



ACCORDING TO OUR
HISTORIANS
A METEORITE
FELL HISSING

WHAT ARE WE LEFT WITH IN THE AFTERMATH?

David Haughey

January 2017

In the science fiction novel *We*, by Yevgeny Zamyatin there is occasional reference to a “Two-Hundred-Year War.” An event that precedes the principle story and sets the conditions for the narrative, and the society Zamyatin describes. The details of the catalysing epoch are never described in full.

The reader is left to speculate upon the crisis and the conditions that brought it about. What is certain, in the context of the novel, is the nature of the society that was born out of this cataclysm.

This speculation, the detached observation of events, where the individual is not, and cannot be present to witness, is one of the central concerns in this body of work. With any occurrence largely read by digital means, how is the historical timeline composed and events concatenated? How does this lens affect reading, and position an “event” relative to any other moment, with only diffuse edges separating document and fiction in this arena? The society arrived at in the novel is technocratic, governed by machine logic, algorithm, and one government referred to as as “One State,” or in some translations “The State.”

Browsing through any one of the many digitised photographic archives available to those of us with internet access, could lead you to the conclusion that the purpose of all human activity may be to make photographs. All varieties of photo. All subjects, from all angles, indefinitely, in a continual unfolding procession.

How to interact with these archives became a pressing concern when initiating this project. The framework put in place to create the work, is a model of how images and data are found and referenced, revealing the flaws, the haphazard nature of search, and the evident human curation, not only of the archive, but the mechanics and structure of how we interact with any archive and its data. However, the framework also needed to allow for no fixed destination, no central ideological concern, the flexibility to accommodate and fold in daily events, and the slow process of painting and drawing.

So the question came, what if the selection process were handed over to algorithm, the machine? What if the terms of the search were guided by a work of fiction?

What if the “true representations” contained in photographic archives were further subject to manipulation and contrivance, and how might those manipulations be further affected by the condition of the individual making those changes, day to day?

The representations found in the images that make up the compositions in this body of work, have been wholly stripped of their original context and recomposed to reveal a timeline that seems to reside somewhere between the alluded to events in “We,” and reality as it is described in the photograph.

There is no definite edge. No place to pinpoint, that accurately describes a beginning, or an end. The paintings and drawings, tilt at something that isn't inherently present within each individual composition, a collapse, a crisis of some variety, a parallel timeline to our own?

The material process for each work, acted as a kind of microcosm, a gesture, a parallel. Give up choice, and allow the machine and chance to dictate the subject. Interpret, reinterpret, cut-up and compose the subject. From the arbitrary, the definite is alluded to by cuts and crops. Allow the variability of paint, of organic matter, and attempted precision, to further obscure the original context, and distil a new portrayal.

Each step is an act of interpretation. First by the machine, in trying to match images with a string of text fed to it by code. The connection between the sentence and the returned images generally failing to bear any similarity to one another. Any subtlety of meaning within the overall sentence being lost, and the subjects often being paired with individual words only. Then the further disruption and interference of the returned digital photographs, through cutting them up, digitally manipulating them, and grouping them.

Utilising the illusions and conventions of oil painting to present an inherently flawed but smooth presentation of a reality. Foreground connecting to background, establishing the figure and subject in the environment, and depicting a series of events connected to something difficult to determine, that sits just outside the bounds of the frame.

Each individual composition is loaded with the representations found in the original photographs, and carry that historical freight into the compositional space, but this is simultaneously nullified and continually recast in different roles by the process of cutting, cropping, grouping, drawing, painting and looking.

Each composition then exists only as something for the next image to be contingent upon, leaving each singularly a kind of void, a null, but as a necessary presence, whereby the totality, or simply the next image might be understood.

The final individual compositions, and the body of work in totality, contain no one narrative, no one meaning as such, but are the residue of a material process that itself contains the primary motivations and questions that stimulated the work.

