

The Depth of Surface:
A practice-based encounter

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Abstract

This practice-based enquiry interrogates the drawn or painted surface as a dense, complex and ambivalent plane. The research arose from a sustained concern in my art practice with pattern and decoration, and it generated critical insight into existing artworks as well as works made in the course of the enquiry. Several bodies of new artworks, created to explore different aspects of surface, marked a considerable development in my established practice.

The research proceeded through two complementary and interlinked activities: making drawings and paintings; and analysis of their cultural and contextual underpinnings. In order to explore the complexity of surface, a broad range of theory from, philosophy, anthropology, new media, textiles and fine art was considered. By exploring this theory through practical methods, the practice and theory impacted each other and shaped the direction of the investigation. This was a two-way process: paintings suggested contextual studies, and were used to test ideas arising from such research. Tacit understandings of surface were also sought through practical cross-cultural explorations of pattern-generating systems and techniques, notably aspects of Islamic, Celtic, Indian and medieval practice, and by probing personal and historical legacies.

The study began as an exploration of the outward-facing and inward supporting components of image-making. My focus was on the interplay between what is intentionally presented on the surface and elements organically arising from the making process, such as traces of preparatory design and generating structures or devices. It sought to understand how these modify what we perceive as surface, and its meanings. Surface emerged as conceptually and materially complex; a place where meaning, value and materiality are not fixed, but in a constant state of (re)negotiation.

A new reading of the interchange between surface and structure is the contribution to knowledge. This questions the commonly held views of surface as a thin skin, or a layered structure, or as solely a material component. The depth of surface was revealed in:

- a) cultural understandings linking pictorial geometries with meaning
- b) multiple temporalities whereby surface simultaneously references past, present and future
- c) the concept of entry where the viewer engages with a sense of interiority that volumizes the surface
- d) an interface between the viewing body and the artwork that contains both above-ness and below-ness.

The research culminates by offering a new perspective on our understanding of surface based on interactivity between zones. This holistic approach synthesises ideas from other thinkers and practitioners, destabilises existing understandings of the over/under paradigm and focuses on the experiential dimension of surface as an embodied encounter. Ultimately, surface emerges as a heterotopic site where time, scopic regimes, outward-reaching shine, and inward-drawing shadow connect in a mutable and unstable zone of encounter.

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Introduction

Context to the enquiry

My interest in surface arose from my established artistic practice that included a sustained preoccupation with pattern construction, repetition and geometrical form. The artworks resulting from these preoccupations led to a concern with the underlying structures of such work. This systematic mapping seemingly lay ‘beneath’ the outer painted or drawn surface, and was, to some extent, concealed from view. This suggested both visual and conceptual depth rather than the flatness associated with patterning. At the beginning of the research, my understanding of surface was constricted by this *seen/unseen, over/under* paradigm, binary positions that quickly began to unravel as the study progressed. To more fully understand how I arrived at surface as a theme worthy of concentrated exploration, it is useful to give some background to my artistic practice.

I had been working as an artist since leaving art school in 1989. Having begun art school training at Dartington College of Arts (Art and Design in a Social Context 1985-87), I transferred into the second year of a Fine Arts degree course (Painting) at Nottingham Trent University (1987-89).¹ These two institutions provided an eclectic mix of social values and aesthetic values: the focus at Dartington was on the meaning and context of artworks, while at Nottingham, the emphasis was on materials and form.² From this late-1980s art school training, I adopted tacit assumptions about art practice, both an anti-elitist stance on the social role of art within the community and a position of art as skill-based work that requires

¹ Led by Chris Crickmay, ‘Art and Design in a Social Context’ at Dartington College of Arts, originally a two-year Dip (HE), was a unique and forward thinking course offering a critical and contextual perspective on artmaking with a focus on process, community and social engagement. In 1986 it became a degree course ‘Art and Social Context’. In 1991, following the announcement of its impending closure, the course transferred to Bristol Polytechnic (soon to become the University of the West of England). The leadership of the revived course was provided by Sally Morgan (current Professor of Fine Arts, Massey University, New Zealand (2012 to date) who subsequently established an MA and research centre in the same field. Other notable lecturers included David Harding, who went on to establish Environmental Arts at Glasgow School of Arts, John Hall, Rose Garrard and Pen Dalton.

² Fine Art in the 1980s reflected a pluralistic approach with figurative, landscape and abstract painting taught alongside new media, installation and performance; a time before modules, learning outcomes and timetabling. In the symposium *British Abstract Painting in the Eighties* (University of Coventry Symposium, 14 September 2018), artist David Ryan described the 1980s as a ‘sort of frenzy of anything goes’.

effort sustained over time. These assumptions would eventually collide with earlier formative experiences.

My earlier experiences involved a particular orientation toward pattern construction and colour. One persistent memory is of the opening scene of the film *Billy Elliot* (2000). Eleven-year-old Billy, an aspiring ballet dancer, is shown in his bedroom jumping playfully on his bed to the soundtrack of 'Cosmic Dancer' (1971) by T. Rex. In slow motion, he appears, disappears, and reappears against a distinctive wallpaper, a repeating grid of circular floral-esque motifs typical of the 1970s.³ The combination of music and image immediately conjures up for me a specific time and place. I grew up in the same era. Family photographs from my childhood include me in profile wearing a pink and white floral dress clashing with a bold orange and yellow Arts and Crafts-style wallpaper print (figure 1).



Figure 1: Film still from *Billy Elliot* (2000:1min 40) and (right) myself as a young child (c.1970, family photo).

I recall another photograph of my Dad in our 'best' front room, leaning against the fireplace, the optical geometric wallpaper contrasting with the floral carpet at his feet. The nostalgia of such images is overwhelming; it is as though my memories are captured within the swirls and shapes of particular patterns and fabrics. These associations reveal that pattern had become for me the inseparable backdrop to my childhood and a multi-layered holder of meanings.

I also remember the drawing toys I played with as a child: first, colouring-in-books, with all their inherent emphasis on staying within the lines and keeping it 'neat'. I seemed to absorb

³ Despite *Billy Elliot* being set in 1984/5, coinciding with the Miner's Strike, much of the film's 'background furniture' is from the 1970s including the wallpaper, soundtracks and toys, such as Billy's 'Ker-Plunk' and iconic Space-hopper.

from this an orientation toward a sort of completion when everything was filled in. There were also packs of multi-coloured felt-tip pens, arranged neatly in rows like a rainbow, providing an orderliness without awkward decisions about colour-mixing. Etch-a-sketch boards and the spirograph toy imposed a pre-formed structure on drawing that provided a confident point of departure. These games guided my first attempts at designing patterns and experimenting with shape and colour, the enduring result of which was a preoccupation with control, order and a striving for completeness that still influences my current practice.

On reflection, this autobiographical interaction with art, both childhood games and art school training, shaped my identity as an artist.⁴ I am struck by the relevance of many of my past concerns to my current research. There is, for example, a continued focus on real and imagined spaces and the importance of labour and the 'hand-made'. Structures of the mind, by which I mean inherent gestures, rhythms and value systems, are present even before an artwork is started, either as a point of resistance or as an intuited motivation. Ingrained habits re-surface, and I have returned, on more than one occasion—and often unintentionally—to familiar patterns of behaviour. Despite (or because of) the intellectual rigour of two very different types of art education, I can revert to the pure aesthetic pleasures that, as a child, playfully absorbed me.

Since art school, my work moved through different stages and genres: gestural figurative paintings for my degree show (1989), landscape paintings (1990-1993) following an arts residency in Patagonia (1990), a series of more controlled paintings focusing on the patterns and textures of 'homeplace' (1994-1999), and spirograph drawings developed while studying for an MA in Fine Art (1999–2001).⁵ These latter drawings developed as a signature practice

⁴ For biographical art writing see; Jaray, T. (2014) *The Blue Cupboard: Inspirations and Recollections*. London: Royal Academy of Arts; Taylor, S. 'Aspirational Beauty: Painting Class and the importance of personal narrative in painting.' *Teaching Painting: A Conference*. Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 29-30 October 2015; Steedman, C. (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman*. London: Virago.

⁵ I was artist in residency on a Raleigh International expedition to Patagonia, Southern Chile (September-December 1990). Artworks on the 'homeplace' (1994-1999) evolved in antithesis to the landscape paintings and were informed by research on the sublime, travel and homesickness undertaken during my MA (Twentieth Century Art History), Goldsmiths College, The University of London (1993-1995). This line of enquiry resulted in a body of paintings and drawings based on the textures and patterns of 'homeplace' and an MA thesis, *There's No Place Like Home: An exploration of the homely and unhomely in contemporary culture* (1995). Between 1999-2001 I undertook an MA in Fine Art at Manchester Metropolitan University.

during a rigorous artistic enquiry sustained for more than a decade (2000-2015). The spirograph motif provided a constant element through which repetition, pattern and process

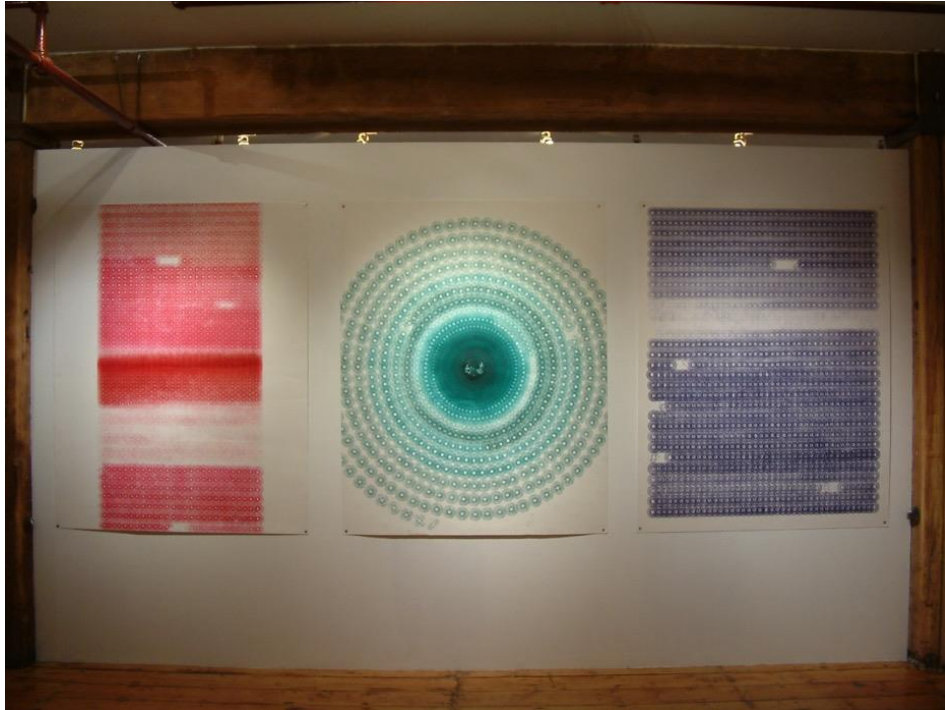


Figure 2: *Red Stretch, 1348 Minutes* (2001), *Green Circle, 1304 Minutes* (2001) and *Blue Horizontal, 1221 Minutes* (2001). Ballpoint pen on paper, 145 x 125 cms. Installation shot, *We go round and round in the night and are consumed by fire* (2003/4). Terminal Warehouse, New York and Liverpool Biennial, curated by Neil Mulholland.

were recurrently explored, and the tensions that arose between control and accident were assimilated into the practice. The drawing process was systematised, and decisions made before each drawing began. Once the colour (from a restricted range), scale and geometrical structure of the drawing were determined, I then decided my approach. For example, whether I would start from the centre of the paper and work out in a series of concentric rings or begin in the top left-hand corner and work in gridded rows, like knitting, from left to right, right to left. As each piece was executed, the process unfolded. Meanwhile, pens ran out of ink, paper fibres wore away, concentration wavered, and my hand slipped. This evidence of the making process took on greater significance, with process-led variations—‘mistakes’, hesitations and imperfections—remaining visible, not hidden or erased, and acting as a counter to the formal structure and systematic process. The moments when ordered precision broke down became a desirable outcome, redolent with meaning.

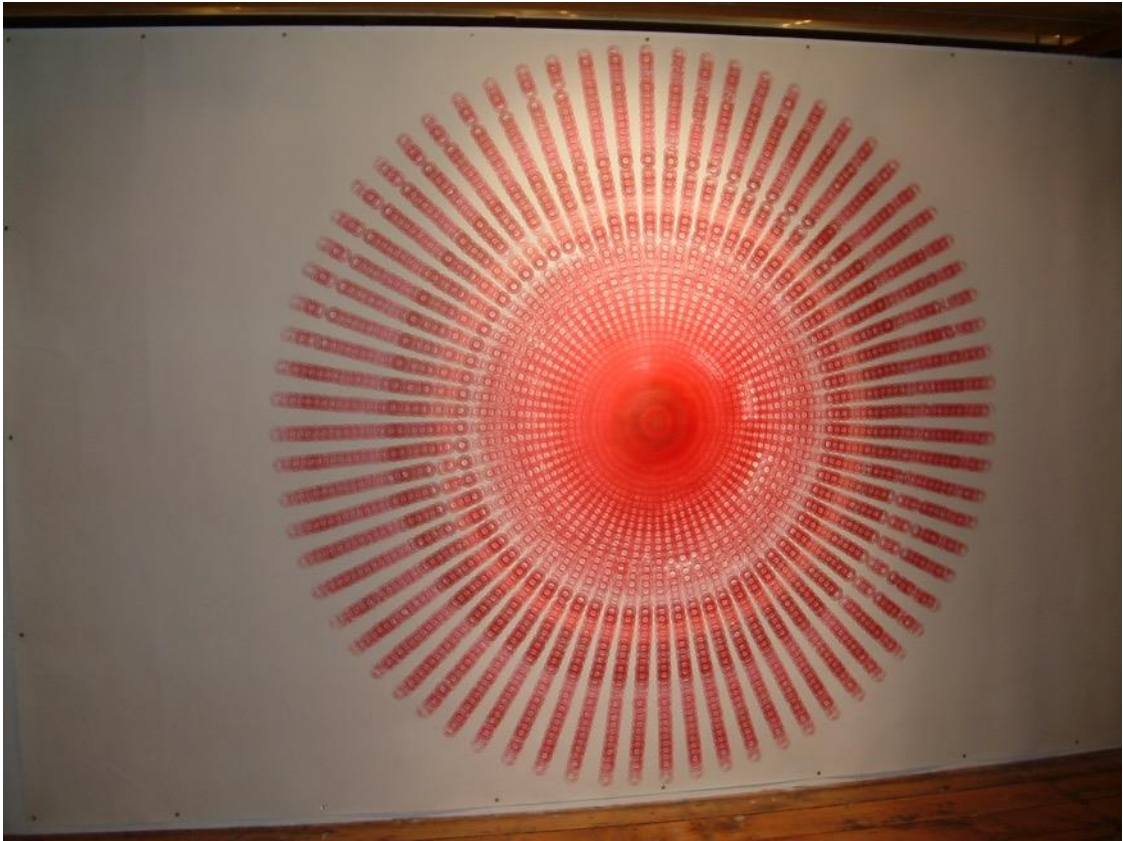


Figure 3: *Large Red Circle, 2054 Minutes* (2003). Ballpoint pen on paper, 240 x 300 cms. Installation shot, *We go round and round in the night and are consumed by fire* (2003/4). Terminal Warehouse, New York and Liverpool Biennial, curated by Neil Mulholland.

The spirograph work was begun during early motherhood when studio time was consequently constricted, and time itself became a focus of the drawings. I timed the minutes that I spent working on each drawing, so there was a 'clocking on' and 'clocking off' record of manual labour. The culmination of these timings were noted in each drawing's title. This was a period when I felt I had to account for every second, not to waste time, manifesting inner angst to remain productive and to have something tangible to show for a days' work.⁶

The expansive 'building-up' nature of this drawing process orientated me toward increased scale. Following graduation in 2001, I bought the largest roll of paper I could find at fifty metres by 250 cms; the width measurement dictating the maximum width of subsequent drawings. *Large Red Circle, 2054 Minutes* (2003) (figure 3) was the first of this series. Made with red ballpoint pens from a variety of manufacturers, the design, in conjunction with differences in the inks' tonal values, produced a subtle optical effect that was compounded by the scale of the drawing.

The standard 'biro' ink colours (red, blue, green and black) were later substituted with a pack of multi-coloured ballpoint pens from a well-known high-street stationer (WH Smith, '20 Assorted Colour Inks'), a move that sustained the practice through a further decade (2005-2015). Reminiscent of the rainbow felt-tips from my childhood, I used these ballpoint pens in the same order that they were arranged in the pack. On reflection, I am struck by biographical predispositions and the relevance of past concerns to my current art practice. Another point of conjunction between art-school orientations and childhood lies in aspects of everyday life. One series of works called *Envelope Series* (2012) for example (figure 4), made use of security-patterned postal envelopes and correction fluid as a basis for further pattern drawing. The use and transformation of everyday materials upheld the values instilled at

⁶ The process-led system meant that once a drawing was underway, I could use any available amount of time I had, be that two minutes or two hours. This way of working suited my circumstances and a daily routine evolved that consisted of dropping my children off at nursery and pre-school at 9.00 am, cycling home, rolling out the paper and working on the drawing until 11.45 am. I then rolled it back up and went to collect the youngest from nursery. After putting the children to bed at 6.30 pm, I rolled the drawing back out again and drew until late evening, thus managing between 4–6 hours of drawing time each day plus any small 'snippets' of time I snatched in-between. An 'interview' by my then 10-year-old son (2009), showing the context in which the spirograph drawings were made, can be seen on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keS_K5jtbSo

Dartington with its emphasis on non-elite art practices, while the use of a time-laden process evoked a working-class ethic of ‘work hard and make good’.⁷ The artworks expand these everyday elements into something more substantial. In this way, basic materials (envelopes, biro, correction fluid) and processes (child’s spirograph kit, colouring-in) were shifted into new territory, making the ordinary extraordinary.



Figure 4: *Envelope Series* (2012). Pencil, correction fluid and silver leaf on envelopes, dimensions variable.

