

A Transient Gaze

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An Exhibition Statement Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art & Art History University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. By Aminah Jomha

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Foreword

When asked to describe my art practice, I like to compare it to an excavation site. The process of creating a work is about discovery. Like any artist, I begin with a question. The deeper I dig, the more I discover and question. I am in continuous dialogue with everything I create. This book is the product of a blog titled "A Transient Gaze." Although this book has a beginning and an end, the blog is a tool that allows me to continually share my thoughts and discoveries in a direct and immediate manner allowing access to all. It also allows for continuous discourse that is not limited to just a gallery setting. This book is constructed and organized to follow the blog's own order. The blog itself is organized chronologically by what thoughts inspired me for the next entry. In my mind the work produced in this book and on the blog act as small gestures and fragments that add to a larger ongoing narrative. The works presented here cover a range of medium such as photography, drawing and painting and all of which are performative in one way or another and heavily dependent on intuition.



A Brief Introduction

“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography.”

I am by no means a professional blogger and this has been my very first experience in the blogging world. For the most part the people who will navigate through my posts will be individuals who have prior knowledge regarding the initial purpose of this blog. In any case, I would like to outline the future of my subject matter for both those with prior knowledge and those who accidentally come across this blog and discover an interest in whatever I wish to share.

I am a visual artist who is interested in exploring and questioning notions of place, identity, displacement and transformation. Edward Said says “just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography.”¹ My exploration of identity and place stems from the fact that I am Middle Eastern as much as I am Canadian. I am constantly renegotiating my existence within space and how I can relate to a physical geography. Diaspora has led to the simultaneous mixing and erasure of cultures, leading large groups of people to float in an in-between place that does not have any physical geographic attributes. Hence the creation of struggle over geography as noted in Said’s quote.

On December 25, 2013 I will be traveling to Beirut, Lebanon and will return back to Saskatoon, Canada on January 10, 2014. For a consecutive 17 days I will document my movement through space starting from the time I enter the Saskatoon airport up to the time I return. I will post an image or more along with some text highlighting what I encounter. It has been three years since I have last been to Lebanon and I am interested in the way the space has changed and how myself and others alike will renegotiate the space and our existence in it.

My intention for this blog is to create dialogue and imagery that explore the effects a continual renegotiation of space has on the transformation of identity. This “Transitional Gaze” that affects me along with many others, is the catalyst for this blog.

DEC. 11, 2013



Resilience

“A landscape is the land transformed, whether through the physical act of inhabitation or enclosure, clearance or cultivation, or through human perception”²

-Tacita Dean, Jeremy Millar

Insider/ Outsider

The beginning of my 17 day journey.

At 4:30AM; I checked in at the airport and all went smoothly. My flight took off at 6AM and luckily the flight was on time. After going through security, I decided to grab a coffee and I then patiently waited for takeoff. I will update as I move along.

DEC. 25, 2013



It is December 27, 2013 and I arrived in Beirut the evening of the 26th at 5:00 p.m.

It was exciting to see that the airport was bustling with people, from all over the Lebanese Diasporas, who are coming home to spend the holidays and New Year with family and friends. As I got off the plane and entered the airport I had to re-map my brain and tongue to suit the environment I am visiting. I made my way to customs and suddenly I realized I forgot my Lebanese passport at home in Canada, which resulted in entering the country as a foreigner and was granted a 30 day visa.

After going through customs I quickly walked over to the suitcase belt to collect my belongings. Unfortunately, the luggage of many visitors, including my own, never arrived. The tired travellers were upset and sadly there is no organized system to help travellers submit a missing luggage application, which added to the overwhelming chaos. After an hour and a half of waiting in a non-existent line, I was told that the missing luggage is expected to arrive the evening of the 27th.

As I walked out of the arrival area I was notified that all visitors are now required to register all cell phones coming in to the country—a new law implemented in 2013. I can not really comment on the process due to the fact that I am not fully informed on the reason for this law.

Finally 2 hours later I made it out of the airport and was welcomed by my friend, Yasmine. She lives in L.A. but has come here to Lebanon to visit family and friends. An hour after arriving we decided to take an evening walk around the city. It felt as if the whole city decided to do the same. As we walked I explained to my friends that my family members were not very keen on my traveling back to Lebanon due to all the political unrest. When watching the news, you are faced with all the political turmoil that exists in the country and never really think about all the living and socializing that takes place in the same space. I was very surprised to see life go on as if nothing was happening.