The work is attempting to describe something perhaps, but similar the Two-Hundred-Year War, that thing is just outside of view, just outside of experience, perhaps past, or yet to happen.

When events occur beyond lived experience and are mediated by a system that is subject to the same flaws and corruption of any other, how do we read them, what underwrites the consensus, and what are we left with in the aftermath?

ACCORDING TO OUR HISTORIANS A METEORITE FELL HISSING (II)

Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



IMAGINE A SQUARE. A LIVING BEAUTIFUL SQUARE (II)

Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



IMAGINE A SQUARE. A LIVING BEAUTIFUL SQUARE (I)

Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



EVERYTHING IS SO NOVEL. SO NOVEL IT IS LIKE A RAINSTORM (I)

Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



EVERYTHING IS SO NOVEL. SO NOVEL IT IS LIKE A RAINSTORM (II)

Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



WE HAVE ARRIVED AT THE TERMINUS

Oil on linen
170 x 170 cm



SHIFTING TERRAIN.

Geraldine Boyle

January 2017

According to our historians, a meteorite fell hissing is a new body of work by David Haughey that on its surface imagines a landscape of ruined buildings and state machinery haunted by figures that dissolve and merge into their surroundings. The exhibition's title implies that the natural event leading to this state of affairs occurred outside of living memory. However not all is as it seems; these chimerical images form a collection of paintings and drawings that meditate on the slipperiness of narrative history through the use and remix of fragmentary archival sources. The early science fiction novel *We* (1921) by Yevgeny Zamyatin acts as a vehicle through which Haughey explores the connections between histories and digital sources, the mutability of the digital image and creative possibilities of online archives.

Set in a dystopian future *We* is the story of the inhabitants of the glass city of One State told through the diary of an ordinary citizen: D-503. One State is home to the ancestors of the survivors of the 200 Years War, a global event of the distant past that wiped out the majority of humanity. This led to the gradual founding and crystallisation of a new machine-like order of society under authoritarian rule: One State. Though left ambiguous it is this shadowy historical event, rather than the meteorite of the title to which the images in the exhibition may obliquely refer. Throughout the exhibited works there are references to military uniform, insignia, aircraft, wreckage and communication systems.

In *We* stories about the 200 Years War and the meteorite are mediated by the state – “our historians” – and used to exert control over its citizens. The Ancient House in One State is a folk museum housing excavated artefacts from the 20th Century onwards. It represents an official version of history composed from the remaining fragments of a past civilisation but it has various opposing connotations for different characters.

All history is a form of storytelling that reconstructs the past by evaluating the stories told by others, by objects, images and artefacts. It is not absolute and its reconstruction is affected by current frameworks of knowledge and bias. Similarly, groups and individuals like the fictional D-503 perceive and record events according to their individual beliefs.

Through the artistic process of making this new work Haughey comments on the malleability of history and perception, particularly in reference to the internet as a resource for gathering material and artefacts for an imagined narrative. The internet is a vast, growing archive of information with input from many authors. It has changed the way the world is perceived creating an interactive channel for understanding of the past and present. In this new era of infinite sharing which writer Marcus Boon describes as utopian, images are endlessly copyable and available.¹ They are decontextualized, manipulated and appropriated away from their original provenance; this break from context invites misreading and competing narratives. While this growing archive holds the potential for new methods of conceptualising the past it requires a framework for interpretation and use of its unreliable sources.

Online archives represent a shifting terrain composed of innumerable fragments of accumulating data, the sheer volume of which is neatly represented by Erik Kessels' installation, *24 Hrs in Photos* (2011). To navigate the mass of information Haughey has designed code that randomly selects sentences from *We* and automatically enters them into a search engine. Each line of text spawns a related collection of images that are then edited, assembled and manipulated by the artist before he translates the resulting digital bricolage into paint and graphite. This practice of image retrieval produces a system with inbuilt chance that arguably has antecedents in the work of the Dadaists.