At the point of enrolling for doctoral study, the spirograph drawings had reached a stage where I had begun to join shapes forming more complex kaleidoscopic structures (figure 5). I no longer used the pens in the same order that they came in the packs but made deliberate colour choices, for aesthetic or design reasons. My knowledge of the process, the materials and technique—developed over fifteen years—meant that I could predict, and plan for, particular visual outcomes. But with this knowledge came greater control. Consequently, there was a loss of spontaneity, of process-derived inconsistencies and the surprise of the unknown. I no longer made as many ‘mistakes’ and the final images were neater and more refined.

⁷ ‘Lesley’s father imported fruit and vegetables. It was sold on the docks of Liverpool, in the shipyards amongst the heaving pulleys, iron cranes and cogs of industry. Her father’s business provided the economic foundations for a North West upbringing in Lancashire with the enduring working-class ethic of work hard and make good. With this axiom of solid principles, those of order and plainness, there is a gentle nestling paradox of colourful revolution in her work’, from *The Circular Turn* (2015), Lesley Halliwell interviewed by Alice Kettle. Creative Academic Writing Course, Manchester Metropolitan University (unpublished).



Figure 5: (Left) *Beauty is the First Test, 3026 Minutes* (2014). Ballpoint pen on paper, 300 x 240 cms. *Beauty is the First Test* (touring group exhibition) with Suresh Dutt's sculpture *Isolate 3* (2012) in the foreground, Pumphouse Gallery, London, curated by Liz Cooper.

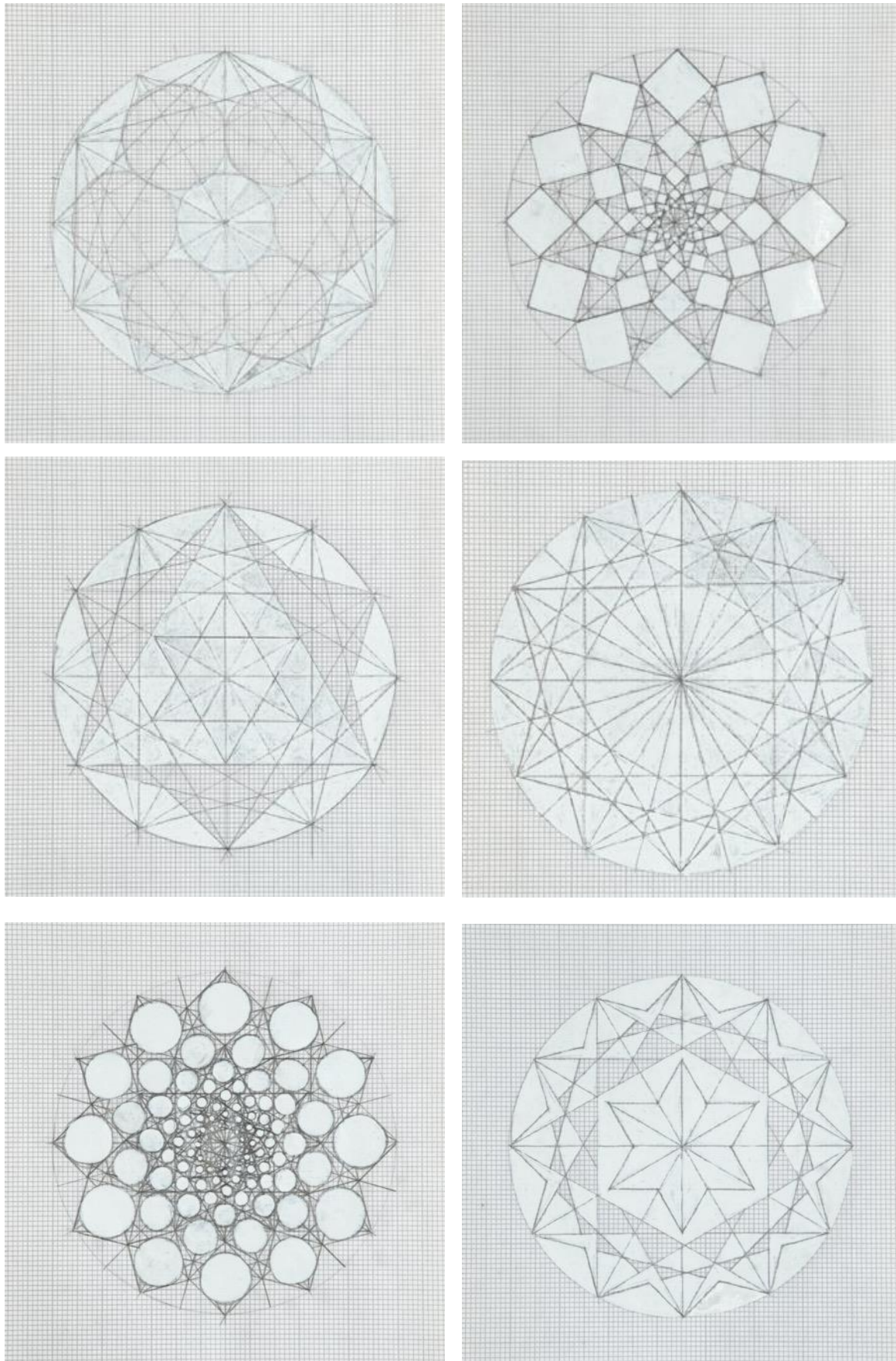


Figure 6: *Geometry Studies* (2008). Pencil and correction fluid on graph paper, 15 x 15 cms each.

My interest in geometric principles was also progressing, and I had taught myself how to construct pentagons and hexagons using a compass and ruler (figure 6). This line of enquiry reflected a growing involvement with the 'underlying' complexity the drawn surface generated and mapped. While this mapping was partially concealed from view by the overdrawing, the pencilled guidelines consciously remained part of the finished spirograph drawings. The sense of under-drawing and over-drawing, and its relationship to the visual understanding of artworks, pointed to surface as an ambiguous site requiring further investigation.

Surfacing: a point of departure

Initial doctoral studio research (2014/15) began as a continuation of my established drawing practice with plans to use the spirograph process while incorporating increasingly decorative strategies. However, given the physical demands of working with such a repetitive action, I knew that my ability to continue working with the spirograph was time limited. I needed to find a way to move forward with the work that would sustain the future of the practice. I had begun to use gilding, albeit in a restrained manner, as a form of adornment and the drawings, which had for so long been about process, were becoming more elaborate in terms of design and surface finish. An exploration of embellishment and its relationship to surface offered a new trajectory, anchored in familiar territory, but testing new ground, and specifically in relation to surface.

The first drawing I made as part of my doctoral research was *Stasis* (figure 7), a large circular motif consisting of eight shapes radiating out from a central inner circle; from these shapes, eight larger circular forms emanate. It was only after completion that I realised that I had not 'timed' the drawing process as I had in the past. This omission was because the composition was fiddly; the joins between the shapes, for example, could take several frustrating attempts to 'get right'. In the earlier spirograph drawings, the logged timings represented evidence of a steady chronological process and provided a comparison between drawings. But here, the labour involved in their making was not revealed, thus marking a shift in both my approach and intentions: no longer only about process.



Figure 7: (top) *Stasis* (2015). Ballpoint pen and gold leaf on paper, 150 x 150 cms. (middle) detail showing the gilded centre, and (bottom) detail of the indented outer rim with gilded with a jewel-like central 'dot'.

After *Stasis*, I made a drawing called *Glide* (figure 8). In both works, I added the gilding once the spirographing had been completed, meeting the definition of embellishment that Michael Carter explores in *Putting a Face on Things* (1997). ‘Embellishment’ explains Carter (1997:117), is part of a complex semantic field, a family of words that includes ‘ornamentation’, ‘decoration’ and ‘adornment’; words that all have the element of *addition* in common. The idea of adding something that is not an intrinsic part of the structure is explored by Carter through Derrida’s notion of the ‘supplemental’, as either compensating for a deficiency or functioning as an ‘optional extra’. The gilded sections of *Stasis* and *Glide* followed Derrida’s notion of embellishment as an addition, even if that addition completed and became integral to the final work.

These ‘additions’ also had a profound effect on the structural groundwork, refusing to obey the tame nature of embellishment. The silver-leaf six-fold rosette of *Glide* appears to alternate between floating ‘above’ and then ‘below’ the spirograph motifs. The gilded central area of *Stasis* gives the sense of ‘holding’ the image in place and preventing any sense of rotational movement. At the same time, the ability of the gilding to reflect light complicates the perception of the surface, either pushing it outwards into the space of the viewer or flattening it in such a way that it appears to sit ‘behind’ the inked shapes. These sensations enhance the sense of depth beyond underdrawn/overdrawn layers to planes that oscillate between a sense of moving forward and receding.

While embellishment proceeded by adding something to the surface, and the gilding felt like an application to the upper-most surface, the resultant visual experience denied a simple surface skin encounter. Nevertheless, the process of overlaying felt more decorative than, for example, other experiments where the surface was debossed by an ink-less metal ballpoint nib, even though both methods embellished the surface. This awareness was important to the research because it was the point at which I began to think about the interactions between layers rather than a straightforward under-over dichotomy; even at this early stage of doctoral study, assumptions and theories about surface were being challenged and complexified through practice.



Figure 8: *Glide* (2016). Ballpoint pen and silver leaf on paper, 150 x 150 cms.

When I began the research, I knew that I wanted to learn more about pattern construction and had been grappling with the tension between structure, surface and process for some time. Opportunely, significant developments in the field of ‘surface studies’, a term coined by Rebecca Coleman and Liz Oakley-Brown (2017), have unfolded during the period of doctoral study, and surface is currently emerging as a central topic within a diverse range of academic disciplines. Surface has been the focus of a number of inter-disciplinary academic conferences, notably *Re-visiting Surface* (2015) and *Apparition: the (im)materiality of modern surface* (2017)⁸ as well as exhibitions.⁹ The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2017:99) noted:

The last few years have seen a remarkable revival of interest in surfaces, in my own discipline of social anthropology to be sure, but also in human geography, architecture and design, and in studies of literary, visual and material culture. [...] this revival appears to have issued from multiple disciplinary sources more or less spontaneously, and at much the same time.

This scholarly turn to surface includes anthropology (Ingold, 2017; Anusas and Simonetti, 2020), history (Amato, 2013), screen and media studies (Friedberg, 2006; Bruno, 2014), design (Adamson and Kelley, 2013), literary studies and sociology (Coleman and Oakley-Brown, 2017), landscape (MacFarlane, 2019), architecture (Chatterjee, 2009) and fashion (Parikka, 2018; Lee, 2020). Recent scholarly contributions to the field include *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (2006) by film and media theorist Anne Friedberg. Using windows and screens as a visual metaphor, Friedberg explores the virtual world where ‘multiple windows coexist and overlap’, with a focus on the dissolution of screen surface into a virtual plane. Similarly, Guiliana Bruno’s monograph *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (2014) concentrates on how the space of material relations manifest themselves on the surface of different media.

⁸ *Re-Visiting Surface*, conference held at the National Gallery, Oslo, 13th November 2015; *Apparition: The (Im)materiality of the modern surface*, conference held at De Montford University, Leicester, 8th March 2018.

⁹ Exhibitions that explored the techno-human interface include *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* (MIT Visual Arts Centre, 2006); *Sk-Interfaces* (FACT Liverpool, 2008). Other notable ‘surface’ exhibitions include *Skin: Surface, Substance and Design* (Smithsonian Design Museum, 2002); *Surface Matters* (National Design and Craft Gallery, 2019) and *Deep Surface: Ornament and Pattern* (CAM Raleigh, 2012).

Mike Anusas and Cristián Simonetti take an anthropological approach to ‘working with and knowing surfaces’ in their edited volume, *Surfaces: Transformations of Body, Materials and Earth* (2020). Building on Tim Ingold’s observation of the tendency to conflate superficiality with ‘surface understanding and knowledge with in-depth’, Anusas and Simonetti are ‘much less concerned with “what are surfaces”’ (Forsyth et al. 2013:1013) and more interested in what surfaces can *do* and *how* they come about in social life’ (2020:10). Unlike Anusas and Simonetti’s human-centred approach Yeseung Lee, in her edited volume *Surface and Apparition: The Immateriality of Modern Surface* (2020) focuses on materials, practice and process. Lee seeks to reveal ‘the type of knowledge that can only be produced (...) in the mingling of making and thinking’ (2020:2), including some visual-led contributions by practitioners.

Christa Robbins drew attention to the historical relationship of artists with surface, describing surface as a ‘vacillating plane, receding and materializing throughout the history of art, often at the centre of some of its most ideological and teleological concerns’ (2002). This ‘timely re-surfacing’ (MacFarlane, 2019) within current discourses validated my preoccupation with the material and conceptual understanding of surface. Yet, these discussions remained primarily theoretical even though, as noted by critic and writer Matthew Bowman, surface is ‘an inescapable limit of painting, whether it is consciously dealt with or not’ (2017:1). There seemed to be a gap in exploring surface as grounded and tested in the discipline of making where my competencies could contribute most strongly.

An overview of the depth of surface

My exploration of literature around surface took Leon Battista Alberti’s concept of the ‘open window’ framing for perspectival space as its starting point (1972:54). From the Renaissance notion of the window, ideas about surface can be traced through representational painting and its association with illusion and depth, into the modern period where surface is more commonly understood in terms of medium specificity and flatness. Alberti’s ideas concerning single point perspective remained a defining concept for later theoretical concerns and have significantly informed my approach. Both during the Renaissance period and afterward, linear perspective was challenged on many fronts. The debate about the perspectival paradigm is

nanced and complex; in this thesis, I have drawn attention to some of the anomalies, reflecting how artists of this period played with and challenged established scopic regimes (Jay, 1988). The unfolding research examines the relationship between the surface and the picture plane, looking specifically at ways they intersect or are challenged.

A study trip to The British School at Rome (2019) provided reminders of the European tradition of painting with its abundance of perspectival illusions and trompe l'œil realism. The recession of surface in pictorial art, which peaked during the Renaissance period, was epitomised by works of art such as the frescos in Villa Farnesina, Rome. Designed and built by Baldassare Peruzzi (1506-1510) for Agostino Chigi, a wealthy Italian banker and treasurer of Pope Julius II, the villa contains numerous commissioned frescos by artists such as Raphael, Sebastiano del Piombo, Giulio Romano and Il Sodoma. At first floor level, Peruzzi himself painted the main *salone* with trompe-l'œil frescoes of a grand open 'loggia' with a city and countryside view beyond (figure 9, left). Here, the gaze does not linger on the material surface but passes through; surface 'is that part of the painting that we see through, to get at subject matter, narration and figuration' (Robbins, 2002). Thus, when the priority was to create a spatial or material illusion, as in the opulent drapes (figure 9, right), the role of the surface was to support that illusion.

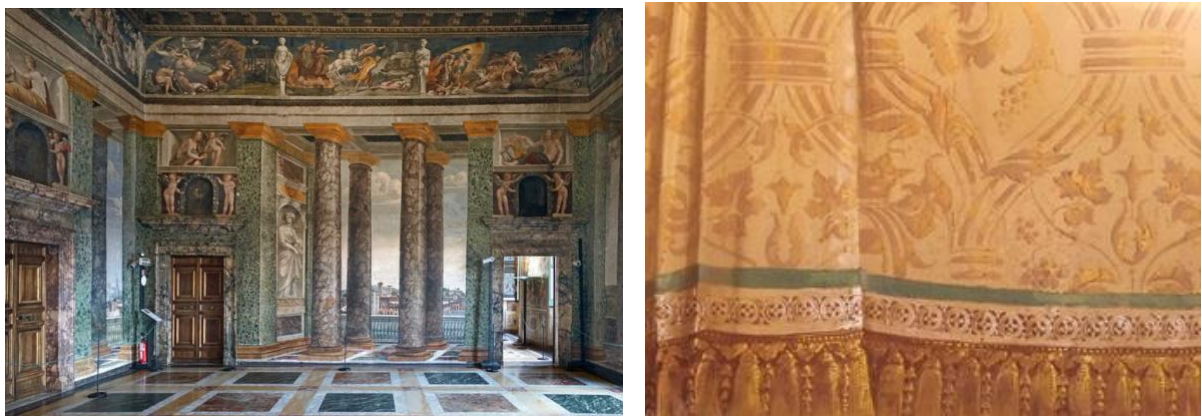


Figure 9: (Left) Perspectives Hall, Villa Farnesina, Trastevere, Rome painted by Baldassare Peruzzi (c 1506-1510). (Right) Detail of trompe l'œil painted curtains, Villa Farnesina.

Alberti's iconic treatise *Della Pictura*, written in 1435, outlined methods of translating three-dimensional space on to a two-dimensional flat support through the use of linear

perspective. He states (1972:54), '[f]irst of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen'. Central to this concept was the picture plane. In representational painting, the picture plane is the point at which reality stops. It is the interface between the real space and the imaginary space of the painting, described succinctly by artist Donal Moloney (2015:37) as 'an imaginary, vertical, transparent window through which we see into the space depicted by a painting'. Erwin Panofsky, who described perspective 'as a historically specific system of spatial representation' (cited in Friedberg, 2006:42) claimed that a representational image 'requires that we negate a material surface and reinterpret it as non-material plane' (Panofsky, 1927 cited in Wachtel, 1995:52). In other words, it is a surface that we imagine we look *through* rather than look *at*—a 'transparent plane through which we are meant to believe that we are looking into space, even if that space is still bounded on all sides' (Panofsky, 1991:55). Anne Friedberg, in *The Virtual Window* (2006:34), uses *St. Jerome in His Study* (1475) by Antonella da Messina as an example of the picture plane as an open window with the 'view' framed by the stone architrave (figure 10). Here, Messina teases the viewer by painting another window on the rear left wall with a view beyond—producing a picture plane within a picture plane; just one of many examples of Renaissance artists knowingly pushing the boundaries.

