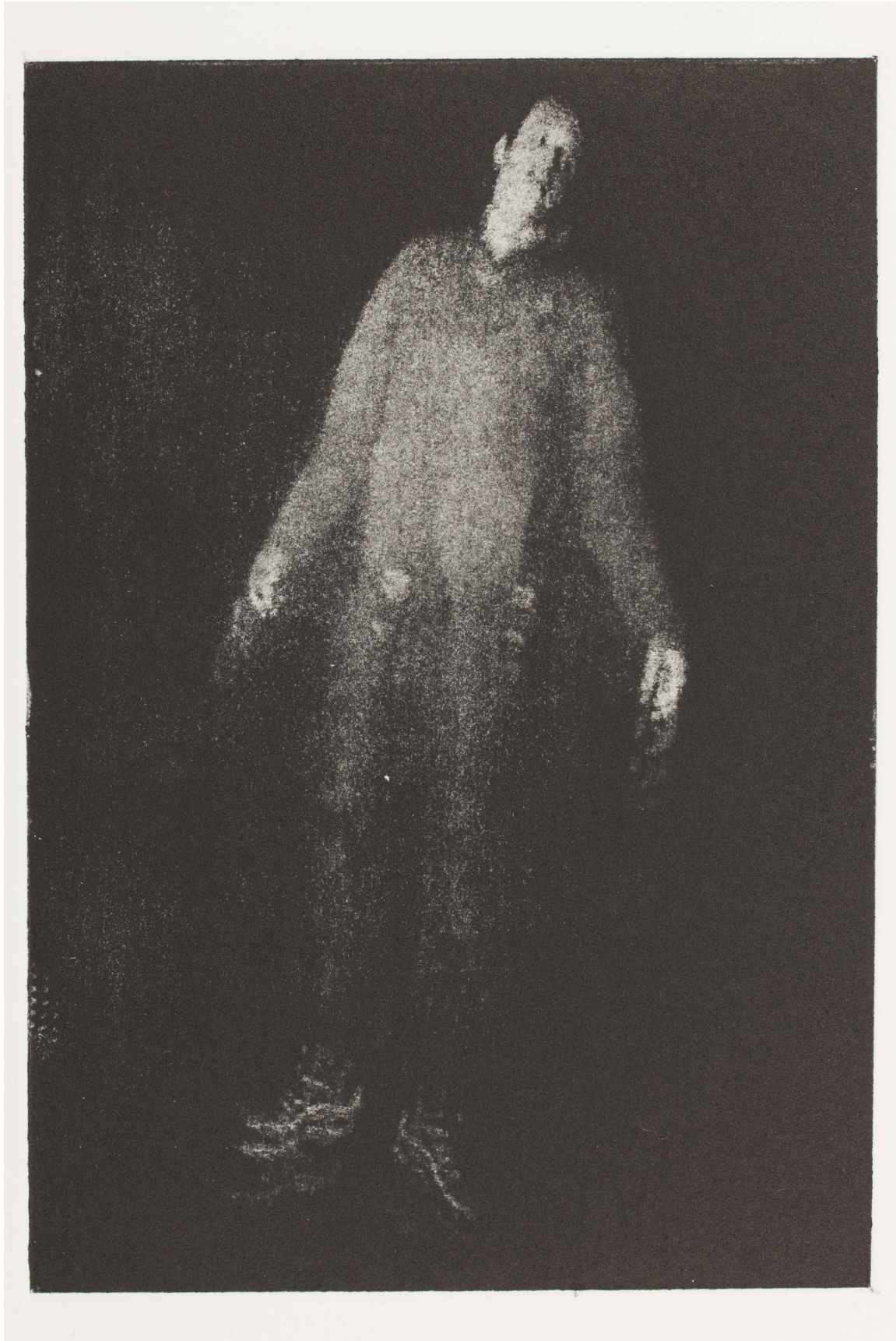


Figure 20 Alex Newton, *Eidolon, Eidolon III*, 2017-18, Photopolymer print, 197 x 139 mm.



Figure 21 Alex Newton, *Eidolon, Eidolon VI*, 2017-18, Photopolymer Print, 197 x 139 mm.

space; this placed the spectator into the same context as the printed figures.³³



Figure 22 Vitrine and prints with spotlight, 2017

There is decay in each of the images and as we progress down the layers of shelving in the vitrine, they disintegrate further as they descend into blackness. This actual and metaphorical physical decline may then lead us to see this container as a memorial or monument to these disappearing and decaying bodies.

³³ Controlled darkness was an essential component in the development of cinematic and other moving image forms. In total blackout we are uncertain of our surroundings and may experience psychological disorientation and anxiety. In entering a darkened space where light has been completely extinguished we may enter a "territory of fear" that simulates "the extinction of life itself", however it may also "instil in the [cinematic] spectator the comforts of the maternal womb" (Elwes, 2015, p. 172). Darkness may also create an imaginative space where there is potential for magic and enchantment. Not surprisingly, darkness held a fascination for Freud, who returns to this theme several times in his essay on the uncanny. Silence, solitude and darkness are, according to Freud, the fundamental elements that have produced the "infantile morbid anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free" (Freud, 1958/1986, p. 161). He also refers to the strangeness of navigating a room in darkness and even mentions E.T.A. Hoffman's nightmarish story *Der Sandman* that tells the story of a character that throws sand in the eyes of children to help them sleep. Freud goes on to describe the uncanny as being concerned with what is "Concealed, kept from sight" (Freud, 1958/1986, p. 127) and to do with the revelation of what should have remained secret and hidden. However, as Nicholas Royle recognises "It is not so much darkness itself (whatever that may be), but the process of ceasing to be dark, the process or revelation or bringing to light, that is uncanny" (Royle, 2003, p. 108).

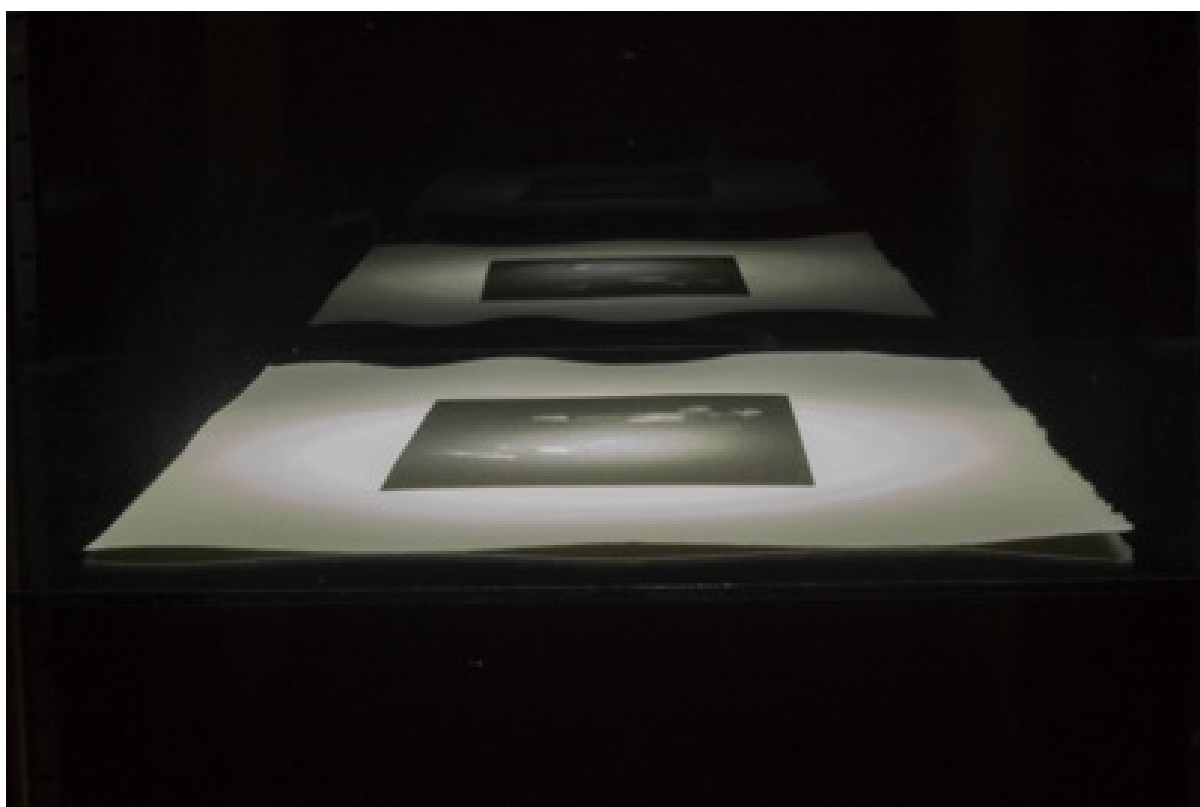
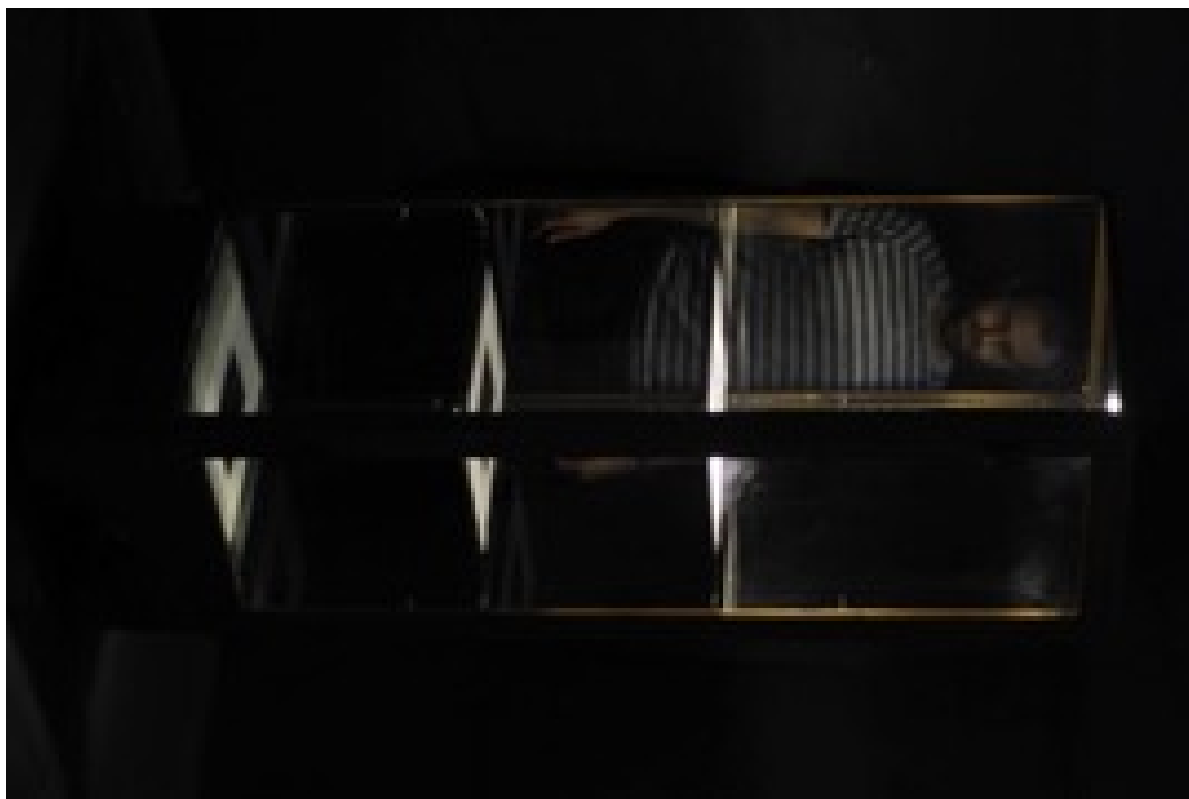


Figure 23 & 24 Vitrine and prints with spotlight, 2017

I was unable to look at the vitrine without reflecting on the relationship between the printed figures, my body (as a viewer) and the upright container (cabinet, sarcophagus, tomb, locker, womb) that stands shut beside me. While the darkness of the room allows the vitrine to be entirely isolated in the space, it also allows the prints to be reflected (**Figure 23 & 24**) in all four of its glass walls, creating repeated virtual spaces that recede into the darkness of the of the room; viewed alongside a video display of Shroud (**Figure 25**) this appeared like a layered phantasmagoria image. Placed in the vitrine these prints go full circle and are once again *reanimated* as they are projected anew, recalling quite directly Elcott's description of his *phantasmagoric dispositif* as a figure directly entering the room. This unexpected quality drew me to reflect on a kind of temporal slippage between *now* and *then* that seemed to be present; this would subsequently influence the direction of later work, documented in chapter two.



Figure 25 *Eidolon, Eidolon I-VI and Shroud* on display at an exhibition of my research, 2021

Chapter 2

Beyond the screen: Bleeding the edges of the body.

A change in my circumstances forced a change in focus and a change in the materials I was able to use. No longer able to use a large studio space that had allowed me to project onto screens, I was back to working outside and editing at my desk. Preparing a presentation of my research for the *Oxford Brookes Research Conference* gave me the opportunity to create a video that would subvert the process and structure of a conventional lecture.

I wanted to provoke in the audience the uncanny or liminal experiences that my work aims to bring about and that I was struggling to grasp. Recording the lecture theatre and then projecting the images back into the same space appealed to me. I would appear as a phantom, a trace of my earlier presence evident in the recorded and projected footage.

The development of this work was driven fundamentally by my fascination with the temporal confusion that I experienced through my engagement with the photographic and moving image; this was a feeling that was just out of reach. It was also partly led by reading Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and his struggle to articulate this slippage in time that occurred for him when he looked at a photograph. The link between the referent (the object photographed) and the viewer was for Barthes like an "emanation" from another place and time, "A sort of umbilical cord [that] links the body of my photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (Barthes, 1980/2000, p. 81).

Employing a different approach to exploring these ideas gave me new impetus and an alternative way of understanding what I was struggling to grasp. This change of tack once again recalled for me Rebecca Fortnum's essay *Creative Accounting*, in which she investigates the value of exploring new materials in order to generate new insights. Though I had continued to use the camera as a way to mediate my experience and gather information,

creating a direct link to the spectator enabled a new performative element and a new way of thinking.

Taking my camera into the location of the conference, the *Chakrabarti Lecture Theatre*, provided a way to explore the architecture of the site and a way to navigate the questions that I had, bringing this awareness to the fore. By recording the lecture theatre this allowed an encounter with both the site and the material process, through which new insights might emerge. This did not feel like a method that was separate to the thinking and making that happens in the studio, it felt like, as artist Christine Borland suggests “[that] the two things are much more interconnected and overlapping” (Fortnum, 2007, p. 12). For both Borland and artist Rachel Lowe, the medium can in a sense, lead the artist’s thoughts and actions; there is a sense that by engaging with the materials at hand unexpected events can create new and surprising realisations. Rachel Lowe describes, “Sometimes I don’t know what to do, often I will do something physically, like film something or use collage which will then lead to an understanding of what I’m trying to say through the work.” (Fortnum, 2004-2009).

I recorded footage from the lecture theatre on two occasions, initially bringing my video back to the studio to look at it, edit it and shape it into a relevant form. Watching the footage after the first visit allowed me to reflect on what I had selected, to consider how to use it and to come to a realisation of what else I would then need to do. On my second visit I reviewed and edited on location, turning the lecture theatre into a studio of sorts. I understood that to create a video that accurately communicated my research, I would need to turn to the knowledge inherent in the kinds of visual forms that I had been exploring. Using just language would be problematic in that it expresses a particular kind of relationship to the work, whereas a work that aimed to elicit the kind of confusing and uncanny feelings that I was interested in, would communicate my research more effectively.