For example, Tristan Tzara in the piece *To make a Dada poem* (1920) issues instructions for producing poetry from the random recombination of a cut up newspaper, or Marcel Duchamp's chance compositions as exemplified by *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913-14).

The use of code is a gesture towards the programmed society of *We*, where desire is dealt with bureaucratically and creativity is based on the laws of mathematics. It introduces a non-human agent into the process; this agent does not make qualitative judgements in the choice of images but allocates text which triggers an image-search guided by other analytical means. Within an instant whole mountains of information can shapeshift and reassemble to fit the parameters of the search terms. Related to these ideas of non-human agency, the multidisciplinary collective, *Recombinant History Project* (2000), have produced code that programmes the automatic composition of historical documentaries in real time from commons archives. These types of interventions have profound implications for how narrative is formed.

Commons archives, which provide the source material for Haughey's paintings and drawings, are repositories of copyright free images. While there are official collections curated by museums, ordinary users can also tag and label images to create folksonomies and new webs of associations. Professional and amateur images compete equally in this hierarchy-free space.

Commenting on the esoteric classifications belonging to other systems of thought Michel Foucault laughingly quotes a passage from Borges wherein a particular encyclopaedia,

animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.²

This quote might well be applied to contemporary practices of tagging and pinning online. These collective curatorial processes add new and obscure, sometimes incorrect, layers of information affecting how images are found, understood, read or misread.

The meaning of images online is especially fluid and dependent on the individual or context. In terms of its value as a document academics disagree over whether the properties of a digital image compared to its physical photographic counterpart change its “evidentiary status.”³ Photography has always been subject to artistic and state revision, however, the digital image has an undeniable malleability inherent to its form and is easily manipulated in editing programmes. The medium’s verisimilitude and versatility make it vulnerable to exploitation, and easy to believe. Digital sources, like physical artefacts, can also exhibit fragility through code corruption or ‘lossy’ effects resulting from compression.

Haughey’s paintings and drawings exhibit glitches that make reference to the characteristics of the digital medium but also shatter the illusion of pictorial reality, introducing a level of doubt into the image. While the sources for each individual work are randomised according to text their on-screen composition and subsequent translation are guided entirely by the artist. Haughey describes how some of the paintings have mutated over time, as if living places: Figures are painted in and fade back out leaving traces, a hand or the outline of a hood. The instantaneous moment of the photograph is replaced with the contemplative timeframe of the painting and the use of a colour palette limited to black-and-white has the effect of unifying fragments within the frame and between works. It also imparts a dreamlike quality to them.

Though the source materials may be obscure they display a familiarity of type from the photojournalistic news image, to the publicity portrait, military images, personal snapshots and so on. Their meanings and associations resonate despite being freed of their original context and connection to time. In some works, a number of images have been layered together while in others a single image is cropped or divested of background. These acts unsettle the images through erosion and juxtaposition to create an open ended series of works with multiple interpretations. This chimes with the suggestion by art critic Jan Verwoert that the appropriation of materials in contemporary artistic practice (1991 onwards) should take into account a “reality constituted by a multiplicity of spatialized temporalities” and “unresolved histories.”⁴ These comments refer to the multiplicity of historiographies that have emerged since the end of the cold war, compounded by the uneven effects of globalisation and the rise of the network society.

Taken together these works appear as fragments and artefacts gathered to tell the story of an event, using the novel *We* as a catalyst. However, the narrative is uncertain and the images are distorted. The paintings and drawings which are constructed from digital source materials called up by a specific line of text are re-presented back alongside that same sentence. Written from the first person perspective the text is suggestive of an eye witness account so that the works appear as a stream of consciousness or memory, which is not always reliable. The creation of something new through acts of digital appropriation and recontextualisation may refer to the infinite variation available from digital sources and the possibilities inherent in the archive. The works in the exhibition move from referencing the dystopian vision of *One State* with its tight grasp on history as a means of control, to the potentially utopian vision of the expanding archive where information is malleable and meaning is “up for grabs.”⁵

1 Boon, M. *In Praise of Copying*, Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England: Harvard University Press; 2013

2 Foucault, M. *The Order of Things*, London/ New York: Routledge; 2003

3 Magagnoli P. *Let Meaning Disintegrate: Digital Compression as Revelation in the Art of Sean Snyder*. In Moschovi A, McKay C, Plouviez A, eds. *The Versatile Image: Photography, Digital Technologies and the Internet*. Leuven: Leuven University Press; 2013.