In contrast to the perspectival paradigm, formalist theory, as set out by Clement Greenberg in 'Modernist Painting' (1961), claimed that a painting is a flat object and that in the interests of 'truth' it should not pretend to be other than flat. With no pretence to three dimensions, the modern era was increasingly characterised by greater attention to the physical surface. Here, all the elements of the painting converged on the picture plane itself, as described thus by Greenberg in 'Toward a New Laocoon' (1940, in O'Brian, 1986:35):

The picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas; where they lie side by side or interlocked or transparently imposed upon one another.

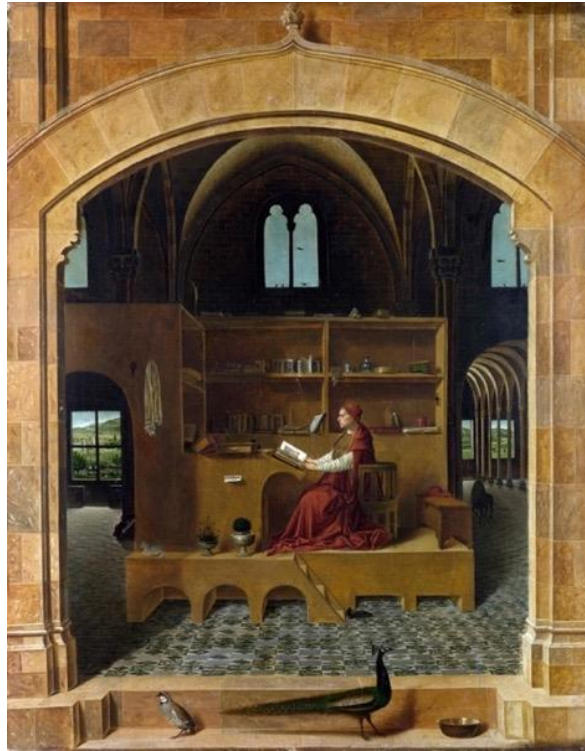


Figure 10: Antonella da Messina (1475) *St. Jerome in His Study*. Oil on wood, 45.7x36.2 cms. The National Gallery, London.



Figure 11: Helen Frankenthaler (1963) *Canal*. Acrylic on canvas, 208.3 x 146.1 cms Guggenheim Museum.

Greenberg's conflation of the surface and the picture plane is evident in the soak-stained canvases of Helen Frankenthaler (figure 11), whose work is one exemplar of this modern flatness. Creating a surface that is impossible to 'hole through', the pigment is drawn down by the absorbency of the raw canvas, leaving very little body of paint on the surface. 'Fusing foreground and background, color and plane' (Guggenheim, no date) the paint and the painting's support merge with the picture plane. The rejection of the Renaissance window concept of painting, culminating in the work of early to mid-twentieth century artists, meant 'that surface was no longer something that we look *past* but instead turned into something we look *at*' (Bowman, 2017:1).¹⁰ In this scenario, some said 'the picture plane is the same as the actual physical surface of the painting' (Tate Gallery, no date), marking the point of contact between the real space occupied by the viewer and the illusionistic space within the painting. But although there are times when picture plane and material surface coincide, or when there are slippages between the two, the picture plane remains a conceptual imposition.

In artworks made after the 1950s, the picture plane establishes a more complex relationship between viewer and image. Until this point, the picture plane represented a view into a world corresponding with the 'erect human posture' and a relationship to a stable horizon line. In 1972, Leo Steinberg coined the term 'flatbed picture plane' to describe artworks typified by Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet. These images 'no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals' such as table-tops, maps, floors or notice-boards. Described by Dunning in, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting* (1991:333) as having a 'pluralist spatial orientation', Steinberg's flatbed picture plane resisted a single viewing position. Like an aerial view, depth was flattened once again. As the postmodern era continued, the flattened surface expanded outwards, beyond the picture plane, and into the space of the viewer. Here, 'surface exceeds its frame and consumes the world around it' (Robbins, 2002) as demonstrated in the all outward mirrored

¹⁰ For a more in-depth analysis of the modernist picture plane see Jason Hoelscher's essay, 'Surface Tension: The Late Modernist Picture Plane as Internally Inconsistent Interface' (2013a). Here, Hoelscher argues that the conceptual edifice of late Modernist painting, ie medium specificity, flatness and the dichotomy between present-ness and presence, is 'riddled with internal inconsistencies' (2013a:1). His paper is based on the premise that, rather than thinking of modernism as medium specific, it should be viewed as surface specific.

cubes of Robert Morris or the reflective surfaces of Gerhard Richter's *Six Grey Mirrors* (2003) (figure 12). Thus, the postmodern surface expanded outwards, deflecting its inner depth.



Figure 12: (Top) Robert Morris (1965, reconstructed 1971) *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*. Mirror, glass and wood. Tate, London. (Bottom) Gerhard Richter (2003) *Six Grey Mirrors*. Glass covered with grey enamel and steel, 400 x 400 x 50 cm. Courtesy of Dia Art Foundation.

The problem with surface

If we look at the etymology of the word surface, we see that *sur* means over, above, and beyond, while *face* comes from the Latin *facies*, meaning appearance, form or countenance. 'Face' is also related to *facere*, 'to make'. Given that my research is practice-based, the idea that 'surface' relates to both seeing and making, and embodies materiality as well as action, resonated with me. The commonly held meaning of surface refers to the 'outermost boundary or outside part of something' (Collins Dictionary, no date). The assumption that the surface is 'above' prevents further questioning of what surface is and where it lies. Residual layers, for example, influence that which remains 'on top' while the presence of preparatory layers suggests depth. If these underlayers are not visible, is their presence nevertheless sensed?

In her keynote paper at the conference *Re-visiting Surface* (2015), Patricia Berman spoke of questioning familiar suppositions about surface, of 'making strange a surface we thought we knew'. The conference provided my investigation with framing debates, helping to scope the subject of surface. Ella Hendriks and Agnes Brokerhof, for example, in 'Valuing Van Gogh's surface colours', analysed the colour changes of van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* (1888) drawing attention to surface deterioration. Matthew Bowman's conference paper 'Frontality/Facingness: The Surface Beyond Flatness' also chimed with my growing understanding of moving beyond the simple seen/unseen dichotomy. The conference set the scene for my unfolding enquiry and consolidated questions such as:

- What lies behind the surface?
- Where does the surface of an artwork start and stop?
- Are surface effects necessarily visible?
- What is the significance of the space between artwork and viewer and should this be considered a part of the surface?

The limitations of the inner/outer dichotomy quickly unravelled once I raised the 'what', 'where' and 'how' of surface. Yet, it is still common to conceptualise surface as a thin skin that corresponds with the picture plane. In the forward to the exhibition catalogue *Skin*:

Surface, Substance and Design (2002), curator Ellen Lupton states that, '[e]very object has a skin, thick or thin, smooth or rough, porous or impermeable, the skin is the line between a hidden interior and an exterior we experience'. Although Lupton's discussion refers specifically to the intimate interface between technology and the living body, her use of the term 'envelope' to describe surface resonates with the view of social anthropologist Petra Tjitske Kalshoven. Kalshoven claims that '[s]urface matters' because it defines 'volume, creating shapes in what would otherwise be a cognitively confusing mass of matter' (2013).¹¹ In other words, an envelope is necessary because the surface delimits matter in space. This exterior skin is often held to be of lesser consequence than deeper or more substantive aspects of artworks and objects. Design historians Glenn Adamson and Victoria Kelley, in *Surface Tensions – Surface, finish and the meaning of Objects*, challenge the resulting response that 'commentators rush past the surface in their hurry to excavate more complex inner truths' (2013:1).

In 2018, I took part in a 'Knowledge from the Inside' symposium at Aberdeen University, an interdisciplinary exploration of 'reverie' led by Tim Ingold.¹² Here, as in much of Ingold's writing, the 'assumption that the true essence of things and persons is to be found deep inside them, in an inner core that can be reached only by breaking open the external appearance behind which it hides' was challenged (2017:99). A heated (but good-humoured) debate between Ingold and the psychologist Eystein Våpenstad arose during the plenary session (2018).¹³ Ingold brazenly dismissed the idea of the unconscious to ask, what if there is nothing underneath? What if surfaces are the real sites for the generation of meaning? This debate reveals much about current attitudes to surface. The notion of surfaces that cover, hide or veil has led to a tendency to distrust surfaces and the meanings that they convey, equating surface with connotations of 'superficial'. This discourse is particularly pertinent to

¹¹ Kalshoven, P. T. (2013) 'Creating Lifelikeness: surfaces on which to play hide and seek.' Paper presented at *Surfaces: contesting boundaries between materials, mind and body*. Manchester, 5-12 August.

¹² *Knowing From the Inside: Anthropology, Art, Architecture and Design* (or KFI for short); a 5-year project funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant held by Professor Tim Ingold, Aberdeen University (June 2013-May 2018). <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/research/kfi/>. I contributed a paper, *At the Coal Face: A practitioner's perspective*, to a debate on 'making' during the 'Reverie Symposium', 27 April 2018, convened by Amanda Ravetz, with support from Tilo Reifenstein.

¹³ Session 1 Psychoanalysis / Psychology, Eystein Victor Våpenstad 'Send me the pillow—the one that you dream on' associate professor at VID Specialized University, Oslo and a child and adult psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist and a member of the Norwegian Psychoanalytical Society.

the association of surface with the decorative. Anuradha Chatterjee's writings on architecture (2009:68-97) explore in more detail the 'veneer' of decoration. Through John Ruskin's theory of the adorned wall veil, Chatterjee argues that ornamentation is a plane positioned parallel to, yet outside of, the structural system. It was technical advancements within architecture that proved pivotal in challenging this surface/structure dichotomy. Alicia Imperiale, in her essay 'Digital Skins' (in Lupton, 2002:54-63) argues that the ubiquity of digital technology augments attention to surface. She suggests that 'there has been a movement away from dialectical relationships, from the opposition between surface and depth, in favour of an awareness of the oscillating movement from one into the other' (2002:55). Imperiale bases her position on the metaphor of the living body; 'a continuous surface from inside to out' (2002:55). These arguments posit that surface and structure are about mutually supporting relationships rather than an opposition. What lies 'underneath' for example, directly affects what is on top; an idea that began to galvanise my understanding that surface cannot be separated into layers.

The interdisciplinary conference, *Apparition: the (im)materiality of modern surface* (2017) focused on the contemporary preoccupation with surface. In particular, it centered on 'its dissolution, disintegration or efflorescence, accentuating the surface's function of mediation or passage, rather than that of separation or boundary' (De Montford University, 2018). James Turrell's light architecture, for example, where surface evaporates epitomises the blurring of the material and immaterial surface. I presented a paper at the conference that looked specifically at the area between the multivalent surface and the viewer. Here, the effects of light and reflectivity can radically alter what is perceived. The essence of my presentation centred around a series of questions such as, should the space between object and viewer (the interface, a point where two systems meet and interact) be considered a surface in its own right? Since the perception is of the surface, why is this space said to lie above it? Through this practice-based enquiry, I probed further and asked whether the spatialisation of surface is a theoretical concept, a linguistic metaphor, or even something that stands in the way of deeper understanding.

Methodology, research aims and methods

Through regularly performed studio activities, experienced both consciously and intuitively, my methodological approach is grounded in my Arts practice. In *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2006) Barrett and Bolt describe how the notion of intuitive knowledge is closely related to what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'logic of practice' or of being *in-the-game* (1990). However, while my studio explorations may be called 'experiments' or 'tests', this should not be confused with a scientific method which uses a systemised process to select the activity and evaluate the results. On the contrary, my studio explorations were not pre-determined but emerged according to 'specific demands of action and movement in time' (Bourdieu, 1990 in Barrett and Bolt, 2007:4). The strength of practice-based methodology is in this subjective dimension; a qualitative approach that encourages the exploration of ideas through the physicality of materials and embodied encounters.

My practice-based methodology can be aligned with 'theoretical sampling' in grounded theory. Anselm Strauss (1987) writes that this is 'a means whereby the analyst decides on analytic grounds what data to collect next and where to find them' with 'the emerging theory control[ing] the process throughout' (in Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2007:28). However, practice-based research addresses the systemic nature of the theoretical sampling process by 'knocking at the text' and ultimately discovering the poetics, or 'root metaphors' of the problem (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2007:86-92). The term 'knocking at the text' comes from hermeneutics where the 'active' text summons the reader to ask questions of it, particularly about what is hidden. Reading 'between-the-lines', and analysing the research tangentially, offers the potential to identify and draw out new understandings and describes my own process. For me, *being-in-the-game* facilitated responsive action that was necessarily emergent and 'subject to repeated adjustment, rather than remaining fixed throughout the process of the enquiry' (Barrett and Bolt, 2007:6). In this way, I negotiated a rhizomatic route through the investigation, bounded by the original aims and research question—aims that were open rather than prescriptive and a route which was intuitive. While practice-based methods have parallels in other methodologies, practice invites exploration through tacit and

embodied encounters that are continually held in check by real-world actualisations that retain the organic internal consistency, and a regard for the whole.

The challenge of practice-based research methodology is its ability to account for subjective thought and action (Grenfell and James, 1998:1 in Barrett and Bolt, 2007:5, and Liggett, S. 2020:9) while maintaining objective academic rigour.¹⁴ A ‘findings’ section at the end of each thematic chapter brought together, in a more analytical manner, understandings about surface gleaned from practice and theory. The robustness of my research was also ‘tested’ through public exhibitions, talks, conference papers and peer-reviewed publications at regular intervals throughout the PhD enquiry.

Initially, contextual and theoretical research was sourced by scoping the field where I identified key literature and theorists, thus providing an overview of surface. Thematic exhibitions, journal articles, reviews and unpublished research from conferences provided another research layer, selected to either unsettle, confirm or contrast with my practice-based research. My choice of artists and thinkers were deliberately broad. Positioning my artworks in relation to other fields, cultural contexts and eras revealed particular characteristics of my practice and research findings. This synthesis of ideas also exposed a range of surface encounters that cut across time and space. Such breadth was necessary for the enquiry’s validity and rigour of the conclusions drawn.

Artworks developed in the studio provided a form of enquiry that I further developed through other forms of experiential art practice including Islamic geometric drawing, Celtic design, South Indian *kōlam* and medieval illumination. I selected these creative practices because they offered practical experiences of pattern making outside my inherited drawing traditions while contributing to my skillset and understandings of geometric form. The

¹⁴ I use ‘rigour’ here to refer to the critical robustness inherent in the practice-based research process. For further debates on the challenges of rigour within a creative enquiry see Biggs, M. and Büchler, D. (2007) ‘Rigour and Practice-based Research.’ *Design Issues*, 23(3), pp. 62-69 and Liggett, S. (2020) ‘Positioning the Arts in the Research Process: Perspectives from Higher Education.’ In Earnshaw, R., Liggett, S. et al. (2020) *Technology, Design and the Arts—Opportunities and Challenges*. Switzerland: Springer Open, pp.9-24.

criteria I used for selection were subject area (where I identified a gap in my knowledge and/or skill), expertise (where teaching was provided by experts in the field at recognised institutions) and finally, financial and geographical accessibility.

At the start of my research, I had four key aims:

1. To bring critical understanding to artworks from my established practice and works made in the course of the doctoral study.
2. To evaluate the legacy and associated assumptions of the surface/structure dichotomy as presented in cultural art practices.
3. To apply this understanding in the broader sphere of the uses and value of surface in contemporary art.
4. To produce a new reading of surface.

The research was also prompted as a means to move my practice forward, beyond the spirograph as a mark-making tool. Because I identify as a painter, it was important to integrate painting back within an expanded practice.¹⁵

A key focus at the beginning of the research was the relationship between surface and structure. However, initial explorations of other cultural traditions drew attention to the limitations of this trajectory. Surface was not merely the physical phenomenon that I had at first assumed. The original aims, therefore, were extended to include the need to bring greater understanding of the immaterial surface, such as:

- how reflective materials challenge where surface starts and stops
- how time manifests on the surface of an artwork
- how light and body position alter the viewer's experience of surface
- the relationship between the material and immaterial surface

These more specific foci evolved through a process of making and reflecting on that making.

My methods used during the doctoral research are categorised here into five main areas.

¹⁵ For further information on the expanded field of painting, see Fares, G. (2004) 'Painting in the Expanded Field.' *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts*, 7(2) New York: Trivium Publications and Krauss, R. (1979) 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field.' *October*, 8 (Spring) pp. 30-44.

i. Continuing studio practice

As an established practitioner, my primary research method, guided by existing understandings and established ways of working, was practice. Studio practice offered a unique and individual perspective to my research, enabling a freer exploration of the questions posed by surface ‘through the imaginative possibilities opened up by material realisation’ (Rust and Mottram, 2007:63). A series of studio explorations constituted the dominant strategy for my investigations. It was a working method that utilised what Bridget Riley refers to as ‘conscious intuition’—a process of artistic research that combines a rational approach to making with playful experimentation. I explored a range of materials and techniques, not bound by prediction of where these would lead or whether the different lines of enquiry would necessarily link up. The development of new artworks were central to the investigation, leading my decision making and guiding the direction of the research.

I deliberately disrupted existing ways of working by introducing new materials and processes to the practice such as collage, assemblage with found components outside of paper and mark-making material, video work and book art. This broader exploration enabled a more extensive investigation of the concept of surface as played out in pattern, structure and substructure, form and finish. My studio research developed as a series of exploratory experiments that appeared at the time to be fragmented and instinctive. Thus, navigating a rhizomatic route through ‘the thicket’ (Deleuze and Guittari, 1987:21) complicated the arrival at what Yeseung Lee calls ‘settled knowledge’ (2016:1), yet enriched the outcomes of the practice in ways that I could not have envisaged. Artist and lecturer Sally Morgan championed the value of art and design as pure and applied research.¹⁶ Research through the creative arts argued Morgan (2019), ‘takes us to a new place,’ one that could not be reached through the written word alone. Morgan used the term ‘emotional intelligence’ (ITP Symposium, 2019:1min 50) to describe the results of artistic exploration. This is the area of research that is most difficult to articulate, where the thinking is ‘*embodied in the artefact*, where the goal is not primarily communicable knowledge’. Thus, working with practical

¹⁶ Sally Morgan is Professor of Fine Arts, Massey University, New Zealand (2012-date) and former course leader (‘Art and Design in a Social Context’) at Dartington College of Arts.

methods is 'not about knowing more, but knowing differently' (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2015:429) and this is where, as a practitioner, my contribution could be made most strongly.