Using recordings of landscape and figures, my presentation began to be shaped by a shift from the interior of the Chakrabarti lecture theatre, to the outside landscape; images and sounds from the past and present, from the *here* and from *there*.

In making this work, I began to investigate forms of spectatorship and started to reflect further on how using the screen may affect this. In developing my installation *Shroud*, I had previously explored the screen as a sculptural presence and its potential to integrate the image into the architecture of the gallery space, as described by Elcott's *Phantasmagoric Dispositif*. In creating a video which presented first the inside viewing space and then the outside, the divisions which existed between the interior and exterior, real and virtual were being destabilised, "rendering a wall permeable to 'ventilation' in new ways" (Friedberg, 2009, p. 1). The rejection of cinematic screen traditions and the development of a more participatory relationship between viewer and screen is, however, not new.³⁴

For Kate Mondloch, the use of both material apparatus and virtual spaces created a kind of "spectatorial doubleness" (Mondloch, 2010, p. 64) that drew the viewer's attention to the spatial parameters of the gallery, whilst simultaneously utilising the virtual space of the screen to alter the viewer's conception of the gallery's architecture. In this liminal space where the viewer is required to experience a kind of "double consciousness" (Uroskie, 2014, p. 2), there also occurs a temporal and spatial displacement for the spectator, which Mondloch describes as "[being] both 'here' (embodied subjects in the material exhibition space) and 'there' (observers looking onto screen spaces) *now*." (Mondloch, 2007, p. 24).³⁵ On reflection, these were ideas that my initial videos *The Sea is the Land's Edge* and *Shroud* began to touch on and tentatively explore. This was also particularly evident when displaying my etchings in reflective vitrines, creating a phantasmagoria of sorts.

³⁴ The emergence of an array of interrelated screen reliant and moving image practices in the late 1960s and 1970s began to challenge the dominant spectatorial forms of the cinema, whilst blurring the boundaries between the cinematic and the sculptural in gallery spaces. Michael Snow's ground-breaking films and installations explored this territory, enabling us to consider the screen both as a kind of sculptural object and as a virtual space, creating a tension between the material and the immaterial (Mondloch, 2010).

³⁵ Both Kate Mondloch and Andrew Uroskie refer to this dual ability to be present and cognitively able to perceive both the material space of the gallery and the virtual space of the screen simultaneously. Jean Mitry describes this in relation to the cinema, where, "I am simultaneously in this action and outside it, in this space and out of this space." (Mitry, 1965, p. 179). In her book, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, Mondloch credits Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey for their writing which proposes a similar idea. Mondloch does however make the distinction that whilst Metz and Mulvey's theories arose out of their research into narrative cinema which privileges *time*, the media installation artworks that she writes about tend to be tied to *space* and the sculptural presence of the screen. These artworks "insistently push their viewers to be mindful of the material exhibition space (as experienced in 'real time')" (Mondloch, 2010, p. 64).

As a visual image, the screen as a “permeable” membrane was a striking one, and as I edited the video that I would later title *Margin* (a reference to the screen’s hybridity, the lecture theatre’s liminal qualities and its status as a site of learning), I returned to it frequently. We begin in the darkness and as the outside subtly becomes the inside there is a textual reference to Freud’s essay on the uncanny (**Figure 26**). The empty lecture theatre is gradually revealed to us, as the lights are turned on by an unknown agency. The darkened room is gradually illuminated (**Figure 27**) and an increasingly ominous low hum changes the lecture theatre into a strangely charged space.

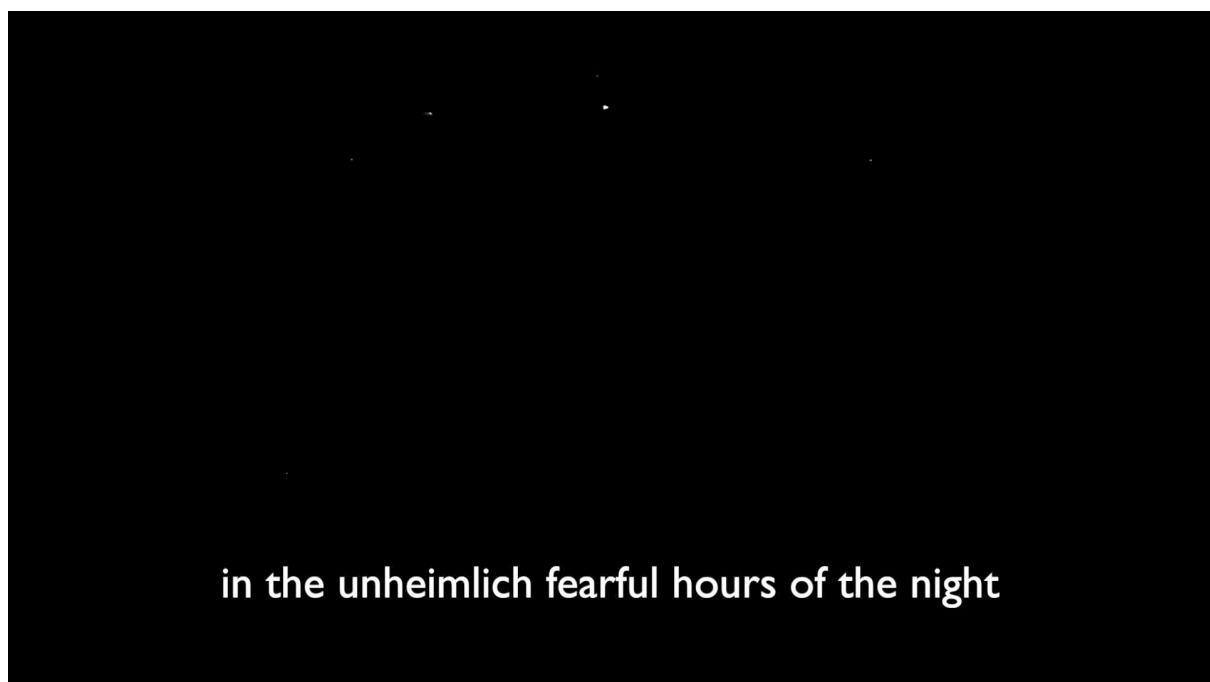


Figure 26 Alex Newton, *Margin*, 2018, Digital Video, 8 min. 11 sec.

With the image of the lecture theatre clearly mirrored on the wall hung media screen, text from an anonymous commentator brings our awareness to the room and places us in the present. (**Figure 28**). We are then taken through the window of the screen and outside into a windy, misty landscape as these interior and exterior worlds begin to coalesce.



Figure 27 Digital still from *Margin*, 2018.

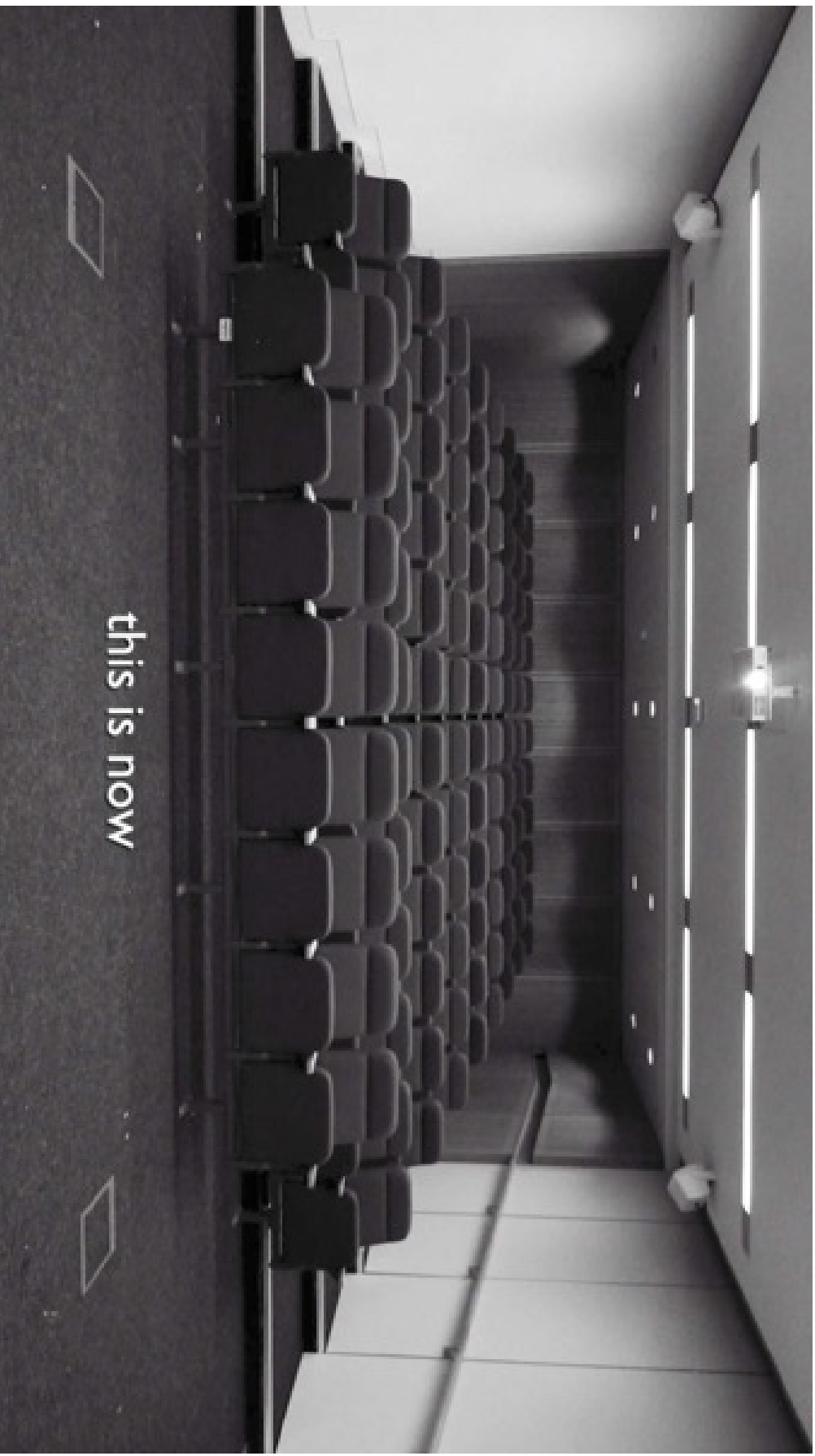


Figure 28 Digital still from *Margin*, 2018.

We are aware of our *nowness* as we sit on a chair in the lecture theatre (**Figure 29**) and of the *nowness* of the recorded figure filmed in the past but persisting into the present; we watch a ghostly presence move as if it was dragged from the *there* in the past and into the *here* of the present.

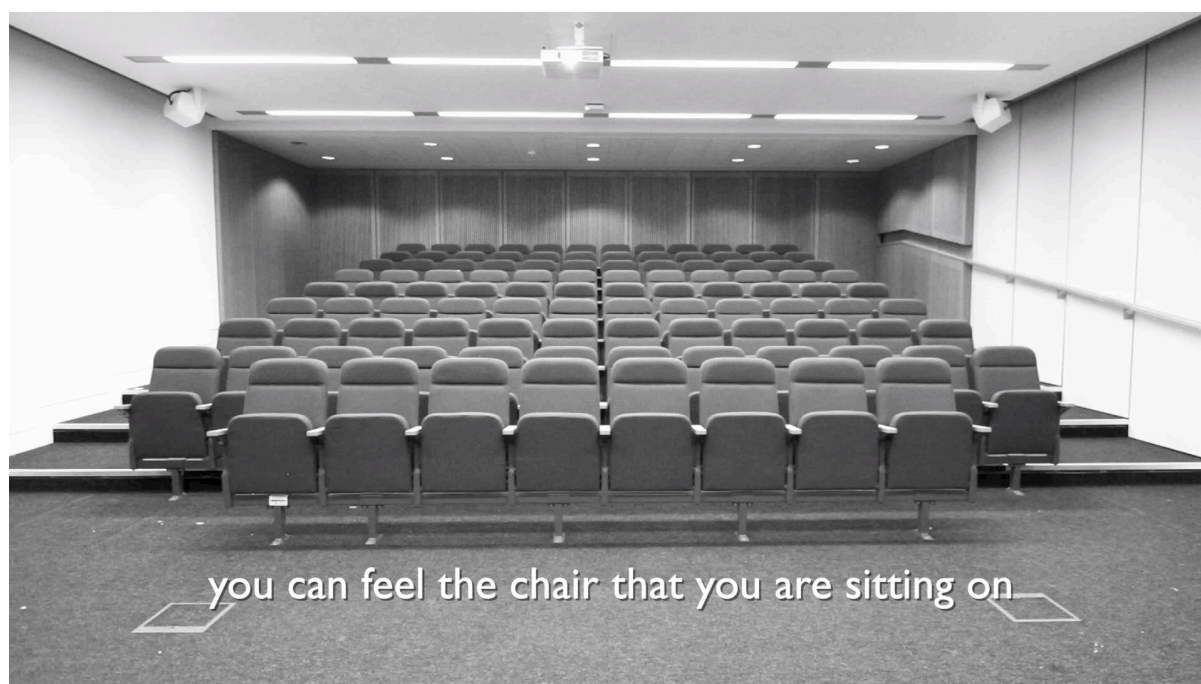


Figure 29 Digital still from *Margin*, 2018.

A change in structure and the decision to use text brought a new dimension to this video. Whilst it was initially used to bring a more explanatory aspect to my *lecture*, it soon became a way to reference, reflect upon and respond to Barthes' use of deixis in his attempts to articulate the complexities of the photograph in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1980/2000).³⁶ Using deictic language cuts through directly to the referent, which at the conference indicated the spatial parameters of the lecture theatre, the chairs that the audience were sitting on and the

³⁶ In Peircian semiotic theory, deictic language is *indexical* as it points directly to its referent, though requires contextual information to be fully understood. Deixis uses words that refer to a specific time, place or person with a certain context, and includes pronouns - words like, I, you, here, there, now and then are deictic. The index, as described previously, implies a "real connection" (Peirce, 1932, p. 251) between sign and object where a physical imprint has occurred, leaving behind a material trace which, "does not evaporate in the moment of its production but remains as the witness of its anteriority.". However, as Mary Ann Doane explains, "the index as deixis - the pointing finger, the 'this' of language - does exhaust itself in the moment of its implementation and is ineluctably linked to its presence.". This is the indexical in its, "purest form", though the implication of touch or imprint here is only figurative. (Doane, 2007, p. 136).

now in which it was happening.³⁷ The discrete boundary between the outside (the *there* of the virtual space of the “ventilated” media screen and the world outside of the lecture theatre) and the inside (the *here* of the lecture theatre) gradually begins to dissolve so that the outside becomes in, creating a kind of “spectatorial doubleness” (Mondloch, 2010, p. 64) as described by Kate Mondloch. This spatial and temporal confusion is compounded by the self-reflexive use of the screen, as seen by the audience and is also indicated by the deictic “this was now” (**Figure 30**). Using deictic language to address the audience introduced a performative element to the video which, reminiscent of Michael Snow’s avant-garde film *So Is This* (Snow, 1982) suggested a specious form of interactivity.³⁸



Figure 30 Digital still from *Margin*, 2018.