4 Verwoert, J. *Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art*. *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*; 2007, 1(2)

5 Spira A, Cummings N, Lewandowska M. *From Enthusiasm to the Creative Commons*. In Mereweather C, editor. *Documents of Contemporary Art: The Archive*. Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England: MIT Press; 2006. p. 149-153.

BUT IF YOU COMPARE THIS WITH THE TABLES, YOU WILL SEE SIDE BY SIDE GRAPHITE AND DIAMONDS (I)

Graphite on plastic
27 x 27 cm



I KNOW OF NOTHING MORE DANGEROUS (I)

Graphite on plastic
27 x 27 cm



WITH PRIDE I NOW WRITE THAT THIS OCCURRENCE DID NOT DISTURB THE RHYTHM OF OUR WORK FOR EVEN A SECOND (II)

Graphite on plastic

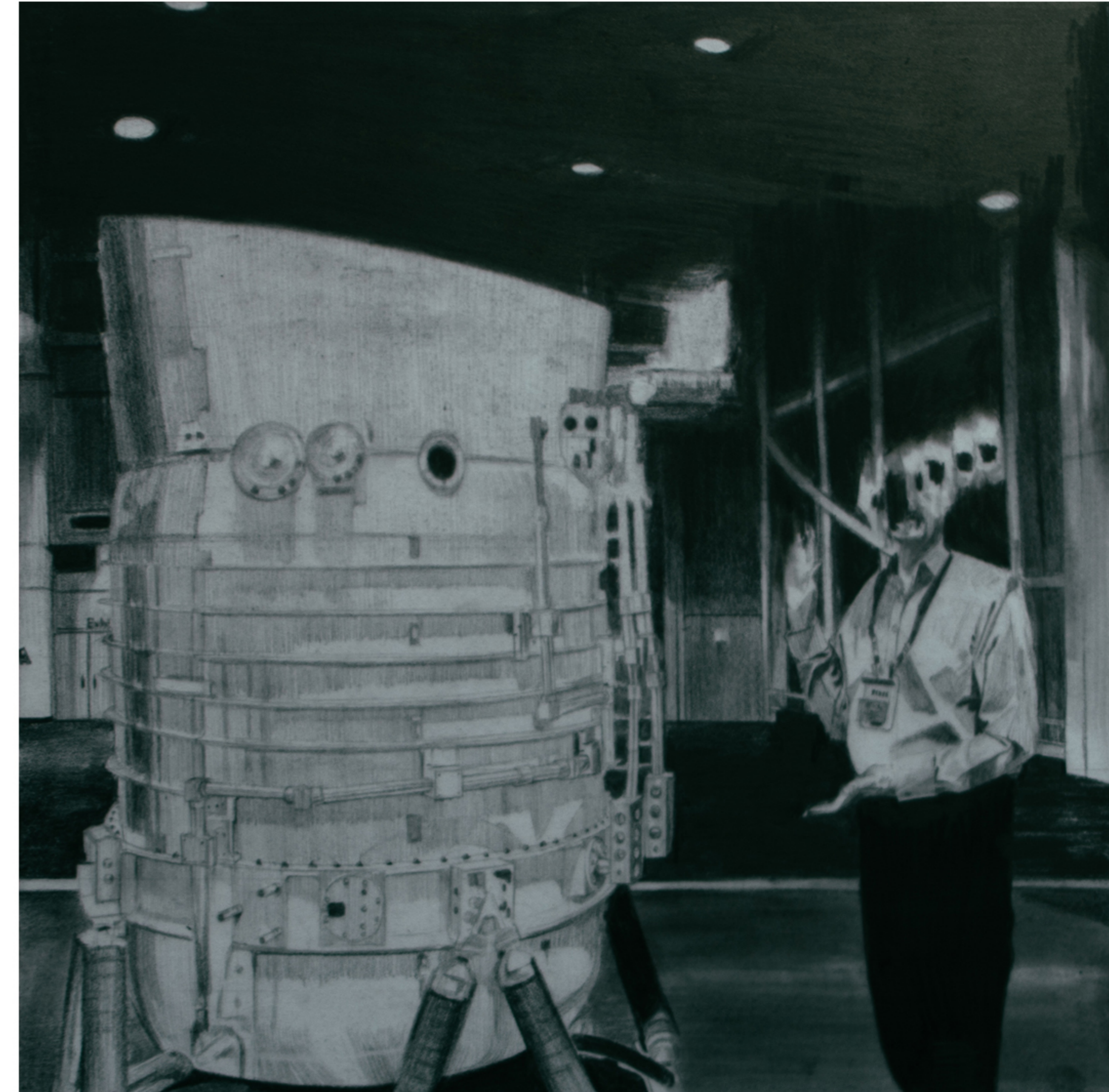
27 x 27 cm



BUT IF YOU COMPARE THIS WITH THE TABLES, YOU WILL SEE SIDE BY SIDE GRAPHITE AND DIAMONDS (II)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



WITH PRIDE I NOW WRITE THAT THIS OCCURRENCE DID NOT DISTURB THE RHYTHM OF OUR WORK FOR EVEN A SECOND (I)