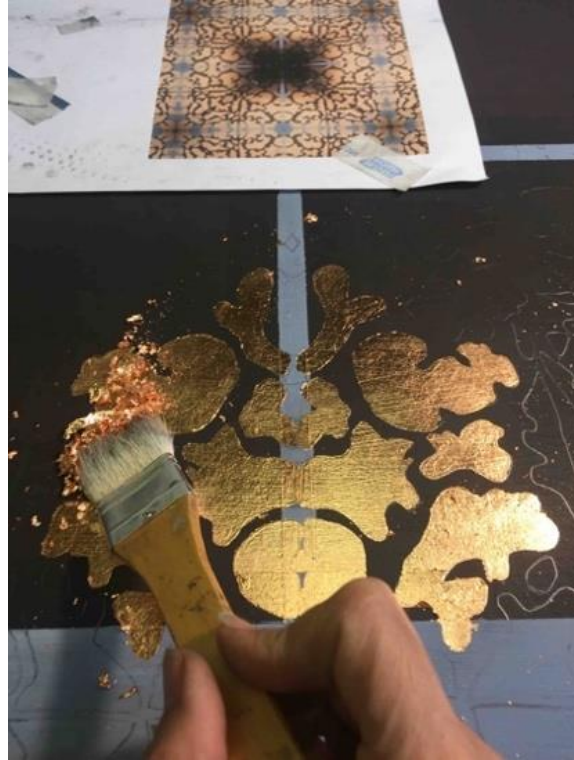


Figure 13: Studio explorations and work in progress. (Top left) gesso on ice-cream wafers (2015), (top right) gilding with copper leaf (2019) and (bottom left and right) large leaf stencil (2017).

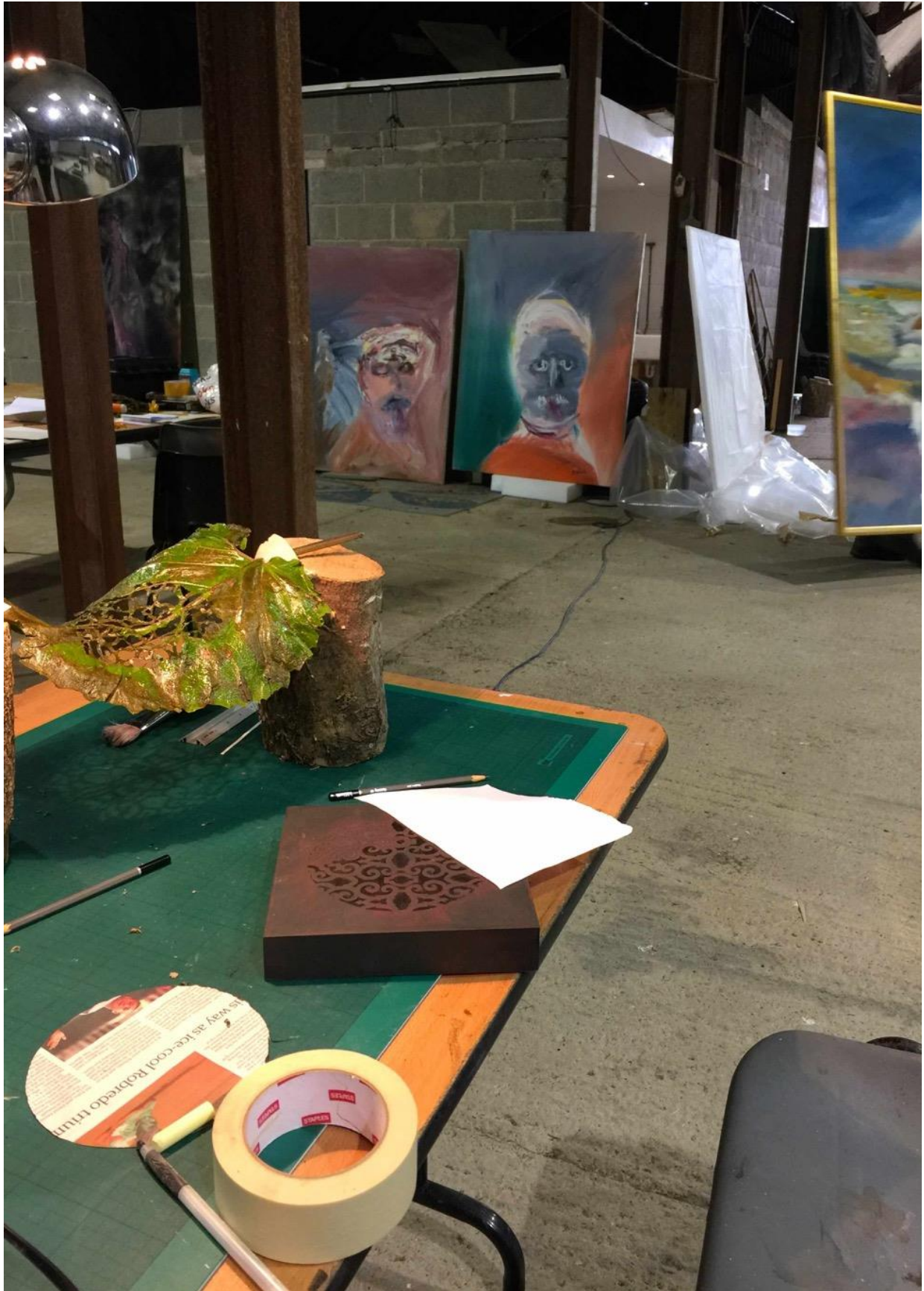


Figure 14: Temporary studio space in the Grain Barn at the Sidney Nolan Trust, Artists' Camp 2017 (including three paintings in the background by the artist Sidney Nolan in transit for a conservation review)

During the doctoral research, I also took part in three week-long Artists' Camp residencies, *Practice and Research in Action* 2017, 2018 and 2019, at the Sidney Nolan Trust, Powys (see Appendix D). Echoing the spirit of the Sydney Artists' Camps of more than a century ago, and of Sidney Nolan's vision for The Rodd, these 'camps' provided time and the space beyond the academic environment to:

- develop either individual or collaborative bodies of artworks
- work together in a shared studio space
- exchange knowledge, processes and skills with artists working across different media
- share work in progress with the public

With a temporary studio set up in the old grain barn, the retreats provided me with a prolonged period of studio time away from the constraints of family commitments, and the opportunity for full immersion in the making process. Exposure to new influences, people, practices and experiencing collaborative ways of working all fed into my practice as a consequence. Aslaug Nyrnes, Professor at Bergen University College, describes this as 'lighting from the side', quoting the French philosopher Michel Foucault 'that it is not always climbing the highest peak that will give you the most interesting view. On the contrary, light from the side will be the most alive and life giving' (2006:7). I found the camps particularly productive experiences, and each one led to a significant development in my practice.

ii. Workshop explorations

A related type of practical research also supported my studio practice. Through a series of skill development workshops, I explored beyond the limitations of my own training. Practical investigations focused on pattern-generating systems from different cultural traditions, aiming at an embodied understanding of other practices through doing. Between 2014 and 2016, I undertook three intensive courses:

- *The Art of Islamic Pattern*: Istanbul Design Centre, Turkey, led by Richard Henry and Adam Williamson from The School of Islamic Pattern, London. Classes focused on the construction of geometric and biomorphic designs using a compass and ruler. Site

visits contextualised the design tradition, the history and social role of Islamic art.¹⁷ (See Appendix A for additional visual information).

- *Celtic Art and the Imagination*: The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London led by Adam Tetlow. Classes focused on the construction of Celtic knots, keys and spirals, with the introduction of 'obstacles' and 'tilted' compositions.¹⁸ (See Appendix B).
- *Medieval Manuscript Illumination*: The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, led by Helen White. Classes focused on the application of a range of traditional gilding techniques and materials, such as gesso gilding, loose-leaf and liquid gold, as well as working at a miniature scale.¹⁹ (See Appendix C).

I set aside familiar ways of working to explore different pattern generating systems. Adam Tetlow described how ancient works have pattern systems embedded within them and that it is through 'the practice of an art that its logic is revealed' (2013:22). The research exposed certain commonalities, notably the circle and square as core forms. Working on a small scale made me conscious of breath and control.



Figure 15: Biomorphic drawing class (2015), Rüstem Paşa Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey, led by Adam Williamson.

To understand how to draw intricate patterns without using measuring tools, such as a ruler or compass, I also undertook ten weeks of self-directed research on Southern Indian *kōlams*. My explorations included the deconstruction and reconstruction of *kōlam* designs culminating in a live drawing performance and video. Momentarily inhabiting different

¹⁷ Istanbul Design Centre, Turkey, 19-22 October 2015. Both Richard Henry and Adam Williamson are graduates of the Prince's School of Traditional Arts and continue the lineage of ensuring the continuation of 'the traditional arts as living, contemporary practices' (PSTA, no date). One of the characteristics of a PSTA education is that understanding and knowledge come through the experience of practice and the school continues to promote the application of traditional arts and skills.

¹⁸ *Celtic Art and the Imagination* took place on consecutive Saturdays, between 27 February –19 March 2016

¹⁹ *Medieval Manuscript Illumination*, Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London, 22-26 August 2016.

graphic traditions helped to reveal different bodily relationships to surface, their various rhythms and embodied gestures. This physical understanding is what Tetlow referred to as ‘experimental archaeology’; trying to get into the headspace of alternative pattern-making minds, which in turn, exposes our own inherited value systems.²⁰ Davin Heckman’s interpretation of becoming, as influences rather than resemblances (2002:online), and Simon O’Sullivan’s objects of encounter/recognition (2006:1) helped articulate my approach to, and understandings gleaned from, the cultural research (discussed further on page 181). To avoid staying too close to the source or appropriating particular designs outside of their original context, I was mindful of how I used the things learnt from the *kōlam* studies and the cross-cultural explorations cited above. Therefore, I focused on generational processes rather than particular appearances, imagery or motifs.²¹

iii. Exhibition work

Exhibitions were not only an opportunity to disseminate new understandings to an audience, but a critical testing ground employed at regular intervals throughout the doctoral study.

Key solo exhibitions included:

- *(Re)configured*, 14-17 February 2017, Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester School of Art. I tested four bodies of artworks in various groupings during the exhibition using different arrangements and placements, including walls, floor, integral shelf and tabletop.
- *Tilted Plane*, 2 February-21 April 2018, Alexandria Library, Manchester, curated by Elizabeth Kwant. I explored interfaces between audience and artwork and tested vertical and horizontal display planes. Artworks angled like pages of a book encouraged ‘conversations’ between images, highlighting the viewer’s relationship to the gallery context, the image and page.

²⁰ ‘One of the main forms of experiential archaeology is the creation of copies of historical structures using only historically accurate technologies. This is sometimes known as reconstruction archaeology. However, reconstruction implies a replica of the past, when it is just a construction of one person’s idea of the past; the more archaeologically correct term is a *working construction of the past*’ (Wikipedia: no date).

²¹ I acknowledge that there is a larger discussion within the anthropology of art on cultural appropriation. For further information, see Schneider, A (1996) ‘Uneasy Relationships: Contemporary Artists and Anthropology.’ *Journal of Material Culture* and, for a broader range of debates and essays, Schneider, A and Wright, C (ed). (2010) ‘Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice’

- *In Praise of Shadows*, 11 April-30 May 2019, Made in Wolves Gallery, University of Wolverhampton, curated by Laura Onions. The exhibition brought together paintings, drawings, artists' books and a video projection. The artworks selected for this exhibition investigated the effects of light.



Figure 16: Photographic stills from 'In Conversation' with curator Laura Onions, part of ArtsFest 2019 and accompanying the exhibition *In Praise of Shadows*, Made in Wolves Gallery, Wolverhampton School of Art.
Photo credit: Tod Jones.

Other group exhibitions included: *Compression Culture*, Vertical Gallery, Manchester (26 November 2015– 15 January 2016), *Post-Residency Event*, 70 Oxford Road, Manchester (26 November 2018) and *Practice and Research in Action*, Sidney Nolan Trust (30 June 2018). I used these exhibition opportunities to test display orientations, lighting and thematic configurations, as well as their interactive audience response.²² The public domain enabled different ‘conversations’ between the artworks themselves as well as between me and the public in talks, interviews and presentations.²³

iv. Exploring the work and ideas of others

Seeking to broaden my understanding of surface by looking beyond my practice, I examined the work of other contemporary artists. This research included Maxine Bristow (component pieces), Jane Harris (metallic paints, lustre and symmetry), Richard Wright (gold leaf wall works and light) and Zarah Hussain (Islamic geometry). These artists approach their practices with a distinct sense of purpose, be that an exploration of repetition and labour (Bristow), of identity (Hussain), the balance of form (Harris) or as architectural intervention (Wright). For some of the artists, the use of new technologies features strongly while others, such as Bristow and Wright, rely on labour-intensive processes. Not all these artists explore surface directly (or intentionally), but there is something within their work that inspires, confirms or offers an alternative perspective useful for conceptualising surface.

Within the Western tradition, historical references include the paintings of Antonella da Messina, Baldassare Peruzzi, Hans Holbein and Jean Metzinger, works which demonstrate a range of perspectival techniques. I have drawn on Vincent van Gogh for colour changes revealed by conservation research, Robert Rauschenberg for palimpsest and the flatbed picture plane and, for further understandings on light and shadow, the black paintings of Pierre Soulages. Understandings drawn from this research are woven into the chapters of the thesis, supporting and clarifying the main suppositions.

²² See Appendix E for a detailed exhibition list.

²³ Events included ‘In Discussion’ with curator Elizabeth Kwant during the private view of the exhibition *Tilted Plane* (21 April 2018), ‘In Residence’, a drawing event open to the public, Alexandria Library (16 March 2018) and *In Praise of Shadows* Artist Talk, ArtsFest 2019 (16 May 2019), University of Wolverhampton, with artist and curator Laura Onions.

In working towards an understanding of surface being about complex relationships rather than a seen/unseen dichotomy, theoretical explorations drew on a range of disciplines from architecture, design, new media, textiles, anthropology and fine art. Concepts that offer different ways of thinking about an expanded notion of surface include Alfred Gell's cognitive teasing and unfinished business (1992, 1998), Clement Greenberg's flatness (1960) and Leo Steinberg's flatbed picture plane (1968). I drew on Jussi Parikka's world view of surface (2018), Ella Hendriks on fading and oxidative change (2015), and Robert MacFarlane's re-surfacing (2019) in Chapter Two: Marking Time. Richard Wollheim's twofoldness (1987) informed Chapter Three: Entry, and Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's writings (1933) on Japanese aesthetics informed my understandings of the relationship between darkness and light in Chapter Four: Shine. Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia (1967), as a site that 'can juxtapose in one real place several spaces that are quite different or even incompatible', has helped explain my findings on time and surface. I have also drawn on proxemic theory (Hall, 1969) to bring greater understanding to the multiple levels on which artworks operate, specifically different distance zones which impact on the quality of the viewer's encounter with surface in Chapter Five: The Viewing Body.

The application of theoretical ideas were consolidated and tested through the delivery of several conference presentations, disseminating my research to a broader audience. The writing of these papers enabled me to draw ideas together and present them in such a way that communicated to an audience not necessarily familiar with practice-based research. I found that what often felt like insignificant studio dilemmas, of concern to me and me alone, later resonated with a broader audience. For example, the notion of 'breaking through the surface' became the focus of extended writing about 'entry points' and what defines surface and its relationship to absence and intermission.²⁴

Those currently working at the 'coalface' of surface studies, such as Matthew Bowman (art critic and writer), Mike Anusas (anthropology and design), Yeseung Lee (material culture) and Sarah Horton (fine art and the decorative) have also helped shape some of the ideas

²⁴ Halliwell, L. (2019) 'Pattern, Entry and Reflection.' In Horton, S. and Ionascu, A. (eds.) *Drawing: Research, Practice, Theory (DRPT): Drawing Pattern and Chaos*. Intellect. January 2019, Issue 4.1 pp. 97-102.

developed during the doctoral study. Conversations with these colleagues led to useful feedback, the sharing of information, studio visits and publication opportunities.²⁵

Attendance at conferences gave access to the most recent thinking on the subject. *Re-visiting the Surface* at the Munch Museum, Oslo (November 2015), was particularly significant in consolidating my understanding of current surface debates within the modern tradition. In contrast, other conferences, such as *Decriminalising Ornament: The Pleasures of Pattern* (2018), made me realise that practice-based working had led me to new ways of questioning what surface actually is.

v. Personal reflection and writing

I recorded, in a series of studio notebooks, my thoughts and reflections on studio practice, writing *in* and *on* action (Moon:2004).²⁶ Reflective writing was a way of consciously creating distance from the work in progress and to have a 'safe' space to write honestly and without censorship. These notebooks also acted as a form of sketchbook with random workings out, ideas for possible future works, as well as more considered notetaking from reading material, conferences, residencies and exhibitions. They have proved to be a great personal source of reference material, charting the progress of my research and developing understanding, leading eventually to more purposeful reflective writing. So, although these remain indirect sources in the final thesis (apart from two pieces of creative writing brought into the thesis) they still constitute a 'backbone' method.

Since 'Art does not describe or explain but instead "presents" or "enacts"', (Johnson, 2011:147 cited in Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2015:430), this left the challenging task of translating the experience of making into a communicable language that did not pre-empt outcomes or restrict the experience. I found switching between the two modes of operating (making vs writing) a difficult transition. In contrast to studio practice, which for me unfolds gradually

²⁵ My paper, 'The Depth of Surface', for example, was presented at the conference *Apparition – the (im)materiality of the modern surface*, convened by Yeseung Lee (2018). This conference led to the production of a peer-reviewed book chapter consisting of a series of reflections based around specific pieces of my artworks; Halliwell, L. 'The Depth of Surface', In Lee, Y. (ed.) *Surface Apparition: The Immateriality of Modern Surface*. London: Bloomsbury (2020).