³⁷ My decision to use deictic language came partly from reading Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, but was primarily led by an intuitive desire to explore something I couldn’t quite grasp, whilst wanting to know what would happen if I did use it. Having done this, further contextual research then allowed me to articulate and reflect on these ideas and led me to continue experimenting with its use. It wasn’t until later that I discovered that Alison Butler had explored the deictic in a similar context in her essay *A Deictic Turn: Space and Location in Contemporary Gallery Film and Video Installation* (Butler, 2010). This supported my findings and I built upon her discussion.

³⁸ Michael Snow’s film, *So Is This*, is made up entirely of words which activates, “the ‘this’ of language relentlessly.”. Emphasising deixis, Snow’s film refers to the audience as, “the ‘you’ of a present tense, that of the film’s screening” (Doane, 2007, p. 137).

Throughout this written commentary I have touched on my use of sound in my videos, but it is not something that I have expanded on thus far. My research has been primarily driven by the visual and though the scope of this PhD does not allow for a more detailed analysis of its significance, it would be remiss to not reflect on the more relevant aspects.

In the process of making my moving image work it is the image that comes first nearly every time. *Shroud* does not have accompanying music, but the other significant works of my research tend to be propelled forward by the sound and would not be as effective in purely visual form. The sound I have made is partially intended to create a sense of coherence and flow to disjointed visual elements, to enhance descriptive detail and texture to the images on screen and also to emphasise a sense of duration or passing of time. It also aims to nudge the spectator in a particular emotional direction, essentially telling the viewer how they should feel. Using sound and the visual simultaneously has also allowed me to create a sense of dissonance or a sense of the uncanny through unusual or unexpected audiovisual combinations. Without sound the video lacks depth, but adding it propels it forward changing it completely. This impact of sound on image (and vice versa) is recognised by Michel Chion, stating that “...one perception influences the other and transforms it. We never see the same thing when we also hear; we don't hear the same thing when we see as well’ (Chion, 1994, p. xxvi).

The kind of audio which is present in my research and in many contemporary moving image installations and video art is referred to by Catherine Elwes as “sonic lubricant”. This is described by Elwes as audio that is subordinate to the image and comparable to the incidental sound design often found in more narrative mainstream films. These sounds may contain clicks, metallic clangs or grinding, rumbles from the natural world and ominous electronic drones contributing towards setting up anxiety inducing feelings and “Gothic tensions that are never resolved” (Elwes, 2015, p. 219).

The kind of ominous drones that Elwes refers to features in many of my videos and is also a defining feature of the films of David Lynch.³⁹ Characterised by a low rumbling ambient

³⁹ Lynch considers the use of sound as important as the visual, stating that, “Films are 50 percent visual and 50 percent sound” (Lynchnet, 1998). His use of ‘room tone’ or “presences” as he prefers it to be known is consistent across many of his films and is incredibly distinctive (Lynch, 2005).

resonance Lynch often uses 'room tone' in order to unnerve, creating a sense of anxiety and malevolent intent. Unsettling sounds of wind, low frequency industrial hiss and grinding static accompany the liminal worlds that Lynch presents in order to engender a sense of fear, uncertainty and disquiet; the embodiment of Freud's uncanny. In these spaces that we become immersed in as a spectator, he uses the kind of disembodied and unattributed noises that play on our feelings of unease when our certainty has become destabilised.

For David Toop it is the "intangibility of sound" that is uncanny. The ability of sound to move "as an apparition" across divides, detached from its original source and into our immediate environment induces feelings of suspicion and fear (Toop, 2010). In making my own music for the videos I had created I was particularly drawn to this idea of the spectral presence of sound alongside its potential for taking on physical form, and looked for ways to marry this with imagery so that it contributed towards establishing a liminal space between presence and absence, real and imagined, here and there.

Using slow, rhythmical pulsating drones made from various organic and electronic sources helped me to create layered sounds that aimed to contribute to a sustained and particular rhythm.⁴⁰ Much of the stillness in the imagery and the extended shots I used encourages a slow gaze so that the spectator's way of looking is lengthened. Adding these repetitive, non-diegetic sounds aims to shift the way that we look, so that our experience of the space that we are viewing begins to border on the dreamlike, the rhythmic sounds helping us to look in a more intensified, more contemplative way.

My approach to making my accompanying music has come about, much like the way I edited *Margin* and other videos, as a result of an heuristic interaction with both image and sound. Similarly, the arrangement of these separate elements has emerged without a predetermined outcome and through *not knowing*. On reflection, this intuitive approach has ultimately led me to create sounds that reflect and enhance the texture and physicality of the image whilst not mirroring, too entirely, our lived experience. The sound therefore, aims like the visual, to

⁴⁰ Listening to the work of La Monte Young, Pauline Oliveros and Eliana Radigue was also an influence on how I created these layered drones. When amplified, the invisible low frequencies I used could also be felt as a 'presence' within the body.

place the viewer in a liminal space on the threshold between the materiality of the *here* of the concrete world and the immateriality of the imagined *there*. This has meant creating a dynamic tension between the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds that may enhance the verisimilitude of the presented virtual world and at times lead the spectator's awareness beyond the screen. This is evident in *Margin*, *Visitor* and a later video *Caul* where recordings of ambient sounds from interior spaces and field recordings from external landscapes are used to locate the spectator in a particular space. These meanings become muddled as sounds attributed to the outside enter interior spaces and vice versa.

In order to achieve this I continued to use, like much of my research, the process of 'making strange' or *ostranenie*. This was significant in how I identified, recorded and later processed the audio tracks, enabling me to create sounds that aimed to make the familiar unusual. This involved amplifying noises that would normally be relatively quiet (the sound of earth and grass underfoot in *The Sea is the Land's Edge*), manipulating ambient noises so that they were recognisable but altered through pitch or speed (the mechanical sound of a projector screen descending, recorded in the lecture theatre in *Margin*), and through the juxtaposition of unexpected audiovisual combinations.

By suspending and then reinstating the continued flow of diegetic sounds in *Caul*, I aimed to subvert the spectator's expectations of how the presented visual world was described by sound. Rushes move in apparent silence, the sound of the soft brush of their leaves appearing only when the image cuts to a spinning black rock. Image and sound overlap, whilst contending with the subtitled text that creates a further muted sonic layer. The sound that you hear is not necessarily directly related to the image presented on the screen and so there is a degree of ambiguity and dislocation and a sense of the diegetic world and non-diegetic world bleeding.⁴¹

⁴¹ Making sounds that aimed to reflect an uncertainty in the relationship between the recorded image and the accompanying diegetic sound, came about partly as a result of my experience of having tinnitus. For over ten years I have had a high-pitched ringing in my right ear. The presence of an unwanted, foreign tone was a distressing experience and the subsequent arrival of a pulsing, whooshing noise further heightened my awareness and anxiety to the potential of new intrusive sounds. It was through this acutely focused act of listening that in periods of silence I became more conscious of sounds whose origin I could not identify. Some of these sounds I perceived as exterior to the body and some I understood as within me and inescapable, yet it was the uncertainty that what I might be hearing was imagined that led me to reflect further on the fugitive

In practical terms I captured the majority of my sounds using a handheld sound recorder, either using the unidirectional microphones or a contact mic attached to surfaces. When making *Margin* I began by bringing both video and sound equipment into the lecture theatre where my video would later be projected. I was able to assess the most striking visual aspects in there and also listen closely to the ambient noises coming from inside the room and from outside. I wanted to record the kind of sounds that were specific to a lecture theatre and that perhaps were often assimilated into the general texture of our daily sonic experience; the sound of a mechanical projector screen descending, the whirring of a desktop computer fan and the low drone of an air conditioning unit. As *Margin* moved from the interior of the lecture theatre to the misty terrain of the Peak District I also made field recordings of the wind, of the rustle of my clothes as I walked and the squelch of my footsteps in the earth. Other recordings included dripping rain and the curious sound of water travelling through the pores of aerated concrete blocks. Many of these sounds were specific to the locations that I captured on video, though I wanted also to make other non-diegetic sounds that would contribute to creating a sense of strangeness and uncertainty. Using a contact mic I recorded various reverberant bodies including cymbals and heavy metal gates, the kind of sounds that would allow me to draw out resonant bass frequencies.

I later manipulated many of these recordings so that I could first of all isolate particular noises without the distraction of the background noise, but also in some cases to emphasise specific tonal frequencies. Audacity, Adobe Audition and Reaper allowed me to draw out different frequency bands using high pass and low pass filters and the graphic equalizer. Changing pitch and tempo also helped me to create sounds that were sufficiently transformed from their original state that they possessed strange and unfamiliar qualities. Through a process of experimentation, I also further processed sounds using other filters such as delay, echo and reverb until I achieved the qualities that I was seeking.

The process of editing video has involved, as described earlier in this commentary, a series of experiments whereby I have placed recorded footage alongside one another in Final Cut Pro.

nature of sound. This was particularly evident in *Caul*, for which I made sounds to represent the interior of the body and its cardiovascular system, whilst intrusive, violent sounds disrupt its rhythm.

By either placing images side by side chronologically or through compositing layered video I have been able to follow, at all stages, an intuitive process that draws on my experiential knowledge. Though my initial arrangements have been primarily focused on the image, it is often only when audio has been added that I am able to fully realise forms that I was unconsciously searching for. In a similar way I have tried different arrangements of sounds in an attempt to successfully marry them to an image that I have intuited will be a fit. Though I may not immediately understand when image and sound have been appropriately placed I would describe the recognition I experience as a visceral, physical sense that both elements are mutually complementary.

Margin was a video that had begun to explore material and immaterial space, the real and the illusionary, presence and absence and by extension the disorientating and uncanny notion of being alive and dead simultaneously, an experience of liminality that inhabited the “terrible, and enthralling borderland between animation and lifelessness” (Warner, 2006, p. 3). These were ideas that *Margin* circled around and like much of my research was sited just out of reach, retaining a degree of unknowability. In artistic practice there is value in not knowing and as Emma Cocker explains, “Artistic enquiry might toil towards making something *less* rather than *more* ‘known’”. This involves maintaining “a field of desirable indeterminacy within which to work” and where a trace of unfamiliarity in the eventual form may be favourable (Cocker, 2013, pp. 126-127).

It was this sense of unfamiliarity that meant for me, that these were ideas that warranted further investigation. Using the lecture theatre in Oxford Brookes University had inevitably carried with it connotations of instruction and learning and I felt that in order to pursue my experiments further I would need to find a location uncluttered by the auditorium’s seating and the distractions of items hanging on the wall.

Using a ‘white cube’ style room within the university naturally retained the connection to its institutional setting, though was plain enough to allow some form of physical transformation; this was also a space that I could later project my video in for display. *The Arena* was a room that was internally constructed by large, white, wooden panels that blocked out the light from the concealed windows. Though this meant that the room could be artificially darkened, the

cracks in the uppermost corners of the space was how the light got in; a trace of the outside world still persisting within. Using my camera enabled me to explore the spatial parameters of the room and to look at it, as an image, within the confines of the frame. With this act of mediation, I could defamiliarize what I was looking at by removing it from its context and transforming the image in to something strange and unfamiliar. I intended however to retain enough descriptive information in my recording to ensure that this was, to a degree, recognisable as the room that the spectator was currently standing in.

Whilst filming, I considered the nature of the boundary that divides the interior from the exterior, and the distinction between “the insideness of *place* and the outsideness of *space*” (Trigg, 2012, p. 109; emphasis added) utilising the process of mediated looking to help conceptualise my thoughts.⁴² I reflected on ways to grapple with these ideas and how I might effectively create a video that successfully reflected the experiential ambiguities that I understood to exist within the binary opposition of inside / outside. The division of inside and outside has, according to Gaston Bachelard, “the sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* or *no*”, and has been in a way, a preoccupation throughout my research from the beginning.⁴³ This has been evident in my initial videos *The Sea is the Land’s Edge* and *Shroud* and in the subsequent prints I made, whereby figures hover between presence and absence, embodiment and disembodiment.

Within the enclosed space of the *Arena* there was little to remind us directly of the ongoing outside world, though there was also little to disorientate; with the lights extinguished the cracks of light acted as a direct, evidential trace of the outside, which I imagined as a throbbing mass penetrating the gaps in the wall. Through the process of recording inside the *Arena* I

⁴² The inside, a closed architectural space, relies upon “the primordial image of shelter” a dwelling that provides protection and in which there is also an inevitable relation to the outside. We cannot conceive an encounter with inside without “proceeding from the temporal perspective of where place has come from; namely, *outside*.” and therefore we find ourselves at all times somewhere in place. As Dylan Trigg explains, “At no point do we find ourselves wholly displaced, in a region without any discernible features to orient us.” (Trigg, 2012, p. 109). According to Dylan Trigg, *place* is an “elusive notion” and a, “hybrid concept” that is characterised by an ambiguous sense of identity; it is neither a, “subjective construct nor an object incidentally in the world” (Trigg, 2012, p. 108).

⁴³ Many of my experiments have explored the *inside* of the gallery space and the *outside* of the virtual space of the screen, notions which we may associate with the deictic *here* and *there*, positional dimensions which Bachelard recognises as being philosophically aligned with notions of *being* and *non-being* (Bachelard, 1958 / 1994, p. 212).

was interested in finding ways to destabilise the dialectics of inside /outside by rupturing the dividing wall, emphasising the ambiguities at play and creating a sense of liminality or disorientation.

Our understanding of the inside as a discrete, enclosed space can be threatened by the window or the virtual world of the screen, a “ventilation” or porous membrane that allows us to see and bring us closer to the outside. In using subtle, visual references to the architectural construction of the projection space and with accompanied diegetic and non-diegetic sound, I intended to create a sense of push and pull from outside to in and vice versa. In addition to the light that entered the corners of the room I also wanted to physically bring in something from the outside and so when recording footage, I used a layer of earth to entirely cover the artificially constructed floor. Bringing the spectator’s awareness to the room in which they were standing and its eventual physical transformation into a collapsed liminal space would also, I hoped, contribute to creating the blurred sense of past and present, of real and imaginary that is evident in the Phantasmagoria.

Whilst making *Visitor* I was aware of the similar theoretical ground that Cardiff and Miller’s work *The Paradise Institute* (**Figure 31**) occupies. Within the ‘white cube’ of a gallery setting, a large two-level, plywood construction, houses two rows of the kind of upholstered seating that is associated with the cinema. As the doors are closed and lights are extinguished, the headphones that we are wearing muffle the sounds from outside the enclosed space, and we soon become aware of the binaurally recorded sounds of people talking close by. The ongoing conversation behind us is clearly a fiction, though as the screening begins a miniature diorama of seats is illuminated by the small-scale cinema screen in front of us. Combined with the dialogue and ambient noise that we immediately associate with the images projected onto the screen, illusion and reality begin to blur and as Andrew Uroskie describes “there is a sense of uncanny doubling as real and recorded sounds overlap and coalesce” (Uroskie, 2014, p. 2). We become implicated in a conversation as we hear repeated questions coming from a woman who is beside us.