DEC. 27 2013



Day of Mourning

Unfortunately, the morning of the 27th we woke up to the sound of a huge explosion near by that killed 5 people and injured 70. Mohamad Chatah, said to have ties with the Hariri family was the target of the bombings. Sadly the once busy street was quieted by violence.

DEC. 27 2013

December 30, 2013

Today marks my fourth day in Beirut and the city is back to its active self. And yet, when walking around, it is hard to forget the events of the past few days. In the public spaces of Beirut, you are confronted with the smell of fear lingering in the air. One thing you always hear or are told is to be careful but how can you be cautious of random acts of violence that can take place at any time and any place? Usually these acts of violence target political figures while they are in transition from one location to the next. They can be passing through any of the many main streets within the city. How do you go about your daily life avoiding such important paths? The answer is dissatisfying; you cannot. You must have hope for the best, and to continue your life as if no violence exists.

The city feels different. Today while out and taking photos a friend and I were unexpectedly greeted by an entourage of cars transporting a political figure to a destination nearby. An officer standing in the middle of the road yelled for everyone to stop. All cars and pedestrians halted at a moments notice. As soon as I heard that there was an entourage passing by an overwhelming fear took over me and my gut reaction was to run the other direction. I quickly looked at my friend and said we should head away from the commotion. However, within a minute or so we were told we could pass through.

I then continued to photograph what was around me. An officer quickly came over and said that I need to put my camera away and delete the photos I just took. I had to show him and he made me delete two of the images because a government building was in the background. He then proceeded to explain that I should never have my camera out while a political party is in the vicinity because they might think I am a spy or something of the sort.

People are living in fear not knowing what will take place next. You have to be fully aware of your surroundings and to think twice about who can be trusted. I must say the Lebanese society has mastered a sense of forgetfulness when it comes to the political unrest they are immersed in. The streets are overflowing with people shopping, dining out, socializing, and just trying to go about as peaceful as possible; they refuse to allow such acts of violence to control or cripple their day-to-day life. Amazingly enough they live each day for each day and continue to live life to the fullest.

DEC. 30 2013









Transience

“The land and the body are linked and both bear the scars of different forms of invasion.”³

—*Laila al-Shawa*

While Roaming

As I walked the streets of Beirut, Lebanon I encountered construction sites around every corner. The country is on the verge of civil war and yet optimism is evident. The country continues to construct and re-construct with confidence.