²⁶ For further information on the reflective practitioner, *in* and *on* action, see, Moon, J. (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice*. Oxon: Routledge.

(and playfully) over time without the need for immediate outcomes, I demanded much more clarity and certainty from the writing process. I found that I could more easily locate my own 'voice' when I integrated academic writing with writing on practice instead of keeping them separate. This integration allowed for greater fluidity between the two aspects, where theoretical ideas became embodied through practice, shedding light on conceptual ideas about surface. In this way, the research moved between practical and theoretical investigations which impacted on each other, shaping the direction of the investigation. For example, the practice explored reflective materials, while the academic research explored cultural conceptions and legacies about shininess. Over the course of study, a series of themes emerged, grounded in practice, that probed the concept of surface. These form the thesis chapters.

Scope

The parameters of my enquiry have generally remained within the context of two-dimensional painting and drawing. While I made works with video and film, I do not discuss the discourse of surface and the digital screen, as explored by Guilianno Bruno (2014) and Anna Friedberg (2006). I used film as a painter, as part of an extended and collaborative practice, which was discussed in terms of content rather than as a medium related to the flatness of the screen. Opening up my research to different media would have taken me down a different trajectory which, although relevant to an enquiry on surface, is at a tangent to my main concerns about the depth of surface in painting and drawing. Similarly, while I touch on perception and the psychology of looking in terms of the viewer's experience, I do not explore in detail the perception of pictorial representation. Ernst Gombrich explores these themes in *Art and Illusion* (1962) and Rudolph Arnheim in *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (1954). In contrast, my approach focused on the *experience* of surface rather than the psychology of its perception.

The decorative tradition is something that has underpinned my practice for many years and engagement with pattern remains a foundational pursuit. Throughout my doctoral research pattern has continued to be a vehicle through which I have explored surface. The legacy of the perception of pattern as an 'inferior' aesthetic form, associated with the applied arts and

the feminine, has been a critical issue for the decorative throughout the twentieth century, and continues to have undercurrents today. While I acknowledge the significant relationship between pattern, gender and surface this has been documented elsewhere through feminist practice and theory and has not materialised as an aspect of the practice that I have pursued as part of this doctoral enquiry.²⁷

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into five thematic and one concluding chapter which expands on and synthesises the findings as presented in sections 1-5.

1. Structure and the articulation of space
2. Marking time
3. Entry
4. Shine
5. The viewing body.
6. Surface is...

The themes evolved directly from the artworks made in studio practice. While not reflecting the fluidity or experimental uncertainty through which the practice grew, the categories offer an organisational framework through which ideas were explored and analysed. The themes are not exclusive and concerns often straddle different chapters. Unlike an architectonic image of an elevator (Ingold, 2018) that approaches surface as a vertical column, I propose that movement through the sections is more akin to the adventures of Alice in Wonderland; a space that encourages transgressions of scale and time (Deleuze, 1997:21). As Alice shrinks and then grows again, she loosens her grip on perspective and linear temporality. Similarly, these chapters explore surface from multiple perspectives, I visit and revisit artworks from my practice, approaching them from different angles and viewpoints.

The first chapter outlines the early stages of doctoral studio practice when explorations of surface pursued a framework of structural strategies. The chapter examines pattern-

²⁷ Notably in, Perry, G. (ed.) (1999) *Gender and Art*, Deepwell, K. (1998) *Women Artists and Modernism*, Parker, R. and Pollock, G. (1981) *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. Ayliff, M. and Myers, T. (2001) *Warped: Painting and the Feminine*, Elliot, B. and Helland, J. (ed.) (2002) *Women Artists and the Decorative Arts 1880-1935: The Gender of Ornament*.

generating systems within a range of cultural traditions. It focuses on the pivotal role of the circle, square, repetition and tiling as tools used for the articulation of space.

What became apparent as the research unfolded was how time, in many of its different and often contradictory guises, had a role to play within the practice—an over-arching theme that impacted across the research. In the second chapter, 'Marking Time', I use four concepts of time: speed, duration, lifetime and palimpsest to explore ways in which surface registers different temporalities. Through practical examples, I show how surface collaborates in this through its 'stickiness', its 'thickness' and its continual becoming.

The theme of the third chapter is entry. As a key aspect of the cultural and visual interaction with the surface, I use examples from my practice to trace ways in which entry has played out across my artworks, proposing it as a crucial concept for a discussion about surface.

Beginning with a brief survey of linear perspective and the notion of the picture plane, I look at ways in which surface, otherwise reinforced by patterning, evidences a sense of depth at odds with its apparent 'flatness'. Focusing on different forms of rupture, I question why we feel the need to break through, break into or break away from the surface.

Chapter Four focuses on shine, light and shadow: qualities that mask the penetrability of surface. Raising the issue of where surface and image reside, I reference illumination techniques in my practice. By drawing attention to ways in which the surface is activated by light, I show how lighting conditions alter the viewing experience. Whether it is the sharp shaft from a gilded surface, the silvery sheen of graphite on deep black, or the quiet sensuousness of black on black, the viewer is encouraged to dwell, to slow down and reflect on being present in a world of detail that is revealed and obscured through shadow.

The fifth evidence chapter considers the viewing body. I explore how the viewer encounters surface through horizontality, verticality and viewing angles. Artworks are experienced by the act of looking within a viewing environment—a physical encounter with the thing itself—and this has implications for the understanding of surface. I focus on ways in which the viewer, as an active and mobile participant, negotiates an encounter with surface. An assertion of the

importance of visual 'touch' and proximity is explored through the notion of viewing distances. I question what is lost, and gained, through these different viewing zones in terms of the viewer's experience of surface.

The final chapter (*'Surface is....'*) reflects on the complexity of surface by building on and consolidating my research findings as presented in the thematic chapters 1-5. This re-ordering allowed for different relationships between ideas to be made and brings the voluminous aspect of surface to the fore.

In conclusion, I discuss my research journey and reflect on my practice-based methods. By summarising the relationship between theory and practice, as set out in the five evidence chapters, I summarise my findings on surface in light of current theory and debate. Finally, my original contribution to knowledge is articulated, why the research is significant, and what use it can be to future researchers in the field.

Chapter One: Structure and the articulation of space



In the introduction, I gave an overview of my established practice and the development of the spirograph drawings. These artworks were process-led; a structure was put in place at the start of each drawing, and the making stage followed through the system. Repetition of the spirograph motif within such generating frameworks offered infinite possibilities.²⁸ *Stasis* and *Glide* (2015), made in the early stages of my doctoral research, followed a similar mode of working, although the overall designs were deliberately more complex. The process involved the pre-mapping of pentagonal or hexagonal structures, a preparatory design that seemingly lay ‘beneath’ the outer drawn surface and which was, to some extent, concealed from view.

It was these practical explorations of geometric underdrawings, and my understanding of them as an essential part of the depth of surface, that led me to undertake a series of research projects, notably Islamic geometric and biomorphic drawing, Celtic design and Indian *kōlams*. An aim of conducting this experiential learning was to embody other graphic traditions, to identify commonalities or differences and to learn about the geometric principles and structural systems—the inward supporting components of artworks—such as the circle, line and grid, that underpin these practices. Is geometry always ‘deeper’ than surface and under what circumstances do geometric form and surface fuse together?

While experiential learning was my initial aim, the research instigated further questioning of my habitual practice with surface. I indicate how these new encounters fed into my practice, impacting on broader understandings of surface, in particular, on notions of a *seen* or *unseen*, *over* and *under* paradigm. I introduce this research through the subheadings of a palette of components, the circle, semi-circle, symmetry and nature, and the grid—a range of structural strategies that deal with composition and design.

²⁸ For further writing on my spirograph works see, Halliwell, L. (2007) ‘Negotiated Positions’, Halliwell, L. (2007) ‘Going Straight: Reflections on a repetitive process, a practitioners account’; S. Smith and L. Halliwell (2014) ‘Sim Smith Gallery Interview’; Oliver, E. (2008) ‘Returned Moments: The Work of Lesley Halliwell’; Chavez-Dawson, J. (2004) ‘1 Bic Biro’ <http://www.lesleyhalliwell.com>

1.1 A palette of components

The Topkapi Scroll, currently in the collection of the Topkapi Palace Museum Library, Istanbul, contains a series of Islamic architectural designs.²⁹ Consisting of 114 hand-drawn geometric patterns it is one of the few surviving sources on Islamic design from the early modern Islamic world, dating from the fifteenth to early sixteenth century. The scroll, measuring 33 cm wide and 29.5 m long, is unrolled side to side with one of the ends fixed to a wooden roller and the other end to a protective piece of leather.

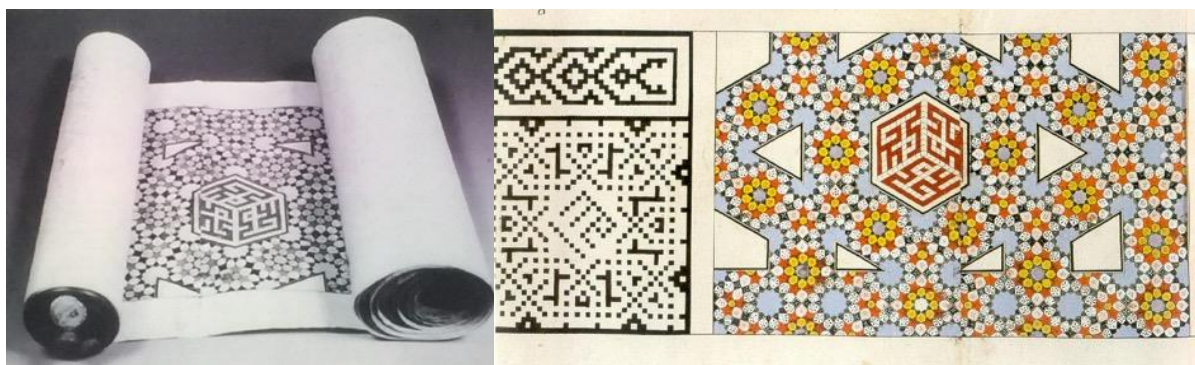


Figure 17: Artist (unknown) *The Topkapi Scroll*, (c1400-1500s). Dye on parchment, 33 cm x 29.5 m and (right) detail showing two adjacent patterns on the scroll. Getty Publications Virtual Library.

Including a variety of hand-drawn decorative ornaments and tiling designs (figure 17) it is believed that the scroll, rather than being a reference document from a craft workshop, was a record of works carried out on the walls and domes of structures in the region (Rogers, 1997:433-439). It remains a valuable guidebook of architectural designs seen in complex ‘muqarnas’, ‘giriḥ’, mosaic panels and tiling patterns.³⁰ Alice Twemlow, in ‘The Decriminalisation of Ornament’ (2005), outlines ways in which, since the Great Exhibition of 1851, there have been many attempts to classify shapes and codify patterns. Owen Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), for example, laid out 37 propositions on ornamentation from around the world relating to the ‘appropriate uses of decoration and pattern’ (Twemlow,

²⁹ The Topkapi Scroll was discussed during Richard Henry’s lecture, Istanbul Design Centre (2015).

Unfortunately, the scroll was not on public display at the Topkapi Palace Museum Library during my visit.

³⁰ ‘Muqarna’ is a form of ornamental vaulting archetypal of Islamic architecture. The structure serves as a transition from the walls of a room into a domed ceiling (Bloom, 1988:21-28). ‘Girah’ are decorative Islamic geometric artforms used in architecture and handcrafted objects that form interlaced ‘strapwork’ patterns.

2005). The Topkapi Scroll and the *Grammar of Ornament* present as ‘catalogues’ that gather cultural structural systems together in one place.

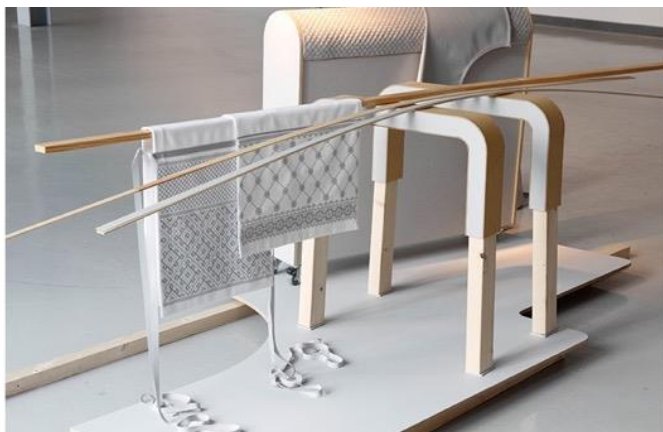


Figure 18: Maxine Bristow, *Catalogue Components* (2013). Foldout pamphlet.
(below) ‘Concordance’: *(Re)Configuration 23913-CH22LB* (2013). Reproduced by kind permission of Maxine Bristow.

Contemporary textile artist Maxine Bristow integrated a similar ‘design manual’ format into her artwork, *Catalogue Components*.³¹ However, unlike pattern classification records epitomised above, Bristow set out different individual structural elements (like a menu) from which she then selected to make ‘new’ works. This approach, explains Bristow, ‘involves the creation of a “catalogue” of individual “components” that can be variously configured... and reconfigured’ within an installational context (2014:152). The accompanying fold-out pamphlet (figure 18) was an integral part of Bristow’s exhibition *Concordance: Component Configuration 26713-M156ER* at the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester (2013). Recalling earlier design manuals, or even Ikea modular unit systems, Bristow’s ‘palette of components’ provided a structural strategy for her practice; an index of individual forms that could be selected and (re)arranged in different orders and various configurations. This approach, where elements are assembled and reassembled, is elucidated by Susan Yelavich in her introductory essay to the exhibition ‘Ornament and Pattern’ (Cam Raleigh, 2001) as a ‘kit-of-parts’. Yelavich refers to this methodology as a ‘kind of design democracy’ where working within a matrix of set parts results in controlled order.



Figure 19: *Jane Harris: Paintings*. Installation shots, Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, 11th November 2006 – 13th January 2007. Reproduced by kind permission of Jane Harris. Photo credit FXP Photography.

Taking Bristow’s palette of components a step further are those artists who work with a more limited number of formal and material components. For example, British contemporary artist Jane Harris (figure 19) works with a self-imposed limitation of motif (the ellipse in all its

³¹ *Catalogue Components* is part of a much larger body of works that were made over the course of Bristow’s practice-based PhD research, *Pragmatics of attachment and detachment: medium (un)specificity as material agency in contemporary art*, (2010-2016), Norwich University of the Arts.

various configurations) and the use of no more than two colours per work. Formal restrictions do not close down artistic possibility. Rather than being restricted, Harris's practice is liberated, and the paintings intensified by the boundaries placed on the process.

The intensity becomes even more apparent when paintings are looked at and referenced in relationship to each other, rather than as singular images, demonstrating how even the simplest of elements allow for the invention of permutations rich in ambiguities and visual complexity. Through the research, I came to realise that, like Bristow and Harris, giving parameters to my work was central to my established practice. These parameters function as structural strategies, with boundaries that can be stretched, and edges that can be pushed. The equivalent in my practice was the spirograph, a mark-making tool that despite, or because of, its systematic process led to infinite possibilities and multiple permutations. One of the questions that I had to work through during the early stages of the doctoral research was if I let go of the spirograph as a method of working and structural strategy, what would I substitute in its place? To this end, I began to consider the components of design in relation to the other 'catalogues' of pattern akin to that of the Topkapi Scroll and *The Grammar of Ornament*.

1.2 The circle

The division of the circle is the ritual starting point for drawing a host of different patterns in a range of cultures and traditions. One of the first things taught while studying Islamic design in Istanbul (2015) was the 'Creation Diagram', a structure composed of multiple circles. Also referred to as a 6-fold rosette, it is a single foundational unit in that when it meets other six-fold rosettes, it can be repeated indefinitely. To construct a 6-fold rosette, first, a horizontal line is drawn through the diameter of a circle (figure 20). By placing the compass at the intersections of the circle and line, a further six circles are added. With the addition of more circles on the outside edge, the structure expands outwards, creating a more complex hexagonal shape in the centre. From this starting point, multiple patterns can be developed through the 'tessellation of regular hexagons perfectly filling the plane' (Sutton, 2007:2). The pattern can then be developed in a range of different forms, mediums, scales and colours and used to adorn buildings, manuscripts, objects or textiles.

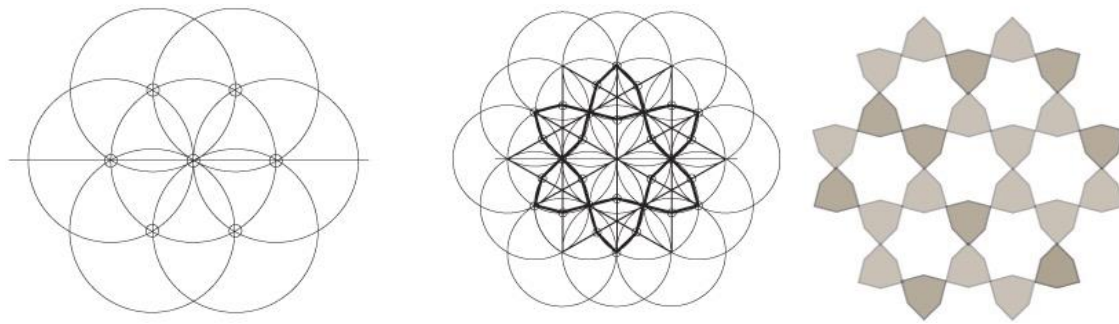


Figure 20: The Creation Diagram: six regular divisions of the circle along a horizontal axis (left), the addition of further circles on the outer edge expands the structure outwards, establishing a regular grid of triangles (centre) and a tessellated design is created by repeating the triangular pattern (right). Reproduced by kind permission of Richard Henry. Photo credit The Art of Islamic Pattern.