Figure 31 Cardiff and Miller, *The Paradise Institute*, mixed media. (Miller, 2001)

The distinction between the ‘reality’ of the architectural space that we are seated in and the illusion of the cinematic world in front of us begins to unravel further, as a man who is part of the filmic narrative becomes detached from that world and appears to cross the divide and enter our world of the auditorium. Like *Margin* and *Visitor*, *The Paradise Institute* requires a foot in both realms and relies upon “the spectator’s double consciousness – her simultaneous experience of real and recorded sounds”.⁴⁴

The Paradise Institute is “doubly enclosed”, the ‘black box’ space of a miniature cinema placed within the art gallery’s ‘white cube’; two cultural sites where we may encounter two diametrically opposed spectatorial forms. The immersive experience of the cinema

⁴⁴ Uroskie’s description of “the spectator’s double consciousness” harks back to Kate Mondloch’s use of the term “spectatorial doubleness” as referenced earlier on.

transports the viewer away from their present awareness of a dark, comfortable auditorium and into the temporally finite, narrative space of the projected film by negating “both bodily mobility and environmental perception”. Within the ‘white cube’ gallery space however, the spectator is free to experience an encounter with an art work within the room in their own (potentially unlimited) time (Uroskie, 2014, pp. 2-5).

Visitor sits between these two spectatorial forms and whilst chairs were placed at the back of the room (**Figure 32**) only six people can be seated. The chairs reference the traditions of the cinematic spectatorial form and contribute a sculptural presence to the room. They serve also to provide a visual reference that when seen on screen, anchor us in the room and into the present. Though some of the PhD feedback group were unaware of the conceptual significance of the chairs, some stated that they elicited a kind of performative engagement from the spectator that disrupted normal structures. Several people did not recognise the images mirroring the architecture of the viewing space, however others had a gradual or sudden awareness that they were in fact watching a recording of the room that they were

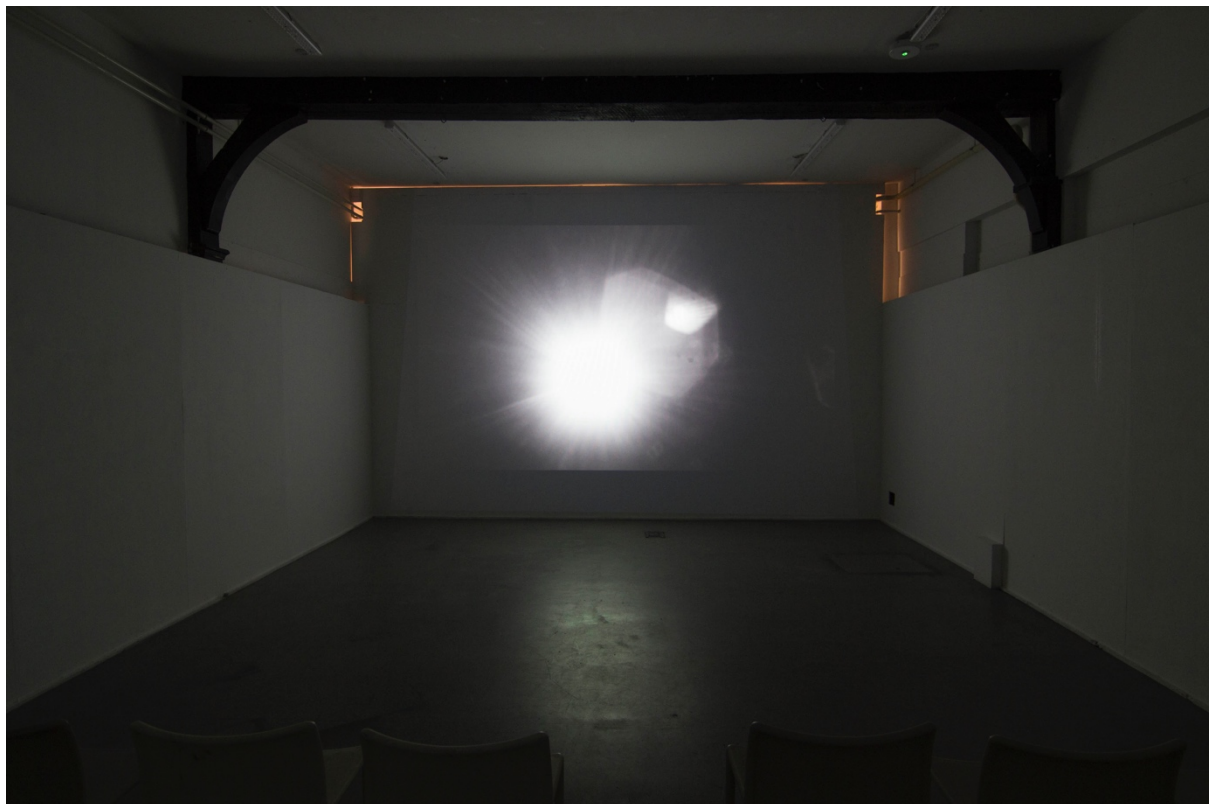


Figure 32 Alex Newton, *Visitor*, 2018, Digital Video, 10 min. 8 sec.



Figure 33 Digital still from *Visitor*, 2018.

seated in. For them this provoked a reflection on the nature of time, of 'now and then', though wasn't always hugely significant in how they considered the video. The meaning of *Visitor* was elusive and opaque though there was, according to the group, an overarching sense of the liminal.

The edited video flits between images and diegetic sounds that represent an imagined *outside*, a space of otherness separate to the projection space (this includes the sounds of people in the corridor and the door of the room closing; uncanny and violent moving images of liquid and earth that behave in unexpected ways (**Figure 33**); the unidentifiable sounds that accompany the ambient noises of wildlife and moving trees), and non-diegetic sounds and images from the recorded *inside* world of where the spectator is sitting or standing (**Figure 34**).



Figure 34 Digital still from *Visitor*, 2018.



Figure 35 Digital still from *Visitor*, 2018.

The two worlds eventually begin to coalesce as the boundary between inside and outside collapses, to reveal the illuminated interior in which we are standing, with a floor that was once covered with earth (**Figure 35**). Text then directs us to the imagined moving trees above us as the ceiling dissolves into a mass of swirling black leaves, breaking apart to reveal the sky (**Figure 36**). There is a sense throughout of something gradually being revealed, and much like my intaglio prints this relies on the use of darkness and the uncanny emergence of an image described by light.⁴⁵

Throughout my research I have applied the concept of *ostranenie* to my methodology. The specific processes and approaches I have used to create images that sit at odds with the perceived world, have developed through an engagement with “the materials of the situation” (Schön, 1983/2016, p. 50). This has meant approaching each experiment with a

⁴⁵ Freud defines the uncanny as being concerned with what is, “Concealed, kept from sight” and what, “ought to have remained...hidden and secret and has become visible” (Freud, 1958/1986, pp. 127-129).

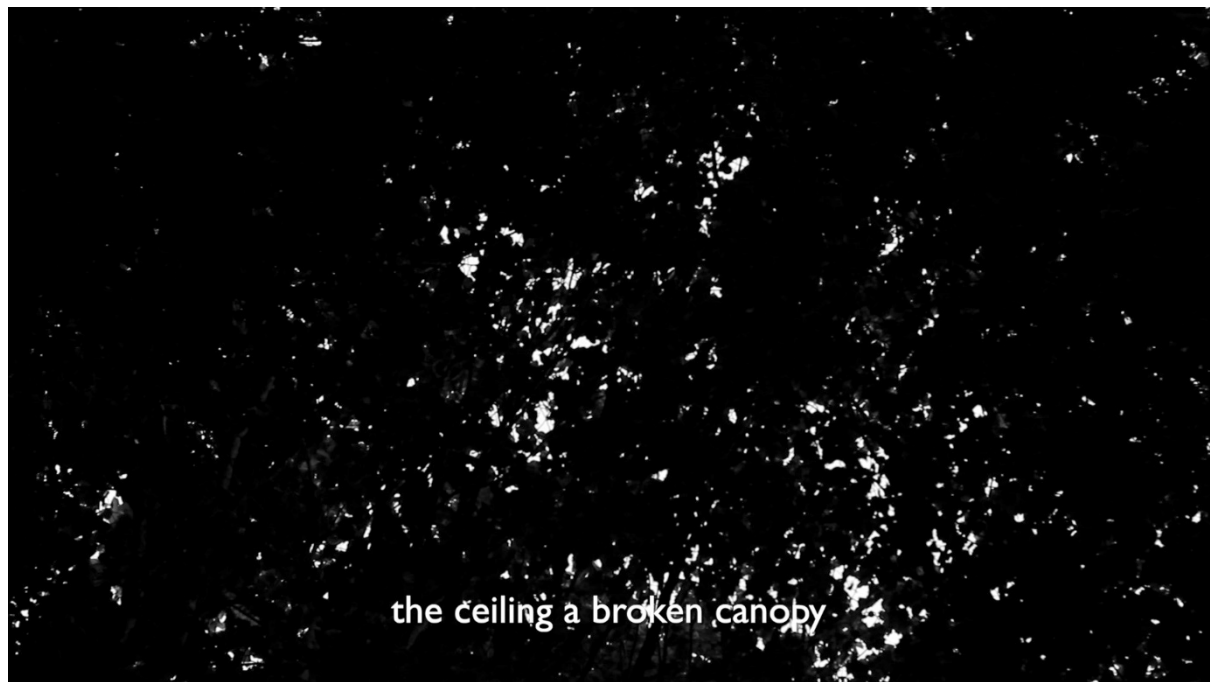


Figure 36 Digital still from *Visitor*, 2018.

broad intention and then responding to the image; this is true when recording both on site and when editing in the studio. Though this is not *always* the case, many of the images that I have made have emerged through an unconscious decision to conceal.⁴⁶ There is throughout an ongoing and dynamic tension between revealing and hiding the image so that the spectator's eye is not allowed to settle. In keeping with Shklovsky's device this aims to show us a representation of our environment in a way that we cannot see it, defamiliarizing the apparently recognisable world so that it becomes strange, unfamiliar and more difficult to read.

Recording both *Visitor* and *Margin* (and much of a later video, *Caul*) in black and white allowed me to use increased tonal contrast, creating less of a direct facsimile of the world. Its effect is a more finely textured, uncanny representation which is less immediately perceived in its entirety. The videos I have made are characterised by the gradual illumination of a

⁴⁶ Though I have described this decision as *unconscious*, I am also aware that when I am engaged in making (recording video, drawing, editing etc.) I have approached this with these intentions in mind. This is not, however, an intention that I would necessarily articulate until I am later able to reflect on it, as these conscious deliberations are directly tied up with the process of making. The duality of thinking / making is a concept that Beth Harland recognises in her practice and for her the idea that they may be separated doesn't make sense, "For me making is thinking" (Fortnum, 2013, pp. 78-79).

concealed, darkened space and rely upon the use of light to describe the image. The sense of uncertainty that I aim to provoke through these techniques is further added to by the framing of the composition, which I often used to hide certain elements that provided descriptive visual information, by accelerating or decelerating the playback speed, by cutting before the image can be fully understood, using looped footage and by reversing the clip. Doing so aims to create a higher degree of ambiguity in what is being looked at and the strange dream-like qualities of the disrupted flow of perceived time. Alongside the disruption of the visual I have also used text to transform and to dislocate.

The use of deixis in the subtitled text continually refers back to the spectator and brings the *there* of the virtual space into the *here* and now - ‘*you* were standing *here*’ later becomes ‘*I* was standing *here*’. A trace from the past is dragged into the present and we see the feet of an anonymous figure straining upon a layer of dark earth, lending a further participatory dimension (**Figure 37**).⁴⁷ As the deictic ‘*you*’ references the now of the screening, there are also subtle reminders of the material supports that enable the image to be realised, the projector and the screen. In *Margin* there are recorded images of the screen on which we are viewing the video, and in *Visitor* we see dust made visible by the projection beam, as it mysteriously and uncannily enters the *Arena*. The projector itself is visible to the spectator in the actual space, preventing the image from being completely detached into the real time and space of the room, as described by Noam Elmcott’s “Phantasmagoric *dispositif*”. Instead we are anchored in both material and immaterial worlds, with the uncanny, indexical link to the “this was now here” (Banfield, 1990, p. 76) creating a haunted presence.⁴⁸

In making both *Visitor* and *Margin* new insights emerged. I had continued to follow a methodology that valued an intuitive process without choosing a fixed or pre-determined

⁴⁷ Reading Deborah Levy’s uncanny novels and Alice Oswald’s poetry encouraged me to reflect on my use of language, including what I withheld and what was not being said. I aimed not to use text that directed too much and attempted to leave large enough spaces for periods of ‘silence’ so that the gaps also resonated with meaning. While some of the PhD group saw the text in *Visitor* as having poetic qualities that led the development or the narration of the image, others thought it was too didactic and carried too much of a visual presence, particularly in a video that navigated a liminal space. These comments influenced how I considered my use of text in a later video, *Caul*.

⁴⁸ Ann Banfield writes about Barthes’ struggle with the inadequacy of language to describe the tense of the photograph and recapture, “a present in the past”. She goes on to suggest that to imply this “now-in-the-past”, it should become, “This was now here” (Banfield, 1990, pp. 75-76).



Figure 37 Digital still from *Visitor*, 2018.

form. Working with fairly close parameters (in that I was using specific locations as a starting point) that exerted some creative control or constraint on the stimuli I could draw on, meant that I was able to develop ideas within a realm of uncertainty of my own making. This is, for Emma Cocker, an act of preparation for the artist in which there is “an attempt to create the germinal conditions with which something unanticipated might arise” (Cocker, 2013, p. 127).

Artist Vong Phaophanit describes his use of “intuitive” or “unconscious” exploration to help navigate the process of recording and editing his films, along with his partner/collaborator, Claire Oboussier. Phaophanit uses the term “strange familiar notion” to explain how his decisions are guided. Though Phaophanit does not explicitly use the word “uncanny”, one would assume, like Rebecca Fortnum, that this is what he is referring to. For me, allowing this intuitive process to shape the form of my videos means viewing recordings to identify the qualities of unfamiliarity that Phaophanit describes and at times “sitting” with the material until it becomes in some sense, apposite to what I am doing. As Rebecca Fortnum states “Artists will often collect objects and images not knowing why and ‘live’ with them for a while before utilising them” (Fortnum, 2013, p. 75). Having edited a video that I called *Shroud*, this remained unsatisfactorily realised as an installation and instead was not developed further. Subsequently however, I began to use the edited footage in *Margin*, *Visitor* and then a later

experiment, *Caul*, where the images found a more suitable place. Similarly, I have accumulated pleasing footage that I have not yet known how to use.