FEB. 3 2014













Through the Car Window

Lebanon 2014

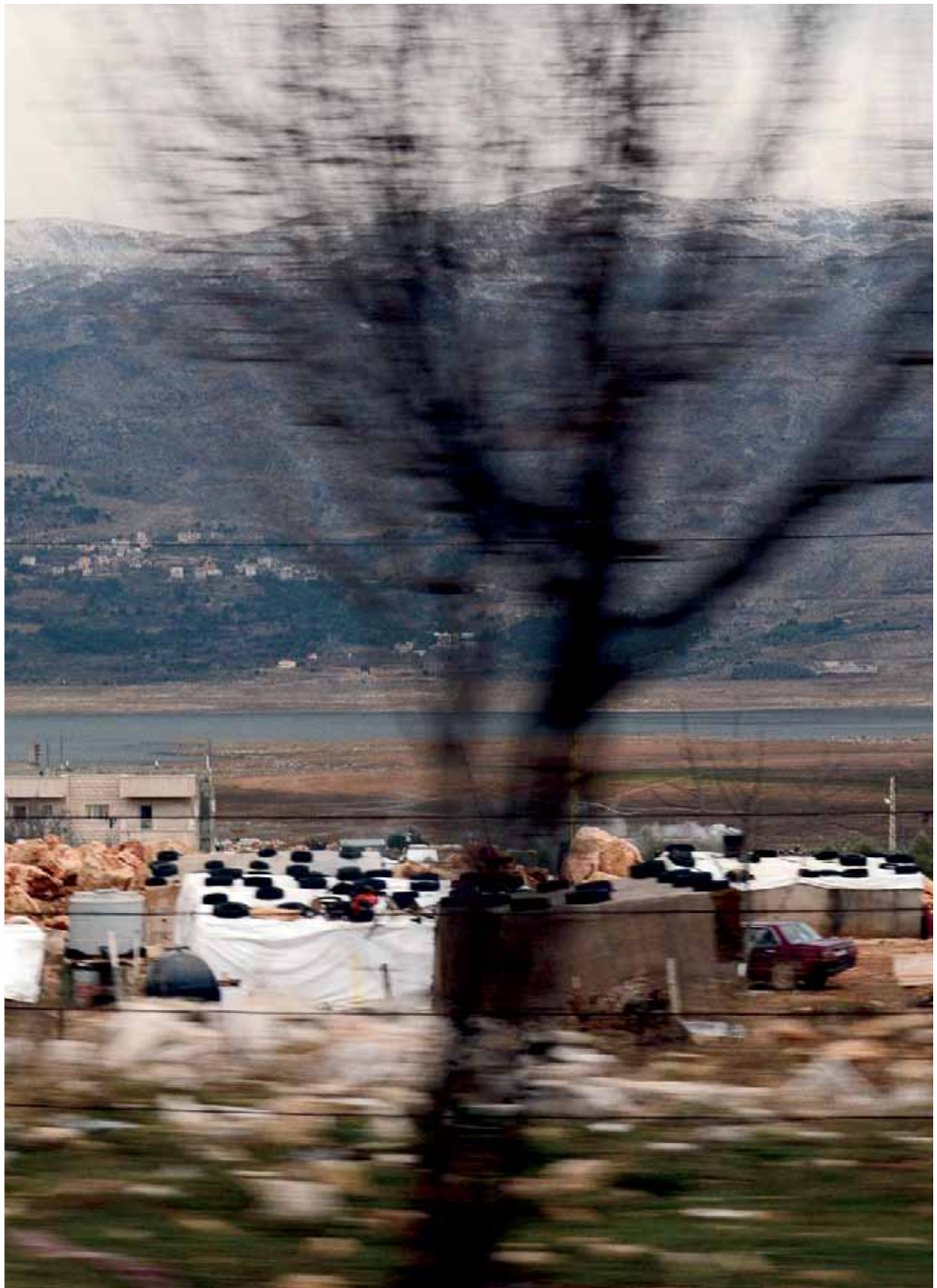












[Photography is] the art of fixing a shadow...fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy.”⁴

—*Fox Talbot*





Figured/re-figured





Categorizing the Artist

“I’m not satisfied with just explaining my culture. I don’t want to be an ethnographic artist.”⁵ –Shirin Neshat

My interest and concentration in space and our relation to it is influenced by the fact that, similar to Neshat, I straddle the liminal space that connects and separates my Eastern and Western identities. There have been many occurrences where my work is read with a single narrative and specified in relation to a specific place. This place is Lebanon. It is very hard for me to disconnect myself from the politics of the Middle East but this does not mean I create work that only speaks to the social and political realms of Lebanon.

It is easy to restrict artists by placing them in a specific artistic category. Shirin Neshat is an Iranian artist who is situated in the United States of America. Her art stems from, but not restricted to, her personal experience of living between two worlds, (although it can be noted that at some point her work was restricted to a single narrative).⁶ In the essay *Shirin Neshat: Living Between Cultures*, Eleanor Heartney notes that Neshat is now regarded as an artist who, “uses her position as an Iranian woman artist to speak to a wide range of personal and social issues and to express her point of view from the intersection of many overlapping identities”.⁷ Similar to Neshat I feel as an artist I need to speak about what interests me starting from within and working my way out.

I am interested in how any individual reacts to the home transforming into the ‘not’ home. How do people individually and as a whole re-imagine their space and connection to it? How does space and the urge to situate ourselves within a place alter or influence our identities and growth? These are questions I ask and am interested in researching. Many if not all have encountered the feeling of being in a liminal space, a space that disorients and disconnects one from their surroundings, either physically, sociologically, psychologically, or all three.

I am interested in exploring possibilities and creating a dialogue with the viewer that creates and intrigues more exploration. I am not creating art to make a statement or to give answers. My goal is to create imagery that carries multiple narratives and possibilities, However, I find that the work is read with a single narrative and contrary to my intentions violence is usually connected to that narrative.

I struggle with the descriptive word 'violence' being applied to my work because the Middle East is always represented as a violent place in the media and popular culture. When my work is described as violent I feel that I am being categorized and being set up to fit the stereotype of the Middle East. This construct of my identity seems to overpower the multiple narrative I try to create. Whether this is a short coming on my part, or it is simply the fact that no matter how the world progresses we still find the need to categorize individuals and groups which in turn can restrict and specify their actions and realities, remains blurred at this point in time. In many ways I feel like Neshat's quote in regards to not wanting to be an ethnographic artist strongly influenced this response and I was able to relate to it on a personal level as an artist who is interested in the human condition as a whole but always feel restricted to being an artist who comments on the violence of the Middle East.