The compass itself—the tool used for inscribing circles or arcs—has a fixed point that maintains a connection with the ground while the outer end rotates, demarcating the territory. Symbolically the fixed point is significant because it maintains an attachment between heaven and earth. Sufi dancers (known in the West as ‘whirling dervishes’) spin, faster and faster, to be close to God. Through the practice of ‘sema’—listening in a prayer-induced trance—the dervishes aim to act as a conduit between God and humankind, blurring the line between metaphysical and physical worlds. While the dervish spins around, one leg stays firmly planted to the ground. Like the compass point, this maintains the connection with the earth, while simultaneously trying to reach heaven. In Islamic art, this omnipresent centre of the circle represents God while the repetition of the circle, as the ‘primordial symbol of unity’, also suggests God’s infinite nature. In this way, the circle is the most significant geometric shape in Islamic ornamentation, expressing philosophical and symbolic beliefs (Sarand, 2016:108).

The symbolic value of the circle is equally important within Celtic art. For the Celts, the circle underpinned reality on a cosmic scale by referencing the relationship with the earth, sun and moon, symbolising the cycle of life. As a symbol that cuts across time and place, the circle was the theme of the exhibition *Seeing Round Corners: The Art of the Circle* (2016).³²

³² *Seeing Round Corners: The Art of the Circle*, Turner Contemporary, Margate (27th May-25th September 2016). Curated by artists David Ward and Jonathan Parsons.

Described in the exhibition catalogue as ‘one of the most potent of all natural symbols’, the show brought together artworks and artefacts that explored the circle: from ‘roundness, rotation and visual perception, to wonderment and cycles of time’ (Cumming, 2016). Artworks from 3000BC to the present day were displayed using a non-linear time narrative, thus encouraging connections across a diverse range of cultures and periods. For example, an ancient Egyptian statue of a sun goddess with a halo above her head was positioned close to Marina Abramovic’s performance video *Relation in Movement* (1977).³³ Here, the arc of light above the statue echoes the circular tyre marks in the video; just one of many juxtapositions that encourage the viewer to make connections across time and styles. While such eclectic comparisons may be post-rationalised, the exhibition was nevertheless convincing in its demonstration of the centrality of the circle to many pattern-making and visual representational traditions across vast time periods and diverse cultures.

The circle, as the building block of my mandala-shaped spirograph drawings, has remained a central motif and organising principle in artworks that I have made throughout the research. In *G(u)ilty* (2015/16), a series of ten gilded drawings on paper, I explored multiple compositional options derived from the circle.³⁴ Through simple repeats and basic divisions, the circle elicits multiple lines and nodes, squares and triangles, pentagons and hexagons; it is a simple shape that embodies infinite possibilities. Using a limited palette of gold leaf, pencil and a transparent lacquer, this body of drawings were made shortly after returning from Istanbul when the things that I had seen were at the forefront of my mind. For example, the magnificent domed ceilings of the Blue Mosque (figure 21) with its four adjacent half domes—an architectural feature that visually and physically extends the interior space—prompted the playful mixing of circles and semi-circles. Then there was the relationship between the circle and the square, where heaven and earth are pared down to their most basic elements (the sphere and the cube). The exterior of Hagia Sophia illustrates this architectural feature with its vast central dome perched high up on a square base.

³³ Ambromovik, M. and Ulay (1977) *Relation in Movement*, video 35’ 21”.

³⁴ While the spirograph motif is still present in these drawings it no longer dominates. ‘Letting go’ of a motif and process that was so integral to the practice, and to my identity as an artist, was a difficult transition but necessary in order to more thoroughly explore aspects of what surface is or can be.



Figure 21: (Left) The ceiling of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque (the Blue Mosque), and (right) Hagia Sophia Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey.

By combining the circle and square, the architecture unites the spiritual and the infinite with the earthly and structural. Rather than focusing on recreating specific Islamic patterns, my gilded drawings on paper (*G(u)ilty* and *Tilted Plane* series (2015/16)) extended this research through explorations of the circle as an organising principle. For example, *G(u)ilty: Half-domes* (figure 22) began with a circle drawn with a compass along a central vertical axis. Centred on the circumference of the first circle, and passing through its centre, I then drew a second circle above. I continued this process until there were five circles in total. The middle circle was then gilded with gold leaf, while the outer half of the second and fourth circle were painted with a transparent lacquer, producing a slight sheen to the surface. Using an old ballpoint pen that no longer contained any ink, the inner circumference of the outer and inner circles were circumscribed with a ring of spirograph motifs, scarring the gilded surface and indenting the raw paper. In all of the drawings from this series, the geometrical tracings and guide-marks remain while in this particular work, a remnant of green ink unexpectedly and briefly appeared on the left-hand-side; a process derived inconsistency that unsettled the symmetry of the drawing. Despite still using the spirograph tool, the main structural tradition adopted was derived from another cultural heritage, thus marking a significant move away from my established practice.



Figure 22: *G(u)ilty: Half-domes (2015/6)* Gold leaf, pencil and lacquer on paper, 50 x 70 cm.
Photo credit: Tony Richards.



Figure 23: *G(u)ilty: Circling the Square* (2015/6) Gold leaf, pencil and lacquer on paper, 50 x 70 cm.
Photo credit: Tony Richards.

Further drawings in the series explored different configurations of the circle. In figure 23, a gilded square, with a smaller circular 'cut-out', sits within a larger outer circle painted with transparent lacquer. Despite, or because of, the simplicity of its three singular shapes (two circles and one square) the drawing has a powerful dynamic that is testament to the significance of the circle, as an ordering principle and a representation of completeness, that draws on a lineage of symbolic, philosophical and aesthetic meaning.

1.3 The semi-circle

The division of the circle as the ritual starting point for traditional geometric patterns instigated further exploratory studio work based on the semi-circle. In *Fanatic, 4500 Minutes* (2009), a drawing from my established practice, a series of spirograph motifs radiate out, like spokes of a wheel, from a central point on the bottom edge of the paper. The effect is a colourful open arc, like a rainbow or the setting sun, stretching from one side of the paper to the other with the lower edge of the paper suggestive of a horizon line.³⁵



Figure 24: *Fanatic, 4500 minutes*, (2009). Ballpoint pen on paper, 250 x 500 cms.

³⁵ I return to the way in which the modern experience of surface is conditioned by the lasting influence of linear perspective in Chapter Three: Entry (page 98).

In *Lunette* (2017) two circles float into (or out of) the picture frame. Despite being bound by the edges of the square linen panel, the image is expansive, with the eye 'filling-in' the remainder of the circles. Because the shapes are left open and incomplete, like the half-domes found in Islamic mosques, they imply more than the arc itself, hinting at the full circle beyond; thus, the scale of the work is expanded further in the viewer's imagination. While the semi-circle is a shape I previously adopted, the shift from a horizontal cut, more reminiscent of the horizon line of Western painting, to a vertical cut is indicative of changes that were happening to my practice through an engagement with other graphic systems.

The division of the circle provides a family of simple forms (including semi-circles, quadrants, tridants, sextants and octants); repeatable units that can be multiplied within a gridded pattern or symmetrically around possible axes, with the possibility for the exponential growth of variants.³⁶ Ideas of tiling, repeating singular units and variations on the circle instigated studio experimentation in which I used fan-shaped ice-cream wafers as a ready-made component, culminating in *(Re)configured: Petticoat Tails* (2016). The work employed an architectural tectonic approach to construction, similar to the spirograph drawings, based on the accumulation of small individual units.

The first stage of the process was to seal the wafers with lacquer to prevent them from absorbing moisture from the atmosphere. With each additional coat of varnish, their colour deepened and produced a slight sheen. From a distance, the wafers looked like small pieces of carved wood and reminded me of parquet flooring. However, following the application of a gesso mix, the wafers had a chalky 'stucco' finish, similar to fine plaster used for coating wall surfaces or architectural ornament.³⁷ From a distance, they were often mistaken for ceramic tiles. When one layer of gesso was applied, the warmth of the brown wafer showed through, but with each additional layer, transparency decreased. While some of the finer surface detail was lost, the overall indentations remained, albeit it in a more generalised form.

³⁶ There is no word that I am aware of that means a third of a circle apart from the generic term 'sector'. I have used the word 'tridant' here, based on numerical prefixes, but it is not a word that exists in the Dictionary. Trine, meaning three-fold or triple could be used, as in a trine-part of a circle.

³⁷ Historically, gesso was used to prepare ('prime') a surface so that oil paint would adhere to it. Traditionally, it is made from a mix of chalk, pigment and a binder (traditionally rabbit skin glue).

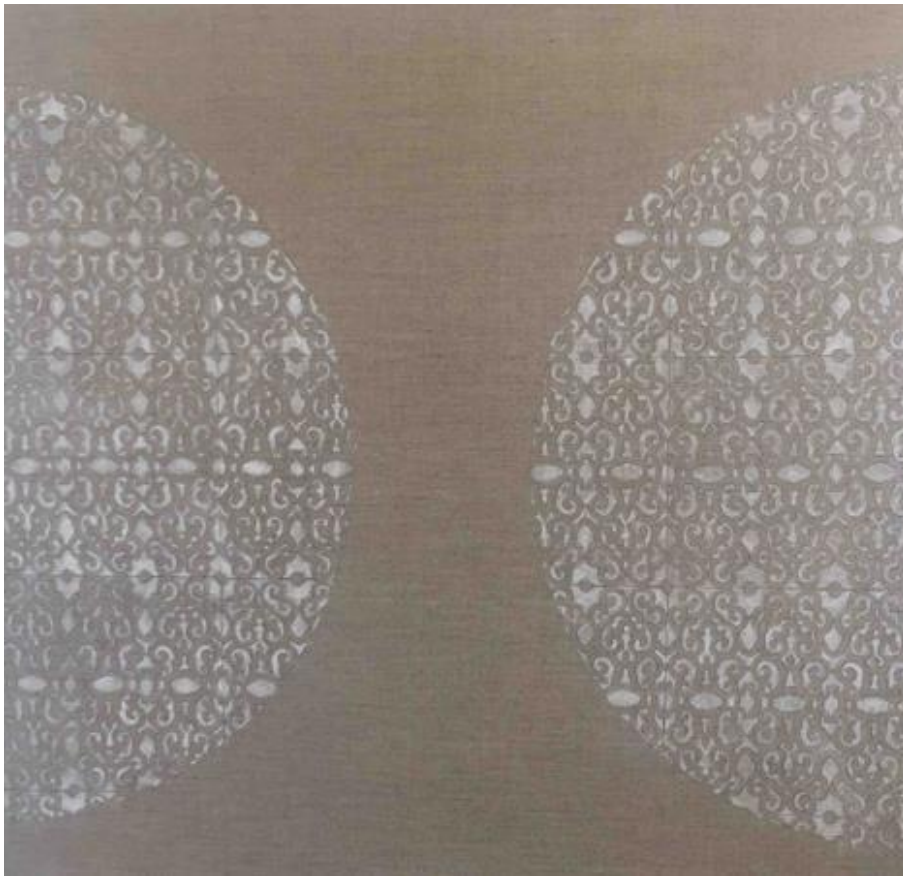


Figure 25: *Lunette* (2017). Pencil and chalk on linen primed with rabbit skin glue, 60 x 60cms.

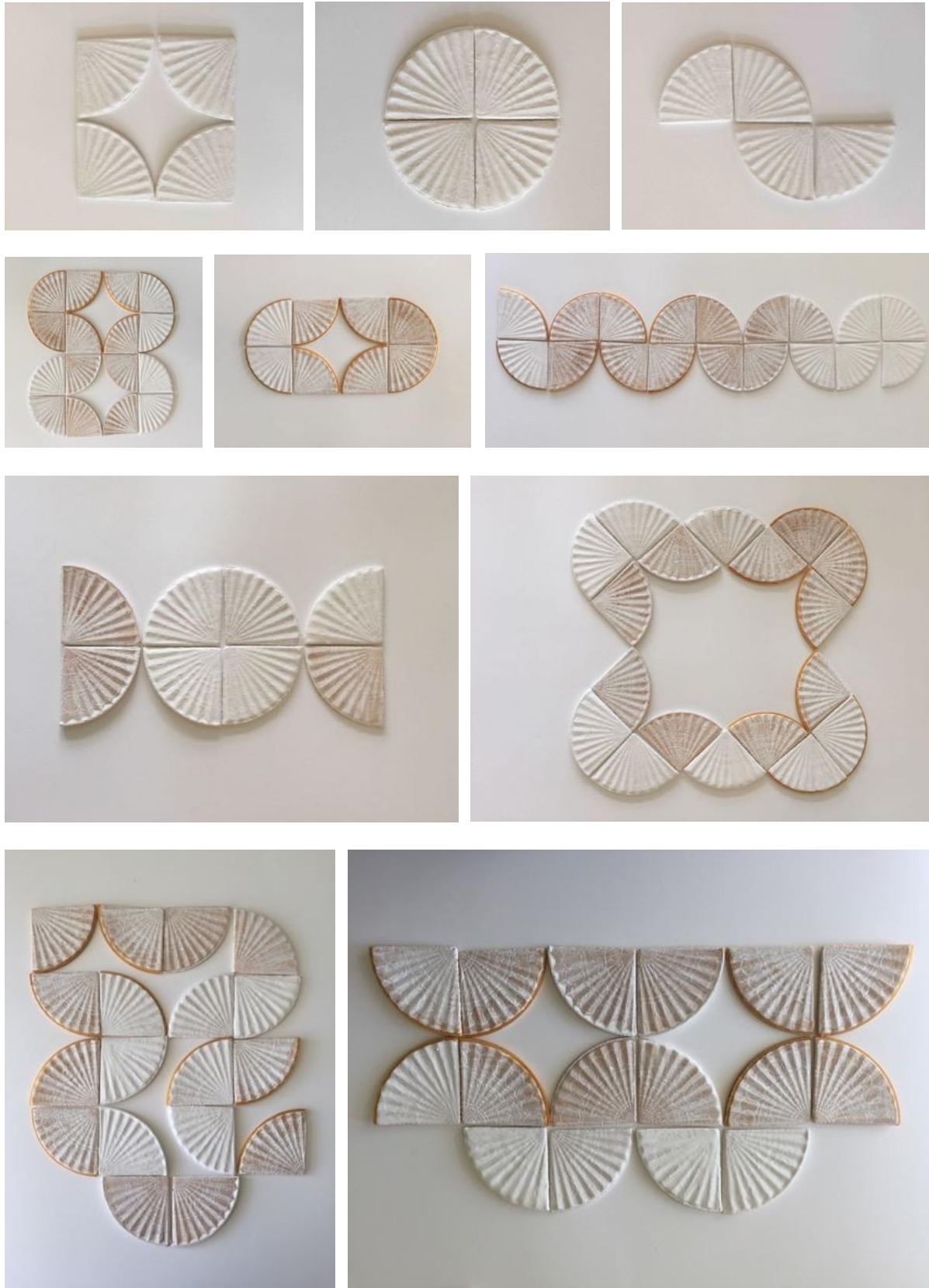


Figure 26: *(Re)configured: Petticoat Tails* (2016). PVA and gesso on ice-cream wafers, dimensions variable; images showing various permutations.

When placing the wafers next to each other, the tonal variations, particularly on the curved edge, introduced rhythm and flow to the work. By drawing the eye to specific shapes and away from others, the flatness of the formal symmetry was gently unsettled. The shallow relief of the wafers also produced a shadowing effect across the surface. These subtle undulations brought out the fine surface volume, similar to low relief carving, and added to the sense of movement.



Figure 27: *(Re)configured: Petticoat Tails* (2016). 100 ice-cream wafers and gesso, dimensions variable.

I exhibited *(Re)configured: Petticoat Tails* at the Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester School of Art (2016). Using the wafers as component pieces, I used the gallery to experiment with different combinations, reconfiguring the individual units in a variety of permutations, on the walls and floor using both vertical and horizontal orientations, during the exhibition. Working on the floor, I used the herringbone floor tiles as an under-grid, sometimes following its pattern with the wafers, other times countering it; a pattern on a pattern, a surface on a surface (figure 27). Dividing the circle into individual units created components that fit together in sequence.

This architectural tectonic approach to structure privileges continuity of form over containment. The tiling approach of *Petticoat Tales*, evocative of Islamic ornamentation, results in an expansiveness to a design. Like the shift from a horizontal to vertical cut of the semi-circle, there is no edge, frame or boundary—the form continues in the imagination of the viewer.

1.4 Symmetry and natural design

During the late 1600s, the English botanist Nehemiah Grew paved the way for the science of plant anatomy. He revealed, through a series of intricate and detailed drawings published in *The Anatomy of Plants* (1680), the inner structure and function of plants as seen through a microscope (figure 28). Grew believed that these complex systems were determined by the interactions of the individual parts, with one thing being linked to the next, the premise being that there is a 'logic' to the workings of these inner worlds. Grew's drawings reflect the synthesis between nature's underlying geometry, as explored by Philip Ball in *Shapes: Nature's Patterns* (2009). Ball elucidates the logic of natural growth and the 'spontaneous fusion' between forms through the example of bubbles. When two bubbles come into contact, they merge, thus changing their geometric conformation. It is this 'logic' of nature—an underlying geometric generating structure combined with free organic formation—that is also characteristic of Celtic patterning. Celtic workshop tutor Adam Tetlow compared Celtic design to the 'free-weaving' of nature over a structured under-grid revealed in the natural world by, for example, the sun and the horizon (circle and line)—a framework through which nature grows. The monogrammed 'Chi Rho' page from the *Book of Kells* (figure 29), a medieval illuminated manuscript, known for its 'sheer wealth and intricacy of invention' (Gombrich, 1979: 81), illustrates how the Celtic tradition is simultaneously structured and rhythmic. The page is brimming with complex and intricate drawing, with frames within frames, branching and radiating links and the unexpected appearance of representational motifs, a favourite being the two little mice eating a communion wafer. Yet, despite the free-flowing pattern and integrated representational imagery, there are numerous tiny compass marks on the back of these images; the traces of the under-grids over which the freehand developed.