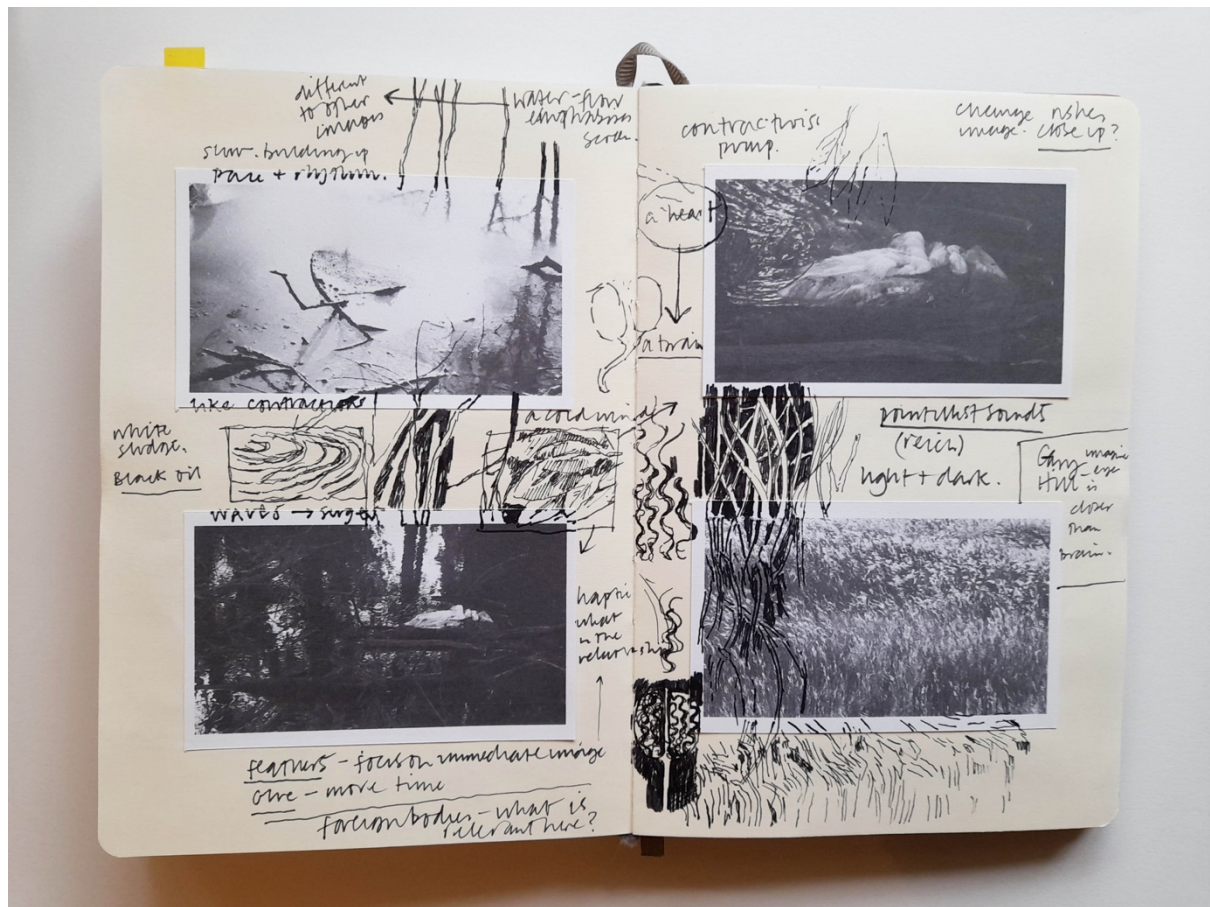


Figure 38 Alex Newton, Drawing, photography and written reflection in my journal, 2019.

I have found that this intuitive sense of what appears right, may emerge through the arrangement of different edits using Final Cut Pro, or, as Phaophanit does himself, by juxtaposing print outs of film clips on a table. Drawing and writing around print outs of digital stills in my journal (**Figure 38**) has given me a different way to engage with the moving image and reflect on ways to imagine new alternatives, something that the less immediate and less plastic nature of digital editing does not possess. Drawing in this way, accompanied by stream of consciousness writing has also allowed a different kind of absent-minded thinking, whereby the kind of unconscious processes that Phaophanit describes have emerged and then affected how I have later edited my footage. These processes, similar to the kind of automatic techniques used by the Surrealists, lend themselves to a state of mind that may

elicit unexpected outcomes. This is described by collaborative practice *London Fieldworks* (Fieldworks, 2013, p. 55):

The idling brain, the wandering spontaneous state of mind embodied and often nurtured by creative types, is well known to somehow facilitate ideas from the subconscious moving into conscious thought to promote insight and creativity.

The “idling brain” or Default Mode Network as it is known, is most active when the brain is in a state of wakeful rest and “is associated with creative problem solving, insight and mental simulations” (Fieldworks, 2013, p. 56). Alongside writing and drawing, both running and walking are activities that have allowed me to access this resting state and have been fundamental as a process in the development of my ideas.⁴⁹ Exercise has shown to promote creative thinking (Schwartz, 2014) and in my case has allowed me to consider what I have been doing, often resulting in new insights that I have been able to articulate, but also leading me to make decisions that I have followed without knowing why. When out running or walking I was able to achieve a kind of clarity and *flow* in my thinking that wasn’t available to me when sitting at a desk. This was particularly noticeable in the creation of *Visitor*, though it wasn’t until I had finished making the work and had some objective distance from it that I was fully aware of the links to my personal life at that time.⁵⁰ This sense of the work having a kind of autonomy and that it is leading its own creation is echoed by Paul Rego, “The painting is a thing on its own, apart from you.....When I’ve finished it’s telling me something” (Fortnum, 2007, p. 155).

⁴⁹ Running whilst holding an image or an idea lightly in my mind allows me to think around it or to reflect critically on concepts that I have been investigating. This is a kind of re-enactment or visualisation, whereby there is an exploratory process that involves imaginatively applying experiential and theoretical knowledge. I can compare this to drawing in my journal, similar in some ways to day dreaming. I will often return from a run and write down new insights, visual developments or ideas into my journal which has propelled my work forward.

⁵⁰ Whilst making *Visitor* my partner suffered a miscarriage. Though the imagery and text used (a preoccupation with the earth, imagery reminiscent of scans and references to digging into the earth) suggests a link to this painful event, I was not fully aware of the direction that my decisions were taking me in and how they would eventually shape the work. The emergence of repressed thinking, fundamental to Freud’s *Uncanny*, has been present in my research from the beginning and while the unexpected forms that were eventually realised may not have been initially intended, they have ultimately directed the outcome. According to Emma Cocker and her performative research into artistic processes and practice, the repressed “is where the work comes from. (It) reveals itself in the shadow of what is being consciously produced.” (Cocker, 2013, pp. 132-133).

Though the idea of the studio as a contained site of artistic activity is well established, the processes that contribute towards the manifestation of creative endeavour have throughout my research, occurred in multiple places; outside, whilst running, walking, or unexpectedly when performing a routine task.⁵¹ Whilst making *Margin* and *Visitor* I was without a studio space and so the site-specific locations that I chose to record within became a space in which I was able to apply a dynamic and ongoing reflective methodology. This used Nelson's cyclical model and involved looking, listening, recording the site on my camera and then reviewing this footage in situ. Whereas in past works I had collected recordings as an initial process prior to editing, it felt as though my engagement with the inside of the lecture theatre or the *Arena* became a site of reflective praxis. Here I was able to view what I had recorded on my laptop and then like Schön's *Reflective Practitioner*, "reflect on the understandings implicit" in my actions, understandings which I surfaced, was critical of, restructured and then embodied in further actions / recordings (Schön, 1983/2016, p. 50). The constraints of working in these locations (sites which I now consider as studios) not only enabled this dynamic reflective process, but I believe forced me into an engagement or "material encounter" that led to unexpected events.

It was also striking to note that despite these creative and locational constraints, the eventual content of both of these videos reflected my experiences over the period of time that they were made, in particular magnifying the worries and concerns that filled my life. It seemed to me that by using *ostranenie* as a way to approach these experiences afforded me a way in which to represent new and unfamiliar emotions that were difficult to apprehend.

Having made two site specific videos I wanted then to create a further experiment that wasn't as creatively restrictive. Like both *Margin* and *Visitor*, *Caul* was driven by an exploration of liminal threshold spaces. I looked for ways to dissolve and destabilise the boundaries between inside and outside, this time by creating a sense of inside the body. Making this

⁵¹ For Rebecca Fortnum the studio is "a site of flux and unforeseen events" and she describes the artist's gradual collection of ephemera or "studio 'stuff'" as helping to position the studio "as a launchpad into the unknown by forcing the artist into visual and material encounters that, initially at least, may not be fully understood." (Fortnum, 2013, pp. 74,75).

video over a period of almost two years meant that it went through many changes, both structurally and in terms of rhythm and content.



Figure 39 Alex Newton, *Caul*, 2019-21, Digital Video, 9 min. 58 sec.

Caul is characterised by a dynamic tension between movement and stillness and the contrasting material textures of organic forms. Initially we see the surface of a volcanic rock which I recorded with a macro lens (**Figure 39**). We are so close that it is difficult to identify what we are looking at as the rough texture moving in and out of focus very slowly picks up momentum. Course grained black stones and chalk hagstones spin, speed up and slow down to a stop. There is stillness in nature and we sit with quiet static branches that eventually give way to the unhurried movements of a suspended figure which outstretches with the slow hesitancy of a body testing its limbs. The gentle brush of swaying long grass (**Figure 40**) and the continued momentum of the rotating stones is punctuated by increasingly urgent imagery that suggests the inside of the body; the deep redness of a blood-like fluid and the smooth surface of what appears to be internal cavities or viscera. Blurred text fades in and out,



Figure 40 Digital still from *Caul*, 2019-21.



Figure 41 Digital still from *Caul*, 2019-21.

providing a commentary that overlaps several images and aims to contribute to a kind of textural and sensory dissonance. Appearing at first at the bottom of the image the text resembles a more didactic kind of subtitle, though its blurred appearance aims to make it more integral to the image. Gradually however, as a sense of anxiety or chaos begins to escalate the text leaves the bottom of the screen and becomes larger and more dominant (**Figure 41**).

Like *Margin* and *Visitor* before, the imagery in *Caul* is situated in a liminal realm that hovers between internal and external landscapes. There is a dynamic tension too between movement and stasis, evident in the contrast between the stillness of layers of dense tree branches and the manic, spinning stone forms which gradually signal an increase in a sense of urgency. As the video progresses there is a growing sense of borders collapsing (**Figure 42**), though as *Caul* is a looped video there is not necessarily a resolution of the theme as the movement begins and ends again. Unlike *Margin* and *Visitor*, *Caul* does not explicitly make reference to the gallery space or use deictic language requiring the viewer to experience a “double consciousness”, as described by Mondloch or Uroskie. Instead, it asks that the audience engage in an imaginative way to consider the uncanny space inside their bodies.

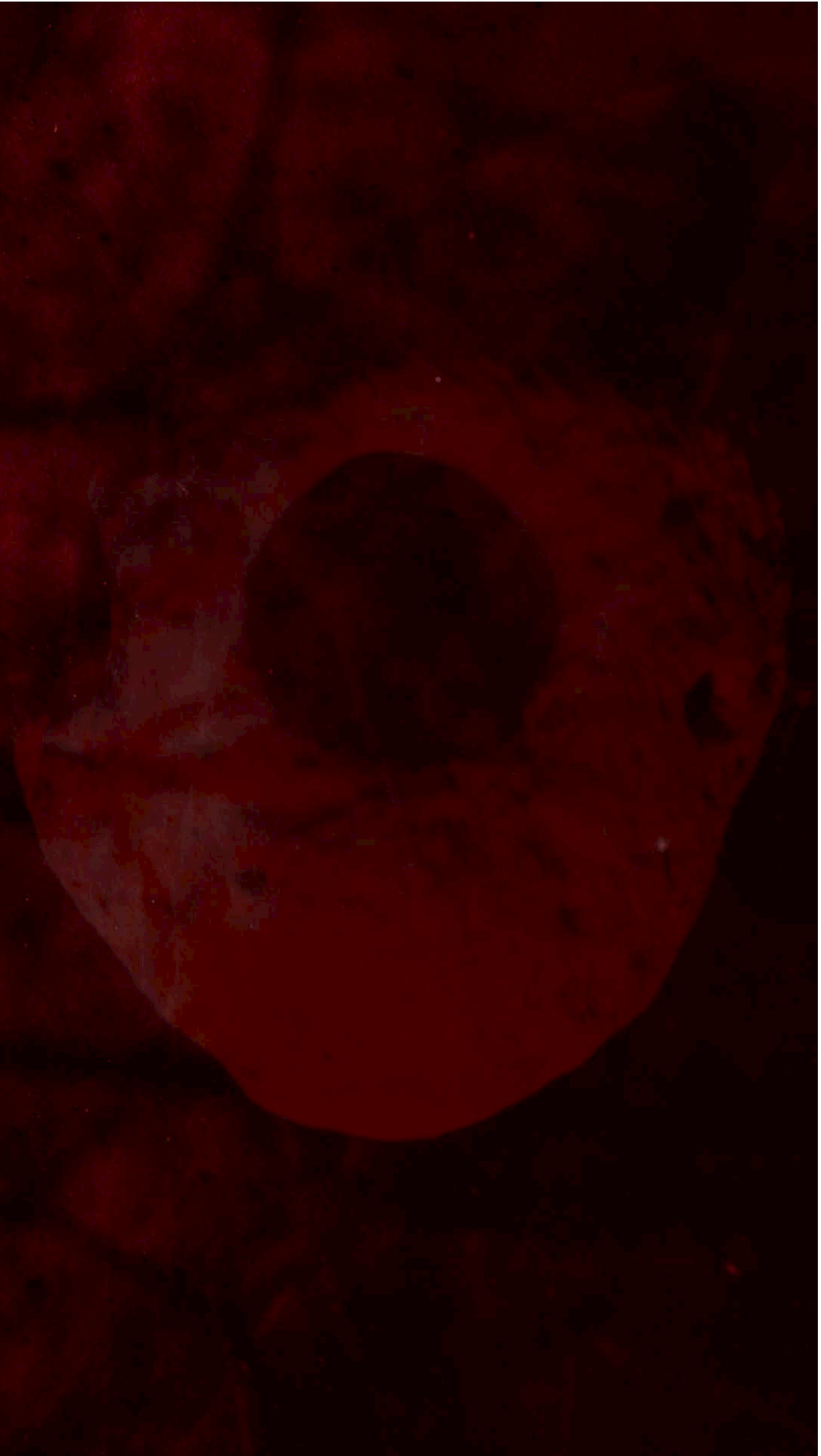


Figure 42 Digital still from *Caul*, 2019-21.

Caul was made over a period of two years, part of which included a time in which I suspended my research.⁵² I approached making it in a similar fashion to previous videos, gradually collecting recorded material which was driven by *making strange* and a sense of what intuitively felt right. I had decided as before to find structure of the video through an heuristic process of exploration, through ‘not knowing’. This meant that making *Caul* developed in an unpredictable and uncertain way, as I searched for something disruptive or unknown. For Emma Cocker this improvised process of grasping to find something that is unnameable or as of yet unknown “unfolds as a series of endless *maybes* an interminable set of tests or trials”. It is through this aleatory process in the studio where, Cocker continues, “objects, images, words and sounds can be disassembled and reassembled; stretched; compressed; inverted and rotated; pushed into unlikely proximity, and then prized apart” (Cocker, 2013, p. 130).

I gradually gathered images of natural forms in flow, seeking out water, long rushes, layered branches and also hagstones. Editing *Caul* over a long period of time allowed me to make refinements as it evolved, though it could also be argued that as this was in fact an experiment which had undergone several different iterations. What emerged was a video that was characterised by a sense of flux and the creation of motifs which began to form a kind of structure; the gentle to and fro of spinning stones, the stillness of layered branches, the dreamlike flow of rushes blowing in the wind, the instability of water. *Caul* came out of these images which were “pushed into unlikely proximity” (Cocker, 2013, p. 130) before being rearranged and then rearranged again. A motif of direction of flow and movement developed, before I began to disrupt what I had made by interrupting the flow with increasingly violent cuts to spasmodic bodily images. Choosing to record the black, volcanic pumice and chalk hagstones was not a decision based primarily on logic or research, but came out of what intuitively felt right; the PhD group later described these images as “visceral”.

Like artists Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier’s collaborative film *All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)* (Phaophanit, 2008), I made *Caul* without a predetermined objective and by relying on the emergence of unconscious and unexpected forms. For Phaophanit this is described as filming “the state of things without too much interference” whereby there is a

⁵² My daughter was born in 2019 and I subsequently suspended my research for 6 months.