MAR. II 2014

“Memory is delay. Memory is a fragment. Memory is of the body that passed. Memory is the trace of a wave goodbye made with a slightly clenched fist.”⁸

—*Robert Moriss*



In My Dreams

“I’ve permanently lost a complete sense of center. I can never call any place home. I will forever be in a state of in-between.”⁹

–Shirin Neshat

Like Neshat, most people who live in the diaspora may have or are experiencing a loss of centre and are designated to live in a state of in-between. A few days ago it has come to my attention that not only in real life do I lack a sense of belonging to a physical geography, but also in my dreams. I exist within a state of in-between, awake or asleep. I had one dream where I was standing with my family in the house we presently live in but the attributes of the house and its surroundings resembled the house we lived in while living in Lebanon. I tried to recall whatever details I could, but then realized that this mixing and blurring of two spaces is a reoccurring theme in my dreams. My dreamscape is the in-between.

Is it common for those who live in a state of in-between (multiple geographies), cities, towns or homes to amalgamate these sites and create an imaginary space to act as a setting in their dreams? The settings in my dreams are made up of paradoxical landscapes. Landscapes that mix and blur borders and boundaries of my past and present lived-in geographies. In my dreams I roam around in spaces that are neither here (Canada) nor there (Lebanon). I experience both places as one. My body is stationed in Canada but the architecture, roads, trees, and weather mimic that of a Lebanese site, and a familiar neighborhood that my body recognizes and vice-versa. I am never stationed in a neutral setting. Borders collapse in on each other. The sites I dream of are always in continual flux similar to my reality, but only in my dreams I can have both worlds at once.

JUL. 21 2014



A Color of Light

“In this work I began to use pure black as a color of light and not as a color of darkness”¹⁰ –Matisse

All things carry meaning and people relate to things in different ways. When trying to understand the history and meaning of any subject, context is very important. I would like to discuss the ambivalence of black and its meaning to my work. Black is understood to be a non-color by many but throughout its history, this definition has been debated. Does the color black represent the absence of light or can it be used, similar to Matisse’s choice, as a color of light? In the book *Color* Victoria Finlay notes that, “just as white light contains all the colors, [...] Black paint can incorporate the spectrum too”.¹¹ I have taken note of my use of pure black in a series of work that discusses my interests and concerns in the duality of culture, identity and place caused by displacement. I am currently exploring the color black and its symbolic significance. Seeing that the color black carries a dual symbolism¹² it is becoming clear to me that it is an apt color to reference the ambivalence of identity and its place within my work. The color black goes back and forth in meaning and signifies multiple binaries such as death/birth, positive/negative, and presence/absence. These dualities and juxtapositions are something I try to convey within my art practice.

Black pigment is produced using a variety of materials but I will focus on carbon black, a pigment that dates back to Paleolithic times. Through the process of burning willow branches and bone are two materials used to create varying shades of black. Depending on how long and how close the material sits in the fire, different shades of black are produced. What fascinates me most about this process is the physical transformation of the material from one state to another. Through the process of burning, the material gains a new purpose and significance. Anselm Kiefer, a German abstract expressionist artist, depicted burning or burnt lands in many of his paintings. He used the imagery of a blackened landscape to reference renewal; in a way reflective of plowing and burning, a process used to rejuvenate the soil.¹³ As plowing and burning are used to help revitalize the soil’s purpose, the process of burning willow or bone suggests both the death and birth of the new material itself. The process of making black attaches meaning to the reading of the color and influences the way it is used. Michel Pastoureau, author of *Black the History of a Color*, says that the terminology of “black [...] is unstable, imprecise, and elusive.”¹⁴

Rebellious Death



Figure 1: Rebellious Death

Black carries both negative and positive connotations and is usually associated with night and darkness. In my experience, and within the critique of my work, the viewer, in most instances, experiences the dark spaces within a piece and initially applies a negative meaning. My intention in creating these dark black spaces is to open up the possibility of an idea coming into formation or dissolving into its own demise. My objective is to offer the viewer a chance to ponder the possibilities of opposing ideologies such as death and birth within the same space at once. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha says “darkness signifies at once both birth and death.”¹⁵ The color black has continually symbolized places deprived of light e.g., such as caves and underground passage ways.¹⁶ Although these spaces are deprived of light they are “fertile crucibles, places of birth or metamorphosis, receptacles of energy and, by the same token sacred spaces.”¹⁷ These places are also associated with fear, obscurity, death, and suffering.¹⁸ Therefore, the color black has been used to depict subjects of death, fertility, ambiguity and more.