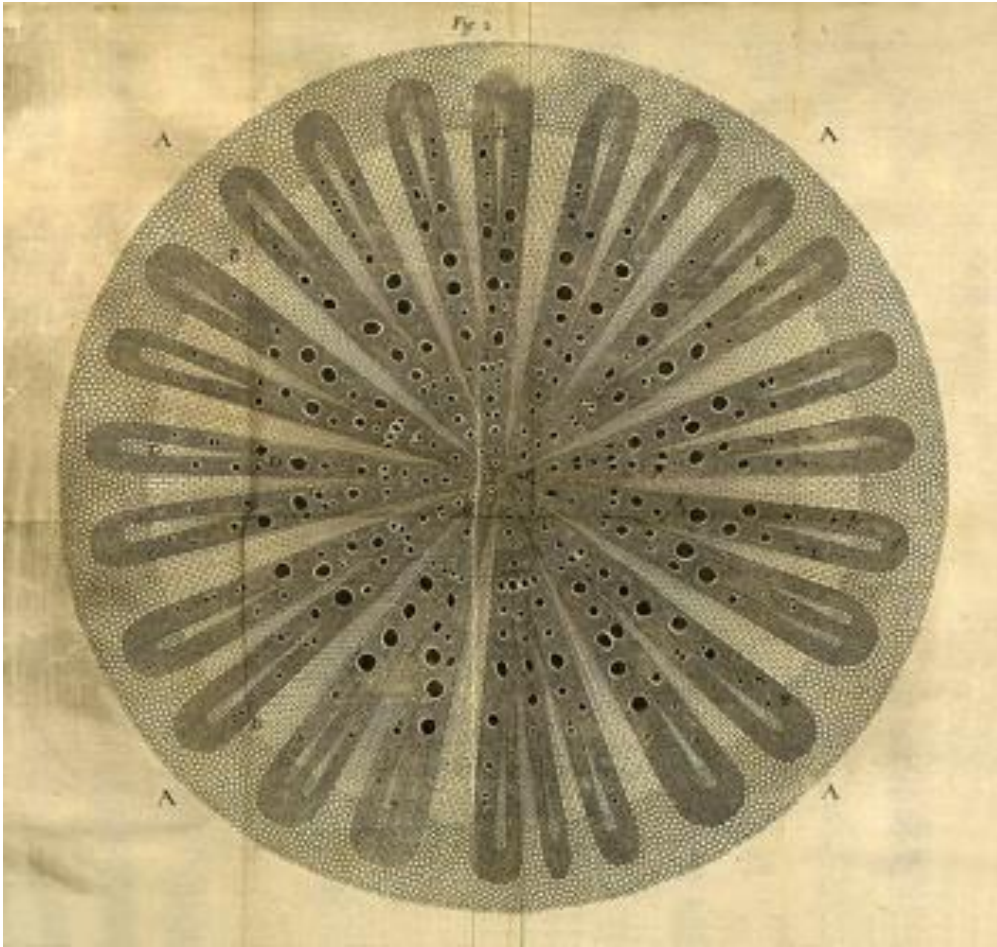


Figure 28: Illustrative plate from Nehemiah Grew's *The Anatomy of Plants* (1682). The Internet Archive.



Figure 29: Artist (unknown), (800 AD) *Book of Kells*, (Chi Roh), Christ's monogram page. Iron-gall ink and pigments on vellum. Trinity College Dublin Library.

Tetlow explained the idea of ‘improvising with the compass’ and upheld the dangers of being, in his opinion, ‘locked into’ a purely geometric approach.³⁸ At first, I was unable to grasp the difference between Celtic improvisation and Islamic Biomorphic drawing, as both require a degree of freehand drawing.³⁹ But, after repeatedly practising many of the Celtic designs, I understood that while both systems begin with an under-grid, established by geometric principles, there were fundamental differences. For traditional Islamic practice biomorphic forms are added to fit *within* the geometry while for the Celts, it seemed that they were always looking for ways to *unsettle* the geometry (Tetlow, 2016). To explain this further, the image below (figure 30) shows an example of biomorphic drawing, a pattern taught by Adam Williamson while drawing in situ at Sultan Ahmet Camii, the Blue Mosque, Istanbul (2015). Even though the rhythmic lines of the free-flowing tendrils appear organic, they are drawn with precision within an accurately proportioned gridded framework that can be tessellated to form a border or frieze. Evident throughout the artwork of various traditions within the Islamic world, from Morocco to Malaysia, biomorphic floral patterns such as these represent the underlying order and unity of nature.



Figure 30: Drawings (2015) of a boarder Rumi pattern from an engraved metal door, in situ at the Sultan Ahmed Mosque (The Blue Mosque), Istanbul, Turkey.

³⁸ Improvising with the compass is when the compass point is positioned by eye rather than by measurements. Tetlow encouraged students to trust their own visual judgment and to not always rely on the ruler for accuracy. This approach chimed with my own method of spirographing; while I used a ruler and compass to establish the overall structure, the Spirograph template would then mainly be positioned by eye. Through practice, the judging of spatial relationships and distances became embedded in the visual memory.

³⁹ Geometric pattern, biomorphic (arabesque) drawing and calligraphy are three distinct but complementary disciplines that comprise Islamic art, and to which geometry is foundational.

The Celts use a similar method to establish many of their designs. However, they would also position and draw some shapes by eye, improvise with the compass and use a variety of other techniques—such as tilted circles, blocks and obstacles—to unsettle the geometry and bring a greater degree of diversity and ‘free-will’ to the artwork. The Celts used the geometry to create opportunities for freehand drawing, such as can be found with ‘key’ patterns, a dominant motif in Celtic art. Often described as ‘spirals in straight lines’, when turned 45 degrees a triangular space above and below the key is created. This area can then be infilled and decorated with a variety of further patterns or freehand motifs.

Another example of the Celts using complex geometric under-grids to unsettle the symmetry are ‘tilted circles’. The drawing below (figure 31) shows how, by breaking the central line, the balance of the circles is ‘off-set’. The four smaller inner circles (red) appear to lean to the left of the diameter of the larger circle (green) giving the impression of a tilt and a sense of rotation. This technique is typical of many Celtic roundels.

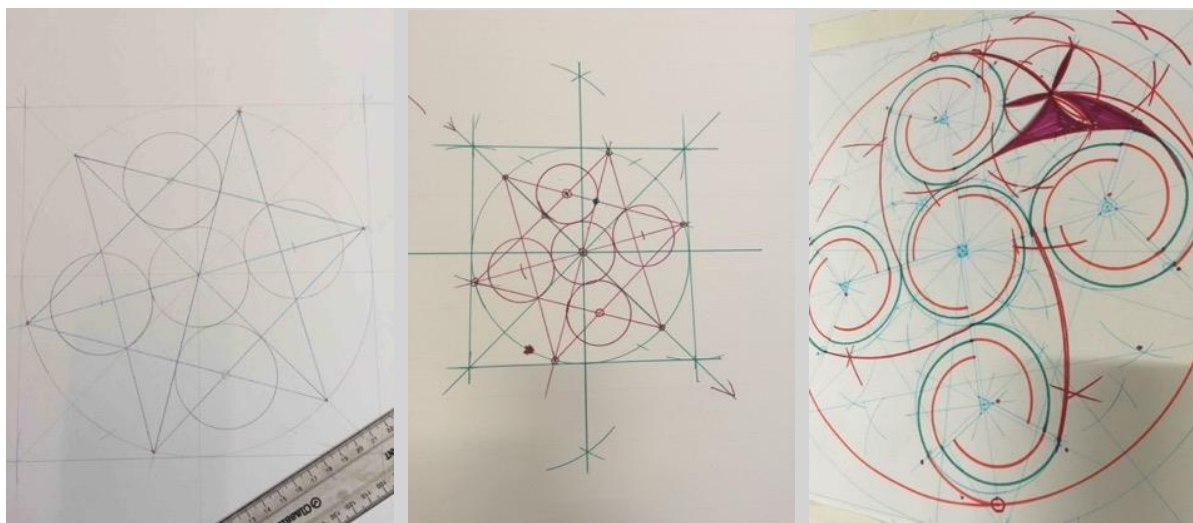


Figure 31: An example of the under-grid for drawing tilted circles (2016). Reproduced by kind permission of Adam Tetlow.

Submitting to the guidance of the geometry, while simultaneously undermining it, is also a strategy employed by artist Jane Harris. Using a range of techniques to modify her signature elliptical form—contrasting directions of brushstrokes, the reflective properties of paint, borders and framing devices—Harris challenges the geometry and generates visual

uncertainty. Curator Martin Hentschel (2001), describes how Harris's geometry 'proves to be [a] deceptive ground that may erupt at any moment, pulling the viewer into primeval depths. And yet, these depths have a way of turning into surface'. For Harris, geometrical forms provide a liberating structural framework that, rather than restricting the work, function as a 'springboard for daring pirouettes'. And thus, an analogous relationship is formed between the geometry, which is fundamental to the structure, and the surface. In this scenario, neither is solely 'above' nor 'below' the other.

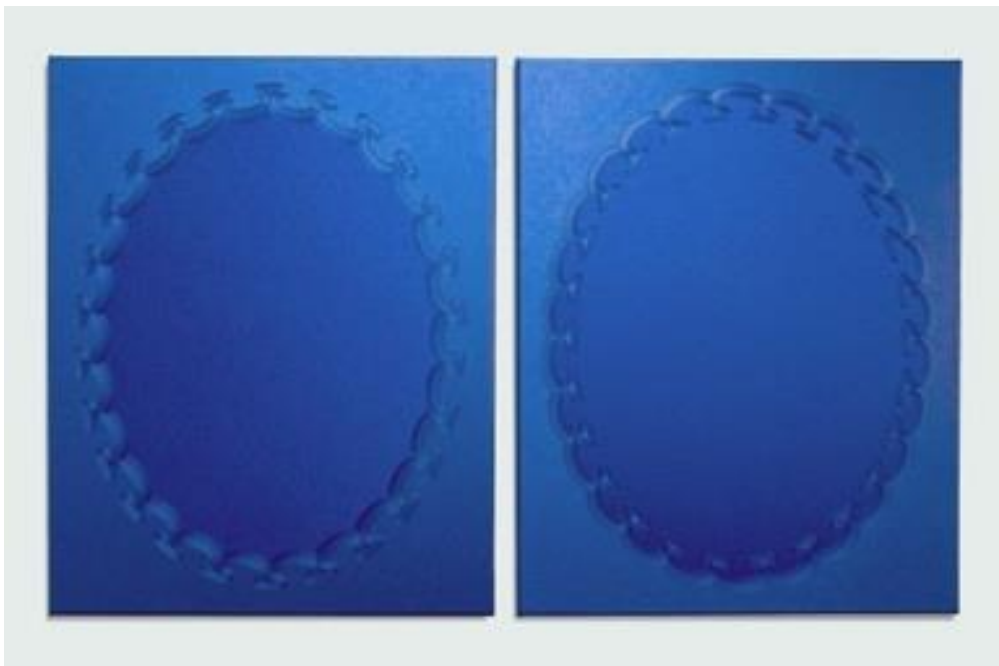


Figure 32: Jane Harris, *Blue Bleu* (2014), oil on canvas, 102 x 164 cms.
Reproduced by kind permission of Jane Harris. Photo credit FXP Photography.

Embodying other graphic traditions led me to identify similar tensions within my work. For example, while I gravitate towards structural processes and the control and order they provide, like the Celtic tradition, I also find ways to unsettle the underlying geometry. This unsettling is achieved either through process derived inconsistencies, material decay or the use of reflective materials. There often appears to be two visual languages going on in the artworks; one around pattern, the other around geometric forms. In *Still Point of the Turning World* (figure 33) for example, the pattern provides continuity; the eye follows it across the surface and beyond, whereas the geometry (the circle) provides containment. The tension between surface and structure blurs the boundary between them, suggesting a zone of interaction rather than the dichotomy that I began with.

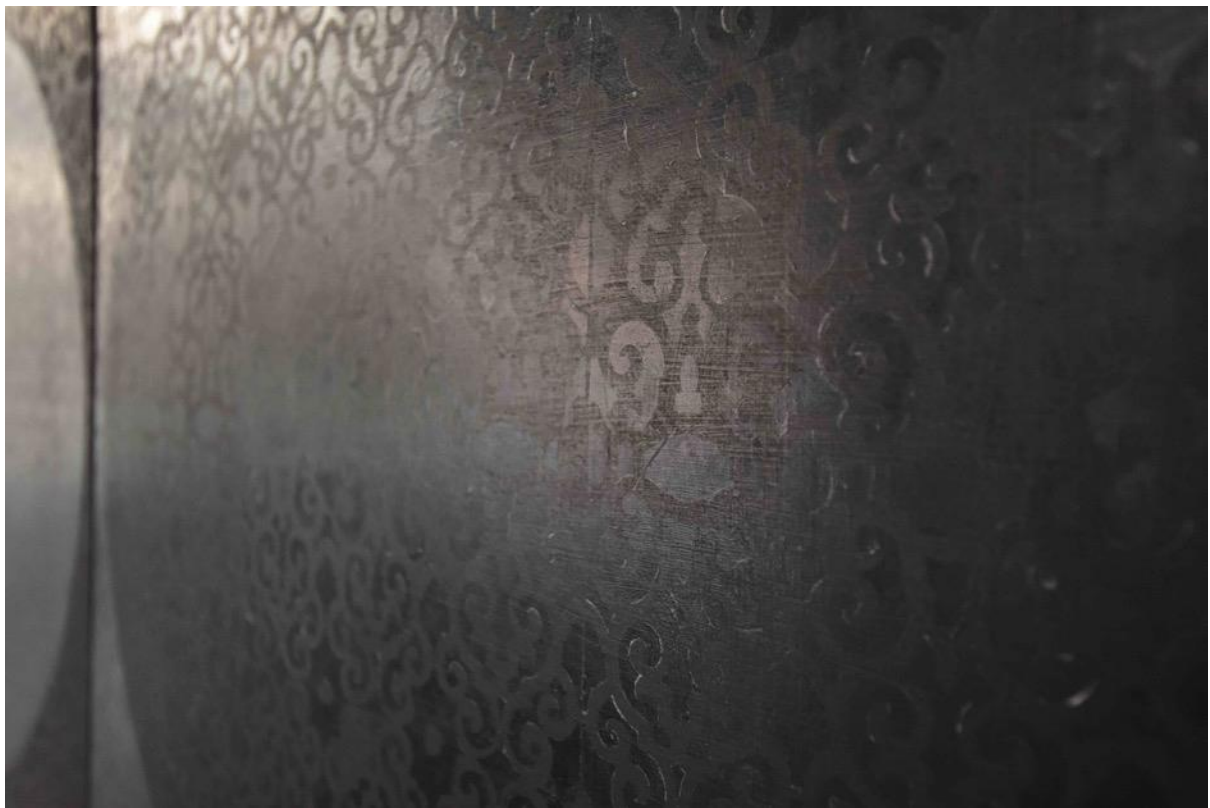
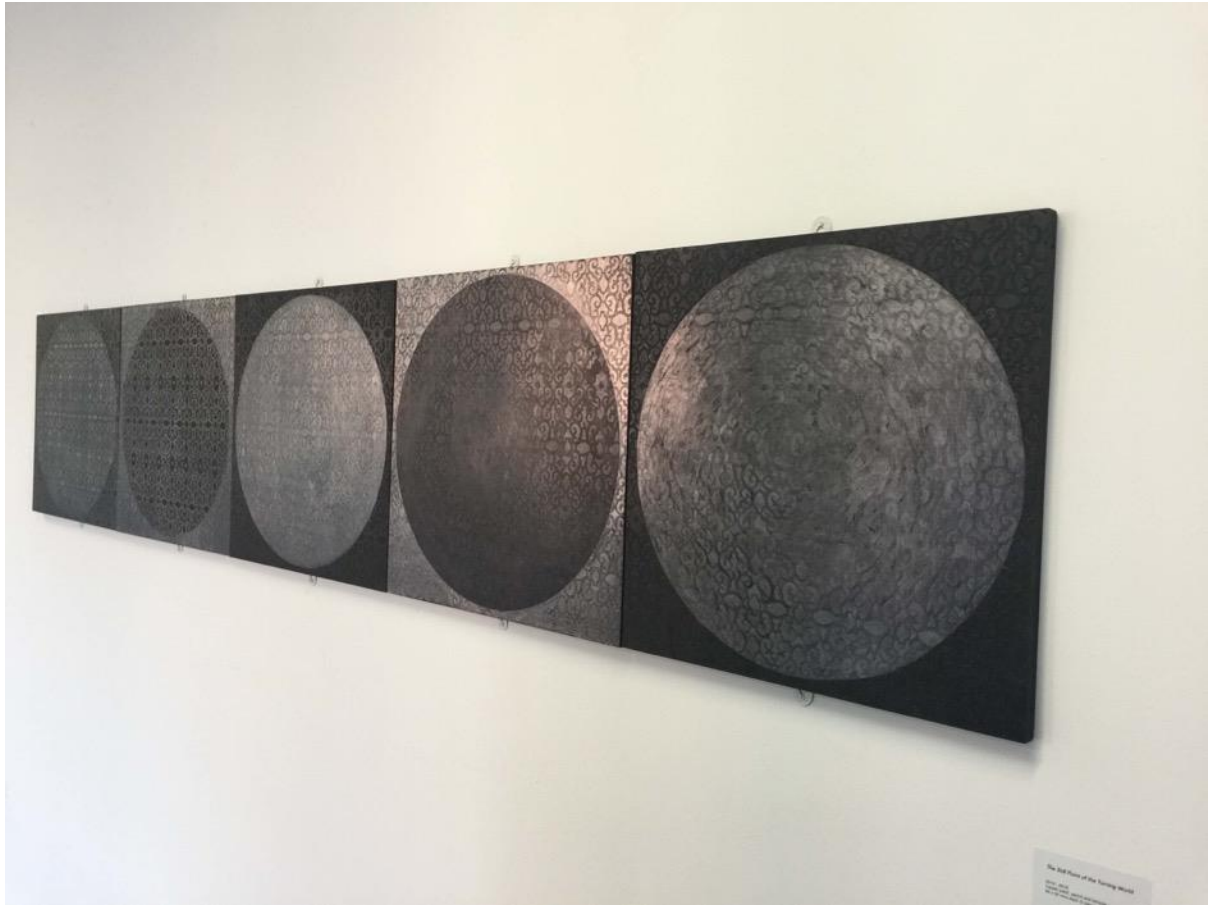


Figure 33: *Still Point of the Turning World* (2018/19). Casein paint, lacquer and graphite on board, 50 x 50 cms each panel.