Graphite on plastic

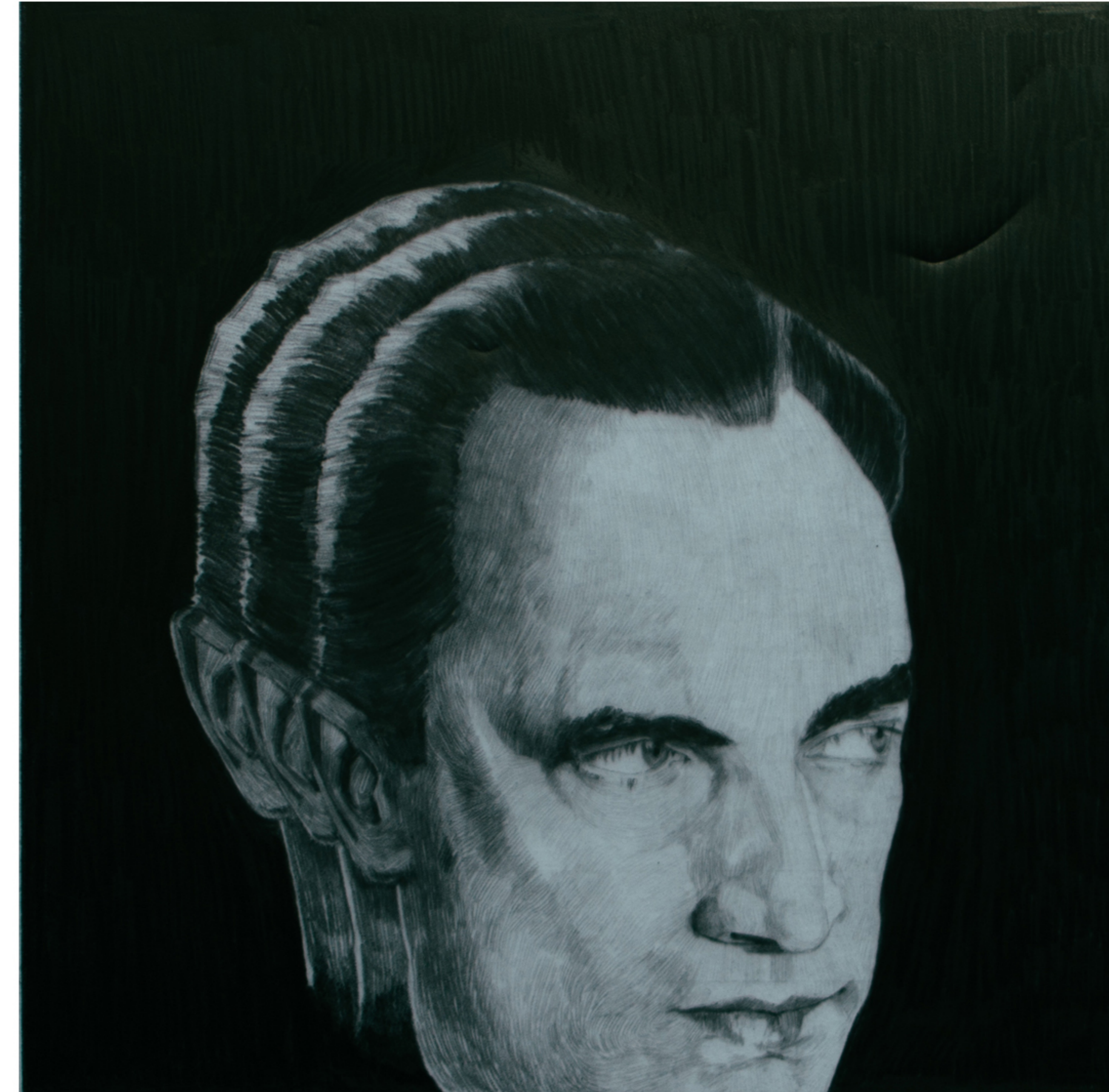
27 x 27 cm



I REMEMBERED A ROSY, CONCAVE, TREMBLING MEMBRANE. A STRANGE BEING CONSISTING OF ONE ORGAN ONLY, AN EAR (II)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



I KNOW OF NOTHING MORE DANGEROUS (II)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



YES. IT WAS A SOLEMN LITURGY FOR THE STATE (II)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



I SUDDENLY PERCEIVED ALL THE MUSIC, ALL THE BEAUTY, OF THIS COLOSSAL, THIS MECHANICAL BALLET.

ILLUMINATED BY LIGHT BLUE RAYS OF SUNSHINE (I)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



YES, IT WAS A SOLEMN LITURGY FOR THE STATE (I)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



THERE BEHIND THE CURTAINS SOMETHING WAS GOING ON. I DON'T KNOW WHAT, BUT SOMETHING THAT MADE ME LOSE MY PATIENCE (II)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm

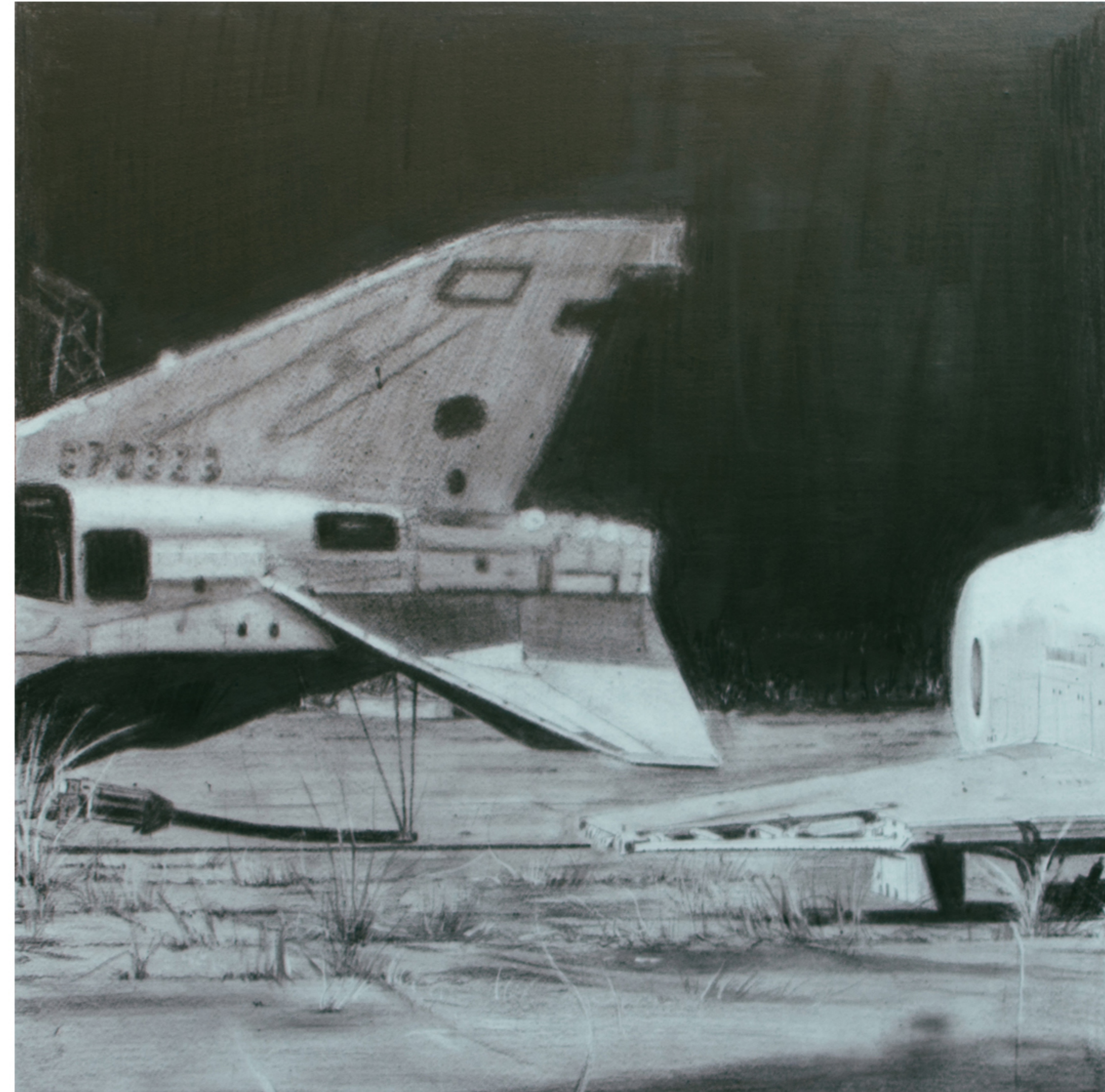


I SUDDENLY PERCEIVED ALL THE MUSIC, ALL THE BEAUTY, OF THIS COLOSSAL, THIS MECHANICAL BALLET.

ILLUMINATED BY LIGHT BLUE RAYS OF SUNSHINE (I)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



THERE BEHIND THE CURTAINS SOMETHING WAS GOING ON. I DON'T KNOW WHAT, BUT SOMETHING THAT MADE ME LOSE MY PATIENCE (I)

Graphite on plastic

27 x 27 cm



I REMEMBERED A ROSY, CONCAVE, TREMBLING MEMBRANE A STRANGE BEING CONSISTING OF ONE ORGAN ONLY. AN EAR (I)

Graphite on plastic
27 x 27 cm









The paintings and drawings that make up this body of work, and presented in this catalogue, were initiated in November 2015, and completed in December 2016.

The resulting exhibition has been curated by **Feargal O'Malley**, whose support, good humour, and knowledge throughout the making process, was indispensable.

I would like to thank **Geraldine Boyle** for the contribution of the accompanying essay; **Brendan O'Neill** for his patience and precision in making sure the work was seamlessly installed; **John McAllister** for his exquisite craftsmanship in framing the drawings; **Toney Corey** for carefully documenting this exhibition; and **Potato Bred Logistics** for unparalleled handling and delivery.

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Art
Gallery