Another dichotomy I present in my work is that of presence and absence. In both my paintings and photographs I depict these concepts by creating black voids and/or outlines of silhouetted figures. As mentioned earlier carbon black dates back to Paleolithic times. It was used as a pigment to draw with on cave walls.¹⁹ Finlay suggests that prior to the discovery of cave paintings, one Western classical legend proclaims that black was the first paint.²⁰ The legend says that a female created the first painting by filling in the pattern of her lover’s cast shadow on the wall with a piece of coal from the fire.²¹ Finlay poetically expresses that the artist may have painted her lover’s shadow as a way of keeping a part of him near while away on his travels.²² If we follow this idea, then the first use of the color black was to create both a presence and an absence of the subject. Similar to the lover’s filled in outline, the silhouetted figures in my work represent both a presence and absence within a space, a space where the shadowed figure once occupied. Given the Western classical legend, the origins of the first painting came to formation with the use of carbon black and its first symbolic reference is based on notions of presence and absence. The traces of what existed before a shadowy figure.

There are two types of black ‘matte black’ (ater) and ‘glossy black’ (niger)²³ and each black carries different symbolic meanings. Pastoureau explains that matte black has a history of being lifeless, ominous and deathlike; where as glossy black is powerful, fruitful, and vivid.²⁴ He explains gloss black as being “so brilliant that it seems to light the darkness and allows one to see in the night (dark).”²⁵ In my work I use both glossy and matte blacks. Each black absorbs the light in different manners. When



Figure 2: Liminality

the black is glossy the light tends to reflect light and picks up different colors in proximity. When I use matte black I use it in order to capture the viewers attention and absorb them into the image similar to how matte black absorbs light. Similar to Matisse I use pure black as a color of lightness rather than a color of darkness.²⁶

I have discussed my reasoning and deliberate use of the color black in my work but would like to add how my process also reflects the concepts I have mapped out. The processes I engage in within my work also reference the ambivalent nature of culture, place and identity. My artistic practice is experimental and process driven. My interests in the physicality of art making hold equal weight to my interests in the symbolic and conceptual meanings I am working with. I attempt to create unfamiliar spaces through the mediation of chaos and structure. The exploration and dialogue of constructing and de-constructing an image through the use of mark making or a long shutter exposure is an effort to unveil previous layers. The aim of these processes is to expose the passage of time and memory by allowing layers to bleed through, permitting evidence of the past to surface once again. Such layers are shown in my series of photographs, *Rebellious Death* (figure 1). By documenting the passage of time and movement, the photographs show how in death and burial, the landscape acts as a veil covering the history beneath. By history, I am referring to the history of the place and lives lived. When a place is subjected to disaster, eventually, infrastructure is rebuilt and the history or record of what the landscape once was is transformed; the reality of destruction and chaos is blurred, remaining only in the collective memory. In *Rebellious Death*, I wrap my body, mimicking the shrouded body and perform the struggle between fighting back, surrendering, remembering, and forgetting. My wrapped body is juxtaposed against a solid black backdrop. It is important for my body to be juxtaposed against a black backdrop in order to allow for multiple readings of the space. My intention is to create a space that implies a place of existence or disappearance, a place where the figure is or once was (which connects to the concepts of absence and presence). The use of gloss black rather than a matte black in these photographs is to reference power, fruitfulness, and vividness. The glossy appearance is the product of the type of photographic paper the image is printed on. I intentionally used a photographic paper with a gloss finish in order to achieve a glossy black to reinforce optimism in a possible future.

In addition to the use of a slow shutter speed in my photographs to document the passage of time, my process of drawing and painting also imply a past, present and a possible future time. I do this by layering and contrasting quick, fast, slow, thick, thin, transparent and opaque marks. For example in *Liminality* (figure 2) I use black

minimally to create thin, light and quick gestures to imply a potential instance or future. I created these marks with the use of willow charcoal. If not fixed, Willow charcoal is very vulnerable, soft and ephemeral; it can easily be wiped away. The ephemerality of the medium reinforces the concept of presence, past or a possible future time.

The symbolic meaning of black and the processes I have discussed create a strong sense of obliteration and renewal. For me the relevance of black in my work is in its ambivalent nature. It carries dual meanings simultaneously which supports my engagement with the changeable (ambiguous) nature of culture, identity and place disrupted by dislocation. My practice involves many processes such as additive/subtractive methods in drawing and painting and long shutter exposures in photography. These processes are intended to heighten the symbolic dualities of absence/presence, life/death, past/future and positive/negative, as these concepts are intended to speak to notions of identity and belonging.

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