“wandering around and you film, part of your unconscious dictates...”⁵³ It is as a result of this approach to making that over two years as I have changed and as new experiences have infused my life, that new intuitive directions have led my wandering and new visual forms have emerged. Driven (in hindsight) primarily by the life changing birth of my daughter and my Dad’s chronic illness, *Caul* has, according to the PhD feedback group a sense of both birth and death, though kept some in a suspended state in between. The (unconscious) intentions that have ultimately guided the nature of this video and its direction cannot, however, be realised or pre-empted during the process in order to retain elements of the unknown. This has meant a conscious resistance to clearly articulating the driving forces behind the video’s creation. Reflecting over the two years that I have spent making *Caul*, I have been aware throughout that there are questions or concerns that have played a significant part in shaping its form, but I would argue that in preventing them from surfacing, *Caul* managed to preserve valued aspects of the unfamiliar and strange.

⁵³ Phaophanit’s description (in conversation with Claire Oboussier) of his working process as avoiding “too much interference” is expanded upon by Rebecca Fortnum, who suggests that this refers to his decision to shun a predetermined narrative in favour of a belief that an unconscious or intuitive sense will guide the creation of the work (Fortnum, 2013, p. 82).

Conclusion

Throughout my research I investigated ways of creating art works that inhabit a liminal realm within presence and absence, between life and death. In my studio enquiries I made videos with imagery that hovers between the animate and inanimate and I investigated the ambiguity of these images using projected light and the screen's surface. I began by using mist as a screen to subtly hide and reveal bodies in a landscape in order to create my video *The Sea is the Land's Edge* (with accompanying sound design), and by looking closely at Antony Gormley's work *Blind Light* I was able to reflect on the similar anxieties that were present in his work. This helped me to find the language to aid the development of further visual forms. To build on the sense of dislocation that this video created I recorded figures removed from their context and apparently in free fall to make *Shroud*, a projected video installation that used layers of tulle as screens. As a way to examine the materiality of the projected images in this video I photographed them and from this created six digital images of bodies in freefall, titled *Drawn Under Gravity I-VI*. Further experiments then led me to test the potential of printing on transparencies, ultimately creating six untitled images consisting of layers of printed transparent sheets. Drawings and paintings in my journals aided critical reflection of these outcomes, leading me to then design, expose and print eight photopolymer plates of these falling bodies, now decayed by a gradual process of digital mediation and printmaking to create an ambiguous and unnerving appearance. These prints were titled *Eidolon*, *Eidolon I-VIII* and were later displayed in vitrines. Inspired by examining the influence of the projected image I continued to experiment by projecting my videos onto lenses and the resulting images were composited together to create two untitled, separate photographic outcomes. I next investigated how to create an uncanny link between the past of a video recording and the now in which it was being watched. *Margin*, which was made for a university conference, was recorded in the same lecture theatre as it was projected and explored the index and notions of "spectatorial doubleness". I later examined similar ideas in a video titled *Visitor*, which was recorded and later projected in a white cube style gallery space. Both of these videos used a mix of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds and established a strange sense of the present and past, here and there and alive and dead. *Caul* continued these interrogations of inside and outside and explored notions of the animate and inanimate, flow and interruption.

Each outcome evolved from the last and there was a real sense of each decision being intuitively driven by an encounter with what I had previously created. In making each work I was able to evaluate and apply an ongoing critical analysis using my research questions as criteria; each new insight enabled the further development of my research. *The Sea is the Land's Edge* was a second iteration of my video *You Cannot Stand in the Middle of This* and came about through an interest in showing gradually disappearing bodies. The decision to display this on a small media screen in a darkened room and the slower rhythm of the edit contributed to a more successful outcome than the first, though did not bring the figures directly into the viewing space. In my research questions I had asked how I could use projected imagery to explore the uncanny thresholds between the material and the immaterial, and though the ghostly figures used in these two videos helped to create a degree of success it was not until I changed the material properties of the screens I was using that I was able to develop these ideas further. By experimenting with glass lenses, translucent plastic and then fabric, I came to new insights and achieved further success of sorts, though this investigation acted more as a stepping stone to new insights. I realised that to remove figures from their context I would need to video using a green screen; *Shroud* emerged from these material experiments and though it made tentative steps towards creating what I considered an uncanny, *real time* phantasmagoria it was not entirely successful.

Engaging with and evaluating the success of *Shroud* by using a camera allowed me to view it in a different way and created new understandings. The photographs that I took of the decaying figures apparently floating in a void were uncanny and had the appearance of spectral figures. As digital images they were intriguing and as prints (*Drawn Under Gravity I-VI* printed onto paper and *Untitled* printed onto transparencies) they inhabited an unsettling liminal space. An intuitively led decision to further decay these images by using photopolymer printing plates created more successful images that resembled stilled bodies or corpses. The quality of the printing process helped to create a pleasing graininess that added to the degradation of available information and contributed to their ambiguity. The subtle shifts in how my research was evolving was then given a jolt by a change in circumstances. *Margin* continued to explore a liminal space between absence and presence and provided me with a new and exciting direction. This video used imagery gathered in making the previous outcomes and was made initially as a way to present my research to a

conference audience. As it developed I realised that like my earlier research it circled around the uncanny notion of being alive and dead simultaneously. As a conference video it was successful in provoking in the audience the kind of liminal experiences that my research aimed to bring about, though the use of the lecture theatre was a distraction. *Visitor* was a step forward in my research and significantly provided an opportunity to experiment with the notions of spectatorship and the uncanniness of the recording process that *Margin* had tentatively approached. Using deictic language felt like a breakthrough and the imagery used was powerful enough to engage the viewer and create a liminal space that collapsed the spatial parameters of the gallery and the virtual world. This enabled me to develop strategies that provided some answers to my second research question. *Caul* evolved once again from the same ideas and continued to explore inside and outside spaces, presence and absence, animation and stasis. I had hoped that as this video had been in gestation for over a year that this would feel like a culmination of all my research. Instead, the ideas that I pursued were, perhaps unsurprisingly, once again just out of reach.

It has been through the critical application of my praxis (defined by Robin Nelson as “theory imbricated within practice” (Nelson, 2006, p. 115) that new insights and further outcomes have emerged.

Initial reading on the concept of the sublime allowed me to articulate more clearly what I had first expressed as a sense of getting lost, and gave me new ways to think about my first video work. Noam Elcott’s essay on the “technospatial” configurations of the phantasmagoria supported my conclusion that in order to heighten a sense of uncertainty and doubt in the ghostly figures that I had created, I would need to bring them off the screen and directly into the architecture of the room. Similarly, examining Freud’s theory of the uncanny and Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, his study on the ghostly traces present in the photograph, led me to experiment with digital photopolymer prints that carried a notable amount of visual decay and a real sense of bodies stilled. It was Roland Barthes’ (and Laura Mulvey’s) exploration of the index and deixis, along with Kate Mondloch’s concept of “spectatorial doubleness” that contributed towards the development of two site specific video installations that aimed to collapse the boundaries of inside and outside, between the virtual space of the media screen and the architecture of the room. In making these video installations I was able to realise a

process that would engender an experience of liminality, a feeling that sat in between presence and absence, of now and then and of life and death.

I approached my research with artist researchers and practitioners in mind, and used Robin Nelson's reflexive model that relies on a dynamic interplay between *know-how*, theoretical research and critical reflection to draw out knowledge. This cyclical model was most successful when my praxis was guided and propelled forward by an intuitively led *reflection-in-action* and a *reflection-on-action*. Regularly recording my experiences and experiments in journals has provided me with space to reflect on and to realise new insights occurring in my practice; this took the form of written reflection but was also expressed through visual responses such as drawing and painting. Recording, editing and reflecting in site-specific locations was an effective process that allowed an ongoing conversation in what essentially became a studio space. I also drew heavily on audience feedback and conversations with my peer group, which allowed me a more objective understanding of my outcomes. This came predominantly from the weekly PhD group seminars run by Professor Ray Lee that I attended at Oxford Brookes University and which provided myself and my peers with an opportunity to share work and receive experiential feedback. The discussions that arose from this feedback helped me to create some space between myself and the work and often led to new understandings.

Much of my studio inquiry drew on personal experience and reflected my anxieties or concerns. As my research developed I devised practical methods which were primarily led by trusting an intuitive approach and through the *know-how* of tacit knowledge, a "reflective conversation with the materials of the situation" (Schön, 1983/2016, p. 175). I made art work that relied on strategies that valued unconscious processes and the retention of elements of the unknown inherent in the work. Using *ostranenie* or defamiliarization to 'make strange' and to make forms unfamiliar and difficult to read contributed towards this. I reflected on how these intuitive decisions might be made and what it feels like when it feels instinctively right and began to understand that this was best described as a physical experience whereby I revealed something unexpected or unknown. I developed strategies of *ostranenie* and came to realise that this could successfully be achieved through by manipulating a dynamic tension between concealing and revealing the image.

Through my practice I also began to understand that in order for my research to develop forward I would need to employ strategies that disrupted the processes I used; using different media or by enforcing certain parameters contributed towards this. As a strategy, enforcing certain constraints was an act of creative preparation that successfully enabled the conditions for the unexpected event to occur. The use of site-specific locations to record and subsequently project in was, I concluded, one such development.

Research Questions

I began with three questions that I intended to answer through praxis. The first asked:

In what ways can I use projected images and screens to explore the uncanny thresholds between the material and the immaterial and the animate and the inanimate?

This was a question that I explored throughout all of my research and that I wrestled with through my praxis. This was explored predominantly using the projected moving image, mainly for digital video's uncanny ability to present to us a world that visually and sonically mirror ours own, but also for its capacity to capture and preserve life, even after death (Mulvey, 2006).

In my video *You Cannot Stand in the Middle of This* (later known as *The Sea is the Land's Edge*) I explored my question through a desire to engage with misty landscapes and to subsequently document my experience. I associated this experience and the following edited video with the sublime and found that in this video experiment I was able to create composited layers of spectral bodies that appeared and then disappeared in the thick mist. This created an eerie experience of liminality that reflected a fine balance between the material and the immaterial.

I continued this interrogation of the material and immaterial in my video installation *Shroud* by using layers of tulle to capture the image, whilst also allowing decay to occur. Transforming the falling figures using a process of *ostranenie* I was able to manipulate how

they moved in order to create uncanny bodies that resembled living human beings but that moved in an unfamiliar and unsettling way; this lent them the uncanny qualities of a ghostly, reanimated bodies. The physical qualities of the black tulle screens transformed the bodies further by degrading the image somewhat and the darkness of the material partially blended in with the architecture of the viewing space. In doing so, the projected image was untethered from the confines of the screen and placed in a shared time and space. This recreated some of the spectral qualities of a phantasmagoria, but did not approach the 'real-time' nature, as described by Noam Elcott and seen in the work of Gary Hill. As a way to look at and represent these projected images in a new way I developed eight photopolymer intaglio plates prints (Eidolon, Eidolon I-VIII). They looked strange and corpse-like, creating a sense of uncertainty as they straddled the threshold between the living and the dead, inhabiting the "terrible, and enthralling borderland between animation and lifelessness" (Warner, 2006). Placed in two spotlit vitrines in an artificially darkened room the prints were reflected in the glass and projected once more, becoming reanimated phantasmagoria.

My pursuit of the material / immaterial and the animate / inanimate continued with three further videos but was investigated in different ways. *Margin* and *Visitor* created an experience of liminality through the temporal exploration of *now* and *then* and the inside and outside of the room. By bringing the spectator's awareness to the trace of a physical presence in the room and its subsequent absence this referenced notions of being and non-being, of the animate and the inanimate. A third video, *Caul*, investigated similar concerns and used images of nature in flux, changes in rhythm, disrupted flow and a cyclical loop. *Caul* inhabited a liminal space between movement and stasis and its visceral start / stop imagery of nature and of the body contributed to what was seen by the PhD group as a meditation on the beginning and the end of life.

My second research question asked:

In what ways can I collapse the boundaries between the spatial parameters of the gallery and the virtual space of the media screen, leading to a liminal experience?

My initial experiments using black tulle created intriguing results whereby the material blended (but didn't disappear) into the architectural space of the exhibition room. Though this did not quite create the frameless continuum of a phantasmagoria it did transform the screen into both a sculptural object and virtual space. By rupturing the divide between the virtual space of the screen and the spatial parameters of the room, *Margin* successfully created a liminal experience for the audience. Bringing the viewer's attention to the room in which they were sitting and to the projected illusion of the screen created a "spectatorial doubleness" (Mondloch, 2010, p. 64) or "double consciousness" (Uroskie, 2014, p. 2). This was achieved partly through using sound and imagery from the viewing space and exterior landscapes, but also through deictic language that addresses the spectator and which cuts directly through the screen to their present. By bleeding the inside and outside spaces, the now and then the audience experienced the in betweenness of liminality.

Visitor was an experiment that moved away from the lecture theatre as a site and towards a more neutral location that avoided the connotations of education and instruction. It explored similar conceptual ground as *Margin* and brought the spectator's awareness to the room in which they were standing. Deictic language such as "you were standing there" created a Barthesian umbilical cord to the past and located the viewer in the room; this again contributed to the rupturing of the boundaries between the interior and the external world. Reading Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and then using text in this way helped me to understand and to better articulate the strange temporal complexities at play in the video.

My third research question asked:

In what ways can I use the process of ostranenie or 'making strange' to create a sense of the uncanny using visual forms?

Using *ostranenie* as a process for making forms unfamiliar and harder to perceive required me to develop new methods in which to manipulate still and moving image. I had chosen to use still photography and video to make art works, on account of both medium's ability to capture an uncanny likeness of the world and to preserve life after death. Approaching my research from a position of 'not knowing' so that I created art work without a predetermined

nature in mind ensured that I remained open to wonder and the emergence of the unfamiliar and uncanny. 'Making strange' eventually became an unconscious and intuitive intention as I made my videos. By developing methods and by preparing the ground for the unexpected event to occur I sought out the strange and the unsettling. In creating forms that were uncanny I aimed to make images where doubt and credulity became blurred, where the familiar and alien simultaneously sit side by side and where "the distinction between the imagination and reality is effaced" (Freud, 1919/1990, p. 367).

Some of these methods and forms of preparation were initially the result of intuitive decisions and only became front of mind after a period of critical reflection. I frequently left the camera recording for long periods of time when recording for videos *The Sea is the Land's Edge* and particularly for *Shroud*. Doing this helped me to understand that it allowed me more scope to record the unexpected. This enabled me then to manipulate video in ways that made the images less familiar; using freeze frames, slowing down footage or creating repeated gestures helped me to capture micromovements and human behaviours that were unusual and uncanny, capturing what Bill Viola calls "an unexpected field of action" (Viola, et al., 2003, p. 40). Both *Margin* and *Visitor* were recorded in black and white and featured changes of playback speed and occasionally reversed footage. Watching back this kind of manipulated footage helped me to recognise if its effects had been over used and its potency diluted. I identified this diminished affect as lacking in something of the unknown and therefore more easily understood or assimilated by the viewer. When these manipulated effects were employed more judiciously I was able to notice the presence of something unknown or unidentifiable as a physical sensation, much like a kind of nervous excitement. These were insights that I became aware of after periods of reflection and through documenting my experience of editing in journals. Receiving peer group feedback or discussion also drew my attention to this. Using *ostranenie* therefore relied somewhat on subtlety and the effective creation of unfamiliar forms without it being clear why they were strange.

The disintegration of images was also a process of *ostranenie* and one that I used to create uncanny digital photographs (*Drawn Under Gravity I-VI*) and intaglio prints (*Eidolon, Eidolon I-VIII*). These were both created using methods that enabled the gradual decay and manipulation of figures through a series of digital processes and mediations that caused the

loss of visual information. Each step forward in the process came from an intuitive understanding that it would create further degradation. The intaglio prints showed figures that resembled ghoulish, corpse-like figures that were uncanny in their ambiguous and unsettling appearance. Making these images helped me realise that in order to arouse dread and anxiety, both symptoms of an uncanny experience, concealing aspects of what the viewer expects to see was a successful approach.

Margin, Visitor and *Caul* all featured elements of the uncanny through the transformation of recorded video using processes described above. Significantly the use of deixis and by collapsing the boundaries between the inside and outside also enabled me to create uncanny experiences for viewers. In making these videos and by employing *ostranenie* as a process I became more aware of the unconscious intentions that were directing the nature of the work. Investigating this new insight after a period of reflection helped me to understand that this was a process that should not be anticipated or realised during the process in order to retain elements of the unknown in the work.

Contribution

This research contributes ten practice-based research outcomes. The research outcomes will benefit and be of interest to artist practitioners, artist researchers and researchers with a specific interest in the uncanny or *ostranenie*.

The specific outcomes from my field enquiries will benefit all or some of these constituencies in the following ways:

Methodology:

Throughout my inquiry I have used Robin Nelson's dynamic model for *practice-as-research*, recognising each stage of the process as potentially knowledge producing. It is through the imbrication of these elements, through the ongoing "relational encounters" (Nelson, 2006, p. 115) that developments and new insights have emerged. I have used this model alongside Schön's Reflective Practitioner. I have also applied Shklovsky's technique of *ostranenie* and a process of *not knowing* to my praxis, both of which value the creation and retention of the strange and the unfamiliar. Using this methodology has successfully enabled me to apply my

praxis to an ongoing, cyclical process of action and reflection in order to lead to new and unexpected outcomes. Using *reflection-in-action* has led to the development of new artefacts (particularly evident when choosing to photograph my video installation *Shroud*) and *reflection-on-action* has helped me to understand new insights and propel my ideas forward after the event. I have effectively used drawing, stream of consciousness writing and drawing on and around printed images of video stills to implement a process of reflection; this was used successfully in the development of my video *Caul*. Using Schön's model in a site-specific location (evident when making *Margin* and *Visitor*) was an effective process in developing an ongoing reflexive conversation in what I considered to be a temporary studio. This methodology will be of interest to other artist researchers.

Practice:

I have developed an effective process for establishing site specific video installations (evident in *Margin* and *Visitor*) which embody notions of presence and absence, the material and immaterial, the uncanny and notions of mortality. This will be of interest to artist practitioners who are exploring similar terrain. My process involves a visual investigation and then recording of a chosen site using a video camera, and then the subsequent projection of the edited video back into the same room. By using spatial and temporal deixis (a subclass of indexicality) in the video along with poetic text, the spectator becomes aware of a trace or presence from the past that perseveres into the present, creating an uncanny liminal state.

Context:

My videos *Margin* and *Visitor* build on Kate Mondloch's theory of *Spectatorial Doubleness* by bringing to it different fields of inquiry. Both outcomes investigate Mondloch's theory through the use of site-specific video installations and lend the conversation a Barthesian perspective through the use of deixis. This is supported by and builds on Alison Butler's essay *A Deictic Turn: Space and Location in Contemporary Gallery Film and Video Installation* through my use of an arts-based practice and my exploration of notions of mortality. Using this process and these specific elements creates an experience of liminality and produces a *real time*, uncanny phantasmagorical trace or haunted presence. This will be of interest to artist researchers whose studies involve spectatorship, phantasmagoria, the uncanny or the liminal.

The breadth of my contextual inquiry will be of interest to artist researchers, specifically those who are investigating a similar subject field. My written commentary brings together research on the uncanny, indexicality, the phantasmagoria of pre-cinema and the nature of the media screen in relation to video installation and the embodiment of notions of mortality.

Artistic development:

Developing new processes as a way to implement a practice-as-research model, in particular the use of drawing / painting on to printed video stills, has been helpful in finding ways to explore the potential of video imagery. Editing on a computer screen does not allow for the immediacy of plastic manipulation that painting and drawing provides and so this process has been significant for me.

Potential for further development:

Though this is a nebulous subject area for research where a definitive answer is unlikely to emerge, there have been aspects of my inquiry that have been somewhat resolved and new insights have arisen. New understandings in terms of spectatorship have revealed to me the potential for further development in this area. The spectator's interaction with the architecture of the room and the media screen presents an opportunity to explore the use of software to control and integrate live visual feeds into the viewing space. Using software such as Max MSP to trigger live cameras so that they were cut into the existing edited video or composited on top, would allow further consideration of these notions as they currently stand. It would also open up the possibility of devising a video installation that does not require pre-recording.

There is also room to look more closely at the significance of how I have used sound in relation to the moving image. This is an area that I have only explored briefly in my reflective commentary and deserves further investigation. I am particularly interested in the uncanny formlessness of sound and its spectral qualities, aspects explored in detail in David Toop's *Sinister Resonance* (Toop, 2010).

Similarly, the nature of 'not knowing' and the resulting strategies that I have touched upon in my research presents an opportunity to explore further. The propensity to reveal or retain what is unknown in artistic outcomes values the unfamiliar in the same way that *ostranenie* does. Expanding upon the relationship between both of these processes could allow for a broader and impactful discussion.

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Uncanny Bodies:

An arts practice-based exploration of strategies to embody thresholds between life and death.

Appendix 1 - PhD catalogue. 2021

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

***The Sea is the Land's Edge* 2015/21**

HD video.
8 min. 30 sec (looped).

Recorded in the Peak and Lake district, this video has undergone several iterations. Originally lasting only 5 minutes 38 seconds it was edited to become a longer, looped piece of work and exhibited on a small monitor with two sets of headphones.

Original edit:

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/247789583>

Longer edit:

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/614602082>



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

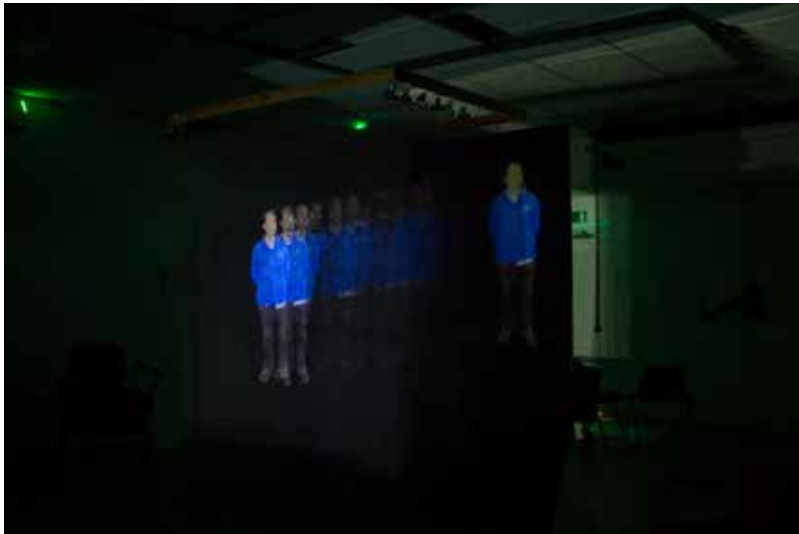


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Shroud 2016-18

HD video, black tulle.
25 min. 6 sec.

Recorded using a green screen I projected the footage of figures appearing to fall, onto black tulle. This was exhibited at the P21 gallery in 2018 (Figure 10) as part of *disPLACED*. I later used Shroud as a way to propel my research forward, using photography as a way to look at the projected images in a new way.

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/614558229>



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

***Drawn Under Gravity I-VI* 2016-18**

Digital Photograph.
420 x 594 mm.

Phantom consists of six large scale photographs of figures digitally projected onto black tulle. The image are transformed as they hit the layers of material, decaying the figures to the extent that they take on the uncanny qualities of a ghostly body.



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

***Drawn Under Gravity I-VI* 2016-18**

Digital Photograph.
420 x 594 mm.

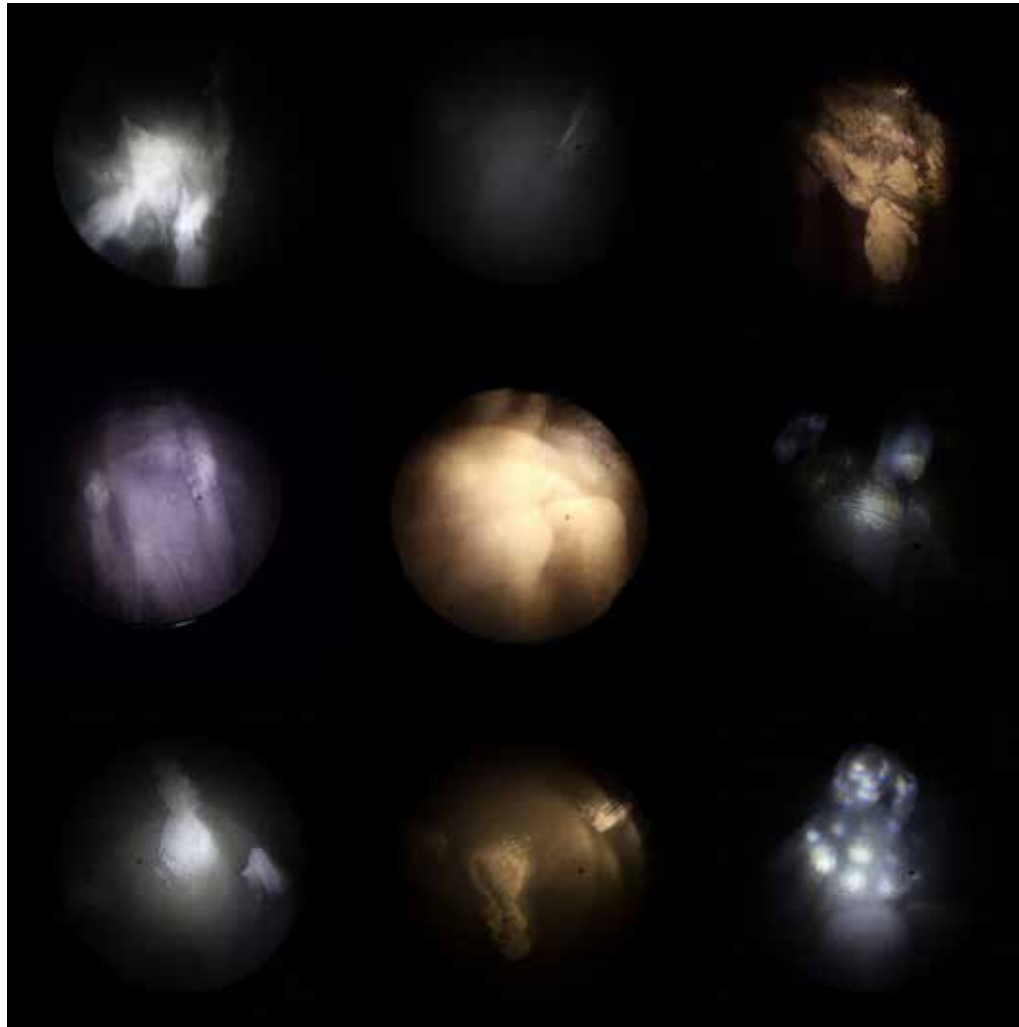


Figure 17

***Untitled*, 2016**

Digital Photograph and composite
image.

420mm x 420mm

This is a composite image of nine digital photographs, taken through the lens from an old overhead projector and using light to project through printed transparencies. This was an experiment in creating a very basic *magic lantern*.

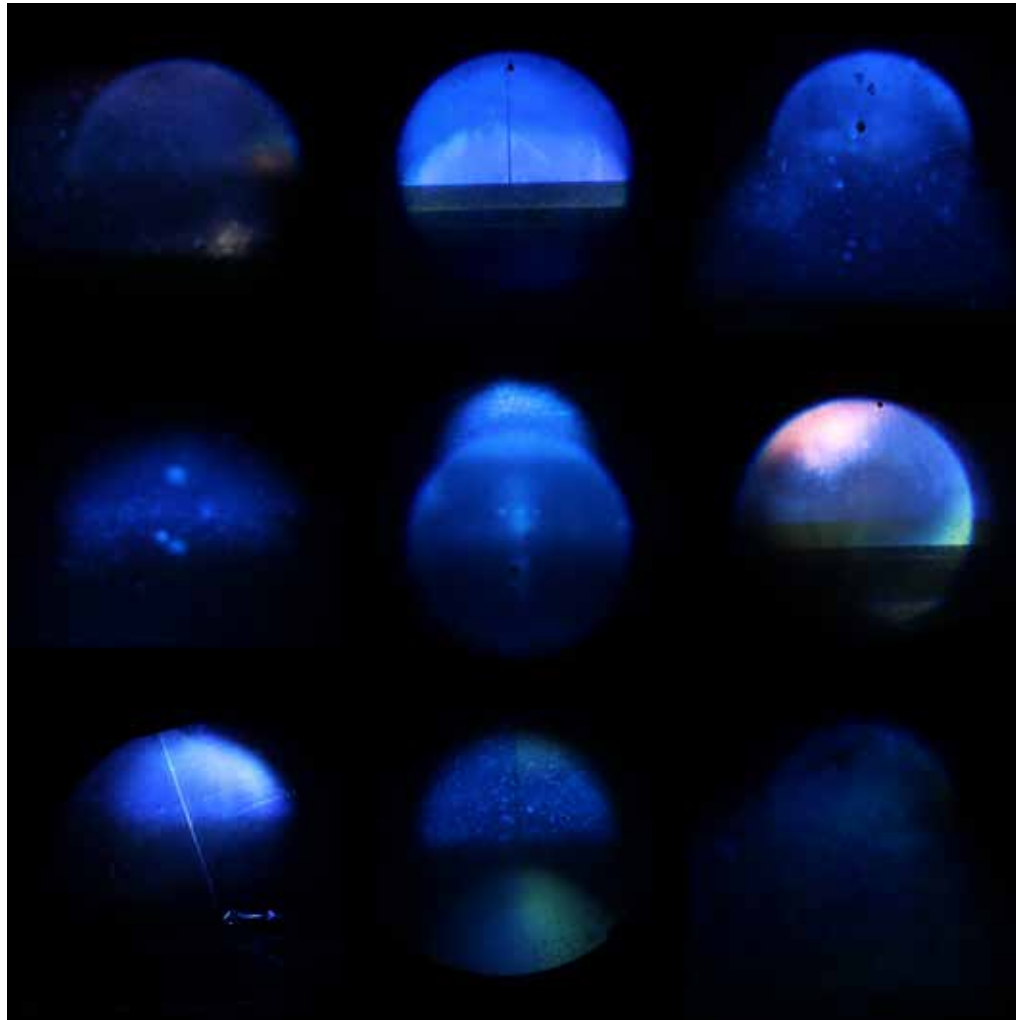


Figure 18

***Untitled*, 2016**

Digital Photo and Composite Image.
420mm x 420mm

A series of digital photographs taken whilst projecting recorded footage onto a dusty overhead projection lens.



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

***Untitled*, 2017**

Digital photograph, layered transparencies.
297 x 420 mm.

As part of the process of making a series of photopolymer intaglio prints, I printed the images of falling figures onto transparencies. This led me to explore the potential of these layered sheets of acetate to create strange and unsettling composite phantoms.



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24

***Untitled*, 2017**

Digital photograph, layered trans-
parencies.
297 x 420 mm.



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27

Eidolon, Eidolon I-VIII, 2017-18

Photopolymer etching on paper.
Image: 197mm x 139mm

Eidolon, Eidolon consists of eight images which have gone through a significant process of manipulation and degradation, as a result of repeated production or duplication. Originally video, the image was projected, photographed and then finally exposed onto a photopolymer intaglio plate. These are the resulting prints.



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30

Eidolon, Eidolon I-VIII, 2017-18

Photopolymer etching on paper.
Image: 197mm x 139mm

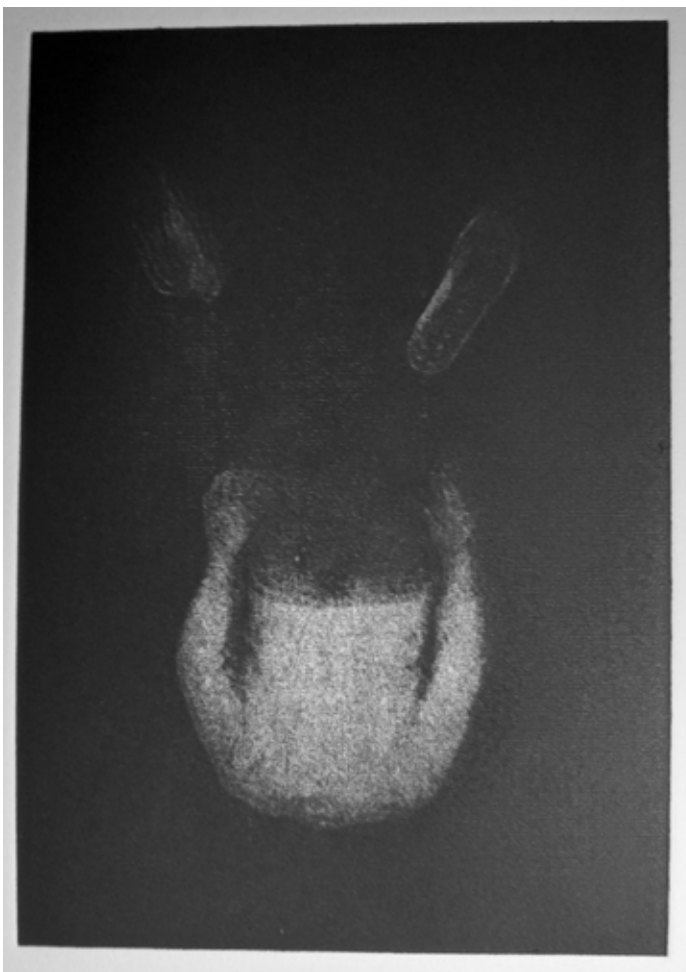


Figure 31



Figure 32

Eidolon, Eidolon I-VIII, 2017-18

Photopolymer etching on paper.
Image: 197mm x 139mm



Figure 33



Figure 34

***Eidolon Eidolon I-VIII*, 2017-18**

Frame: 460mm x 365mm
Image: 197mm x 139mm

Eidolon Eidolon framed prints on display at The Glass Tank gallery, Oxford Brookes as part of *InTuition*, an exhibition of PhD research. 2019.



Figure 35



Figure 36

***Eidolon, Eidolon*, 2017-18**

Six intaglio prints displayed in two vitrines, both in an artificially darkened room and each lit by a single light source. Figure 36 shows *Eidolon, Eidolon* installed at Oxford Brookes alongside *Shroud*.



Figure 37

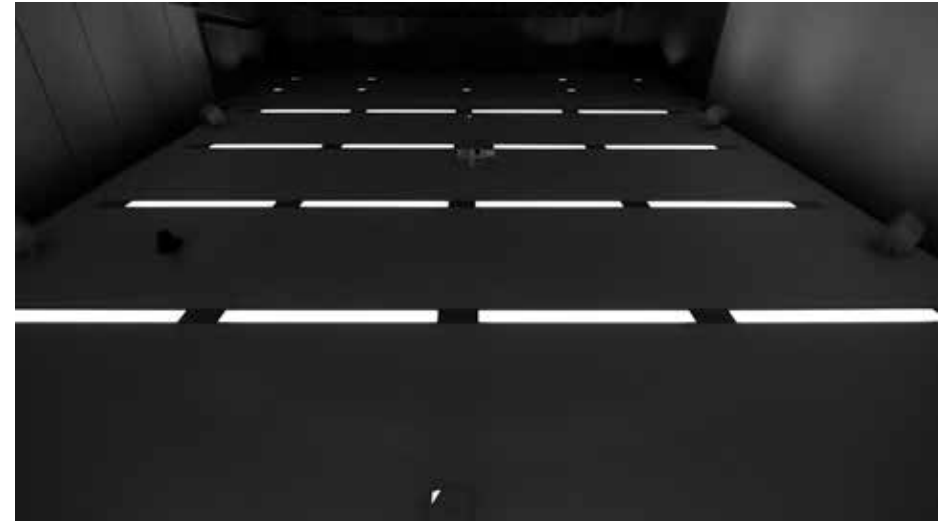


Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40

***Margin*, 2018**

HD video.
8 min. 11 sec.

Margin was made for the Oxford Brookes research conference and was recorded in the lecture theatre where the event was being held. Making this video allowed me to explore modes of spectatorship, particularly a kind of uncanny dual consciousness, that sees the viewer experiencing the screen as both a sculptural presence and a virtual window.

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/614544643>

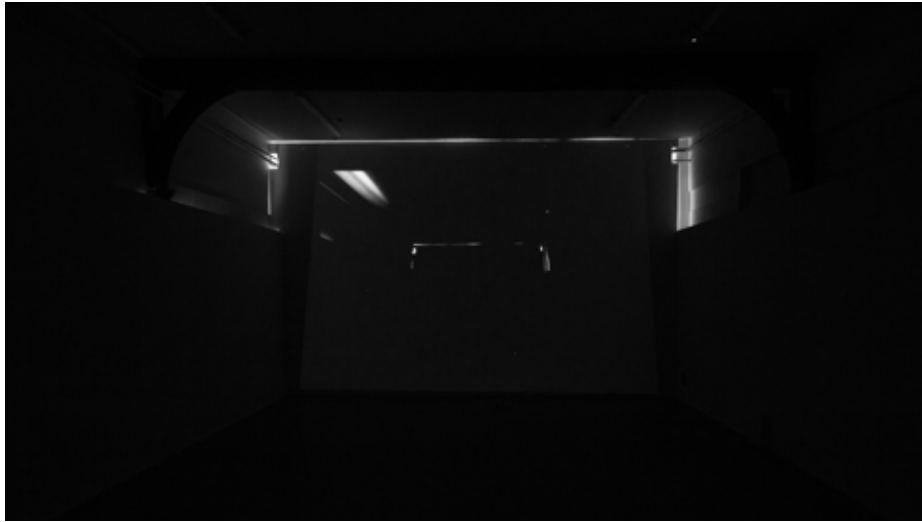


Figure 41

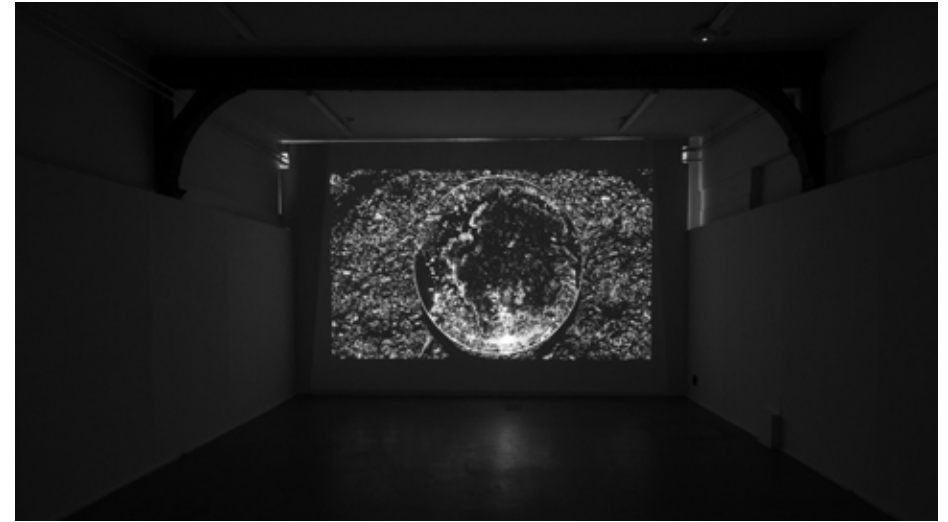


Figure 42



Figure 43



Figure 44

Visitor 2018

HD video.
10 min. 8 sec.

Visitor built on my initial research in **Margin**. This video explores dual spectatorship further and was recorded and screened in a room in Oxford Brookes. Some footage was re-recorded in 2021 after the room was refurbished.

Original edit: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/614585500>
Later edit: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/614540380>



Figure 45



Figure 46

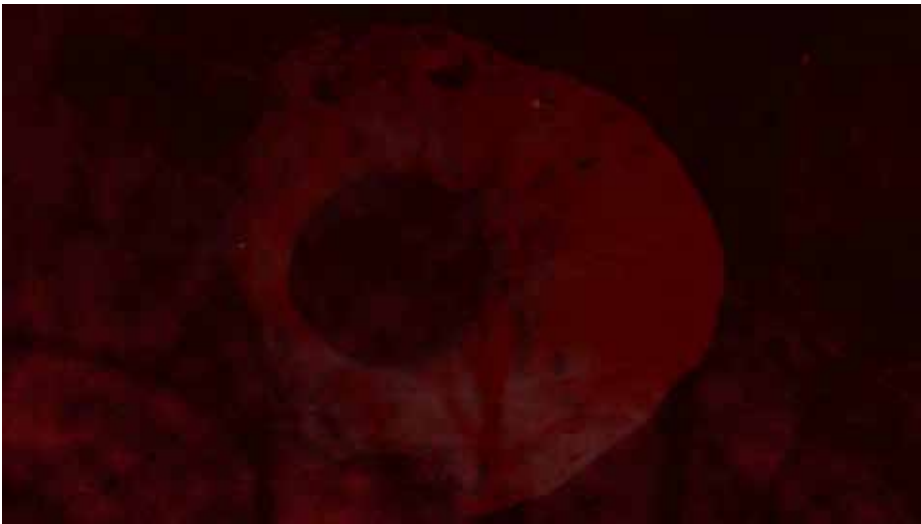


Figure 47



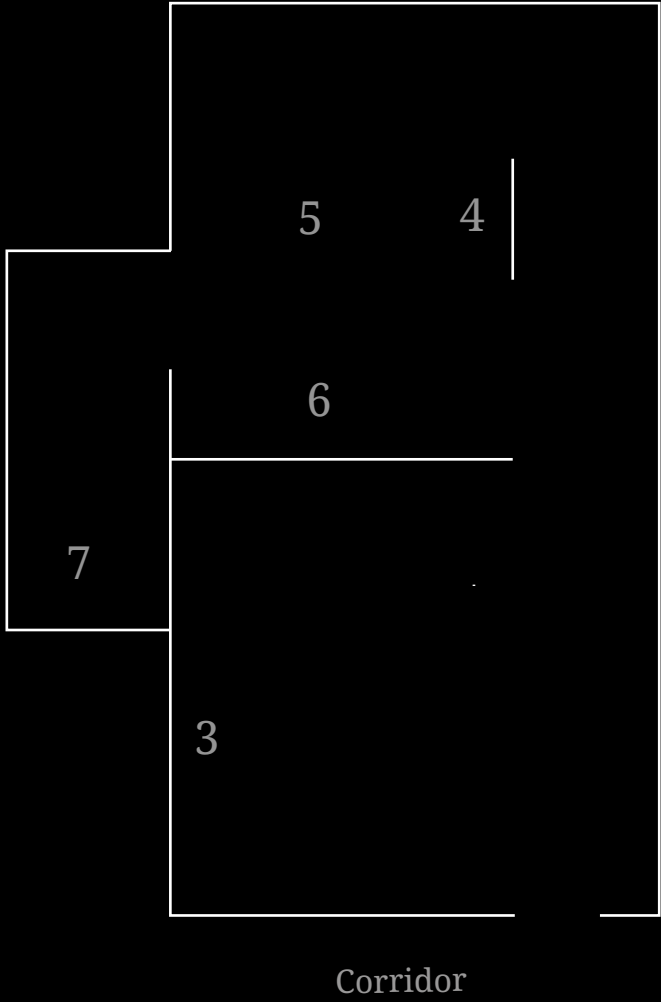
Figure 48

Caul 2019-21

HD video.
9 min. 58 sec.

Much like *Margin* and *Visitor*, *Caul* continues to explore liminal states, contemplating where the edges of the body begin and end. The tension between movement and stillness, between the animate and inanimate which pervades the rhythm of this video also brings to fore a meditation on the thin line between life and death.

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/614617498>



- 3. *Caul* - HD Video, 9 min. 58 sec.
- 4. *Shroud* - HD Video, 25 min. 6 sec.
- 5. *Eidolon, Eidolon I-VI* - Photopolymer etchings.
- 6. *Drawn Under Gravity I-VI* - Digital Prints.
- 7. *The Sea is the Land's Edge* - HD Video, 10 min. 8 sec.

Uncanny Bodies
Alex Newton
1-3 September 10:30-4:30



Uncanny Bodies represents the culmination of my PhD work over the past five years. Throughout my research I have examined the uncanniness of the digital moving image, finding strategies for creating artwork that inhabits a liminal realm and that sits on the threshold of life and death.

Using projected images that hover between the animate and the inanimate, I investigate the screen's combined status as a physical object and virtual window, and investigate ways to rupture these boundaries.

In doing so my intention is to create spectral images that blur the boundaries between materiality and immateriality, real and illusion, alive and dead.



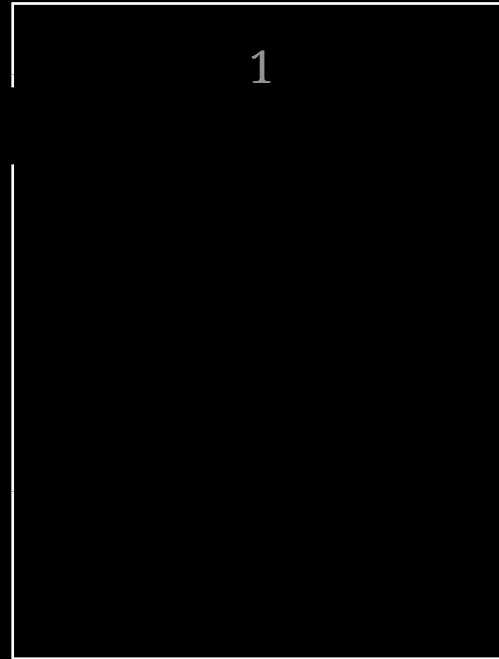
Eidolon I, 2017

Ground Floor - Arena

First Floor - Landing

Corridor

Building Entrance



Stairs

1. *Visitor* - HD Video, 10 min. 8 sec.

2. *Margin* - HD Video, 8min. 11 sec.