1.5 Dots, grids and the square

Another connection between traditions is the use of a grid, often manifested as a grid of dots, a construction that is evident in Celtic knotwork and Indian *kōlams* (figure 34). The dots provide a framework around which lines meander, looping, up, down and around in various configurations. Characteristically, in Celtic meander patterns the line is thickened, the edges rounded and then ‘woven’ (seemingly under and over), giving the image a three-dimensional effect. A similar grid of pre-prepared dots is the structural basis of Indian *kōlams*, made by trickling rice flour or chalk dust through the fingers.

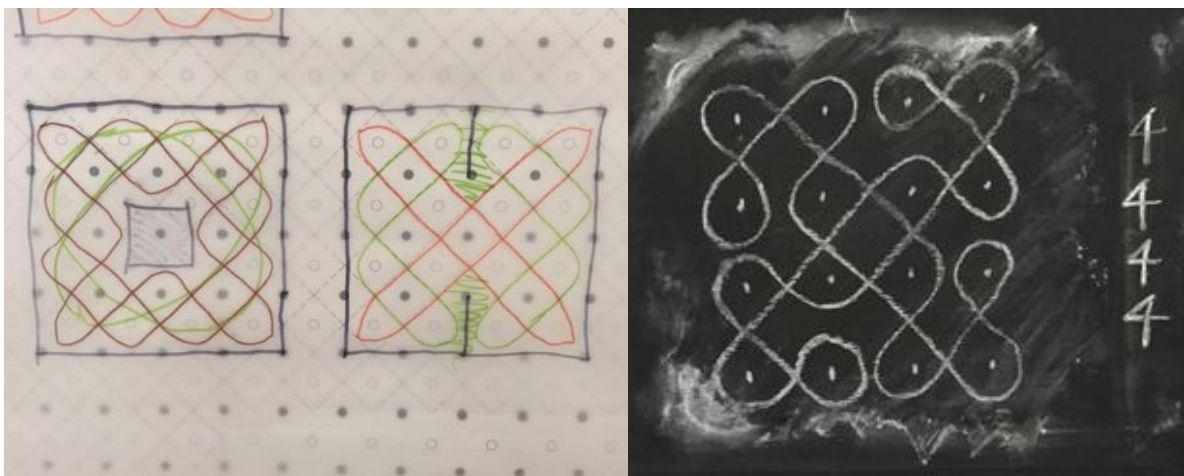


Figure 34: (left) Celtic ‘knots’ as taught by Adam Tetlow during ‘Celtic Geometry and the Imagination’, Princes School of Traditional Arts. Marker pens on tracing paper over a gridded template, 21 x 30 cm and (right) *Additive Trace* (2016), film still. Chalk and blackboard paint on board.



Figure 35: Examples of *kōlams* drawn with rice powder in Southern India. Courtesy of Chantel Jumel

Known by various regional names, such as *rangoli*, *alpana* and *kōlam*, these gridded designs are typically made by Hindu women of the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on the threshold of the home or temple (figure 35) (Mall, 2007). The fact that these patterns are drawn freehand, without using any measuring tools such as a ruler or compass, intrigued me. This curiosity instigated a period of independent research where I deconstructed and reconstructed *kōlam* drawings, culminating in a live drawing event, *Dot to Dot* (2015) and a drawing video, *Additive Trace* (2015).

I began the research by deconstructing ‘found’ *kōlam* images from the internet, stripping them back layer by layer and unravelling the system of each pattern. First, I established the type of grid structure used (square or diamond) and its size (number of dots). I then transposed the grid onto a piece of paper where I used different coloured inks to identify each ‘trail’ by redrawing one line at a time and tracing its journey. In this way, I unravelled the structure of the pattern (figure 36).

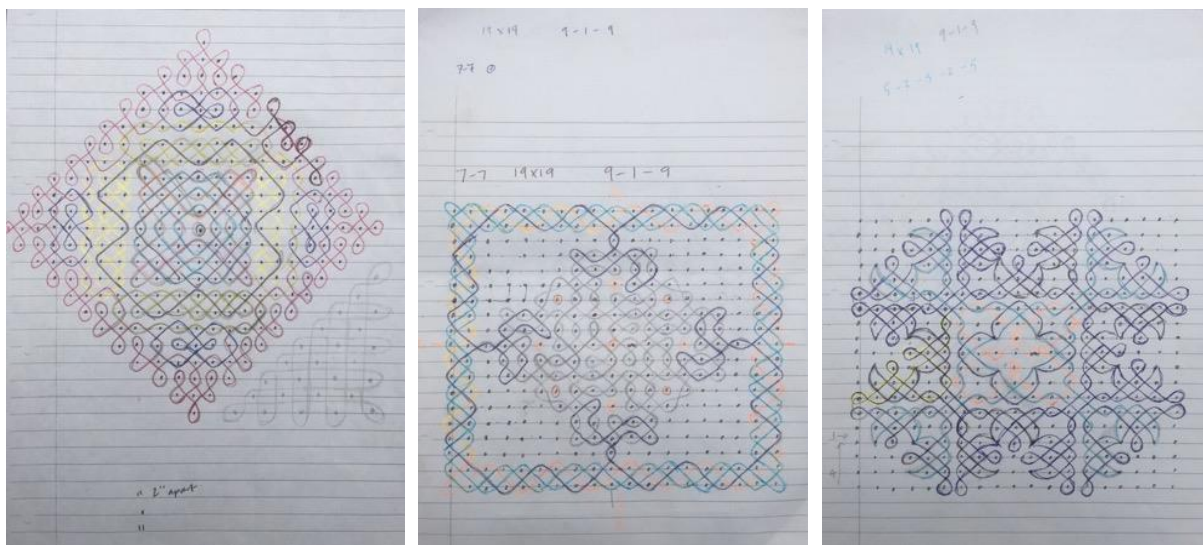


Figure 36: Pages from my notebook showing the construction of found *kōlam* imagery (2016). Marker pens on paper, 21 x 30 cm.

The idea of exposing the *kōlam*'s method of construction was explored further during a live drawing event, *Dot to Dot* (2015) (figure 37). Wanting to experience *kōlam* drawing that was closer to the original method and function, I worked on three 1-meter square blackboard

panels at the entrance to Keele Hall.⁴⁰ Although I used chalk rather than rice flour, I drew on a horizontal plane, crouching down and bending over the panels, which imparted a different physical gesture and rhythm.⁴¹ In the *kōlam* and Celtic meander patterns, the dots are laid in a grid format, a structure that has, argues Rosalind Krauss in her seminal essay *Grids* (1979) ‘remained emblematic of the modernist ambition’. Krauss (1979:50) states that:

It is not just the sheer number of careers that have been devoted to the exploration of the grid that is impressive, but the fact that never could exploration have chosen less fertile ground. As the experience of Mondrian amply demonstrated, development is precisely what the grid resists. But no one seems to have been deterred by that example, and modernist practice continues to generate ever more instances of grids.

But why would a structure sustain ‘itself so relentlessly while at the same time being so impervious to change’ (1979:51)? Krauss identified the issue as lying within modernism. It was, she argued, a period where the gap between the sacred and the secular had widened considerably. As a structure with its roots firmly planted within the geometry of the square, the Islamic symbol for strength and certainty, the grid made it possible for artists to produce very material objects, while at the same time implying a connection to ideas of spirit and ‘being’. Thus, for Krauss, the grid was a means to surreptitiously reintroduce the spiritual into an art form that appeared, on the surface, to be wholly material, making a work ‘sacred and secular’ at the same time.

As a geometric construct, the grid lends itself to repetition and division and the creation of rectangles of various lengths and sizes, rhomboids and parallelograms. The grid acts both spatially and temporally, fulfilling multiple functions. For example, it can serve as a tool that navigates distance, like the overlays on a map or it can symbolise abstract space, as in Agnes Martin’s paintings; ethereal, minimal works with lightly pencilled grids over a cloudy grey canvas. It can also function as both structure and framework (Elderfield, 1972), constituting

⁴⁰ With *kōlam* patterns traditionally being placed at the threshold of the home, as a sign of welcome and to keep evil spirits at bay, the intention was that these drawings would have a similar symbolic function for the delegates attending the conference. A time lapse video of the drawing event can be seen at: <https://vimeo.com/455529253>

⁴¹ While drawing I had many conversations with visitors about the work, its cultural connotations and their own experiences of drawing. I had many re-visits too, as people came back to see how the drawing was developing. Working publicly in this way reminded me of the value of direct interaction with the audience.

either the entirety of all that is displayed or providing the underlying organising schema, an armature that can be in-filled. With a lineage that can be traced back to ancient cultural traditions, surveyed here through the Islamic, Celtic and Indian pattern generation systems, the grid materially maps the surface.



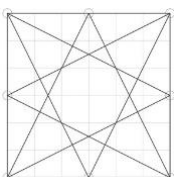
Figure 37: *Dot to Dot* (2015) *kōlam* drawings in situ at Keele Hall, Keele University. Chalk and blackboard paint on board panels, 100 x 100 cms each.

Findings

In the early stages of doctoral research, I explored a range of different graphic traditions. By challenging my established practice and familiar ways of working, these practical experiences shifted my perspective. Initially, I had thought that my doctoral enquiry was about how structural components—be that a design, trace or generating framework—directly related to surface in an under/over dichotomy. However, the cultural explorations exposed the limitations of this trajectory, highlighting integrated relationships that challenged whether structure lay below the surface.

I outlined a variety of structural strategies beginning with the division of the circle as the ritual starting point for drawing geometric patterns. I explored other foundational shapes—the semi-circle, the square and the grid—that can be tessellated, divided, gridded, repeated and transformed into a host of designs. These are symbolic forms that cut across and unite different cultures, revealing the paradox of the material leading to the spiritual. The majority of geometric patterns are based on the repetition of a single motif, designed in such a way that recurring components fit together in sequence. Rather than creating a pattern to fit a set area, artisans divided the available surface into a grid and then repeated the individual motif in each unit.⁴² Cross-cultural strategies of patterning were initially about surface as an expanse of pictorial space and how that space is filled—covering a surface. It is a strategy that privileges continuity of form rather than containment and relates to the spirograph drawings and the practice at the start of the project.

⁴² In *Patterns of Eternity: Sacred Geometry and the Starcut Diagram* (2009), Malcolm Stuart surveys similarities between different cultures showing how the 'starcut diagram' underlies many significant patterns and proportions across the world. The 'starcut diagram' (below) is a simple way of dividing the area of a square. It underlies many significant patterns and proportions across the world, from the Great Pyramids of Egypt to Raphael's frescos in Europe (Stuart, 2009).



My workshop experiences exposed ways in which the geometric discipline both limits and stimulates pattern generation. Tetlow argued that the strength of Celtic work is how it incorporates a degree of improvisation and freedom for the artisan over what he described as ‘the rigid’ geometry. In contrast, Richard Henry, an expert in Islamic geometric drawing, views it as a liberating device that provides the artist with a framework from which to work freely, without the fear of losing control. For Henry, it is through the subsequent introduction of colour, materials, form and scale that individuality is expressed. These two approaches emphasise different interpretations of what autonomy entails. I recognised in my own work an alternative approach in which structure is unsettled by the nuance emerging from the human hand, from process-derived inconsistencies or deliberate subversions that extend beyond the frame (such as folding, tilting or shine). Rather than the geometry being a supporting under-structure, it became a counterpoint to pattern. These elements contradict each other and set up a tension which is central to my intention; pattern cancels out the geometry, and the geometry cancels out the pattern so that from one angle you see the geometry and the other the pattern. In this way, deceptively simple structures give way to an unfolding complexity with the spatial possibilities of geometric form intermittently working with and against the surface of the artwork.

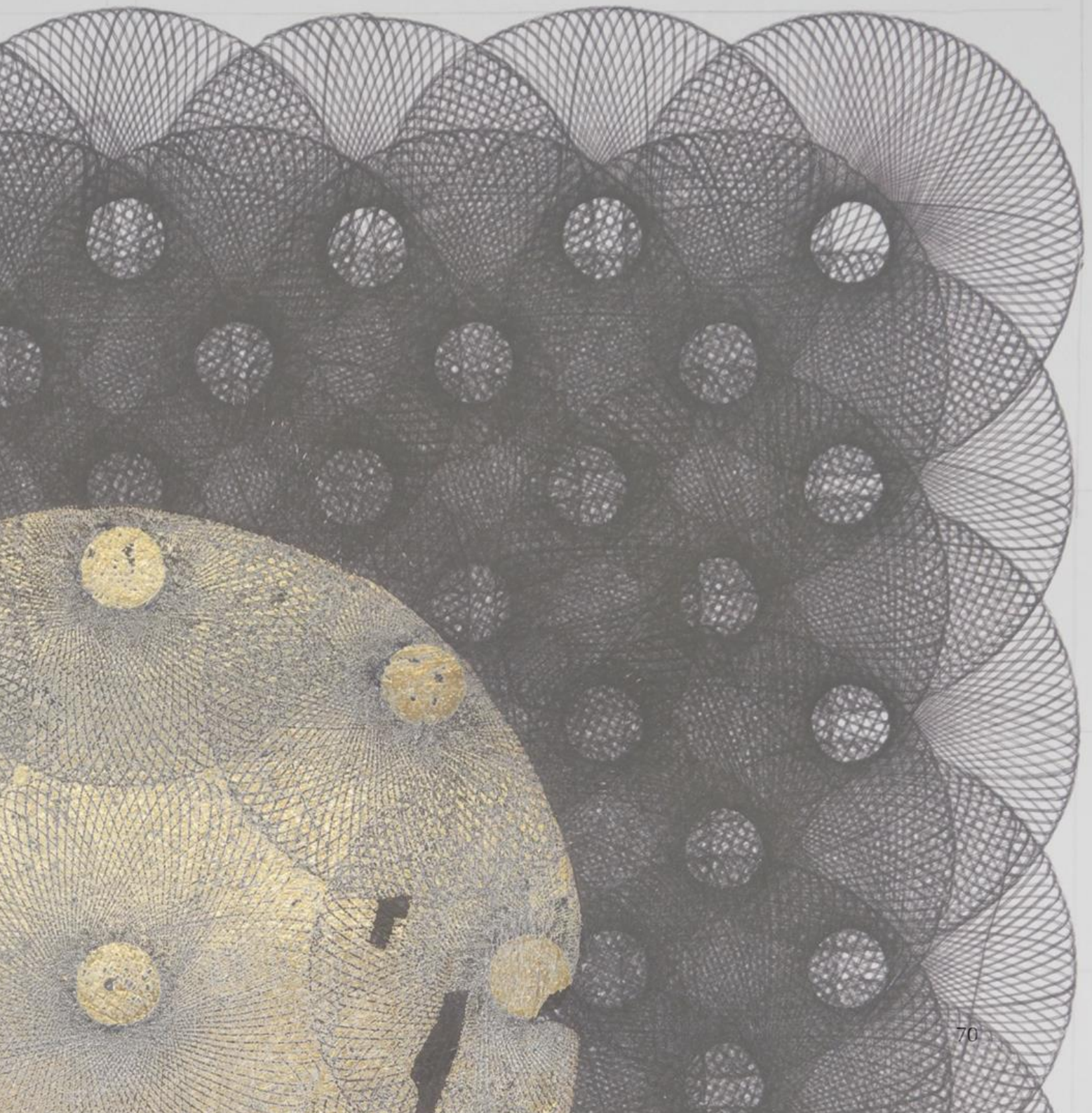
The workshops opened new ways of understanding surface from the perspective of the maker, especially the link between the making body and the drawn/painted outcomes. Covering an expanse can occur on both monumental and intimate scales, but each requires adjustment of gesture and breathing. The body leaves its mark on the surface, whether in the breathless, tightly controlled space of manuscript painting (discussed in detail in Chapter Two), or the rhythm of the crouching body in *kōlam* design.

These explorations of cultural graphic traditions were a practical reminder that visual language does not exist in isolation.⁴³ The approach to geometric structuring across cultures shows a common impulse to seek spatial order. It also provides a basis for generating form

⁴³ This knowledge does not necessarily follow a linear development. During the Celtic drawing course (2016) Tetlow explained how, when looking back over history, there are examples of findings that have been discovered then forgotten, re-discovered then forgotten, countering the understanding of development as always being progressive.

that is not secondary or 'under' because it is closely allied with the cultural meaning of the work. Mapping was initially seen as 'underdrawing', whether geometric lines or the dotted frameworks. But experience revealed no reason to call such structures 'under'. They are as much on the surface as the rest of the drawing, actively participating in a visual tension between potential and actualisation. Thus, the research pointed to ways in which the structural mapping was only a guide, followed at will, a response to which does not hide structure 'below' but hides it in plain sight.

Chapter Two: Marking Time



The focus of the previous chapter was on pattern generating systems, explored as starting points for my investigations of surface. Informed by practical workshops based on different cultural traditions and aesthetic understandings of geometric forms, I encountered a range of structural strategies for the inward supporting components of a variety of artwork surfaces. What became apparent in doing this was how my exploration of surface kept referencing aspects of time in different and sometimes contradictory guises. There was, for example, the additive nature of pattern which at first seemed to be about 'clock-time' but working at different scales showed a relationship more akin to speed and distance. Layering processes also appeared to be related to time in an archaeological sense, but this broke down when layers refused to be seen in the sequence of their formation. Paintings were also materially unstable and threw up questions about the future appearance of the surface. And there was always the vexed question of when an artwork can be judged to be completed. Everywhere the experience of surface seemed laden with matters of past, present and future.

The significance of time, as a means of further understanding the complexity of the conceptual and actualised depth of surface, is therefore the focus of this chapter. Using four concepts of time: speed, duration, lifetime and palimpsest, I probe ways in which the surface of artworks registers different temporalities. Beginning with speed, as a linear, progressive and chronological way of looking at time that is commonly understood, I explore the relationship between time, distance and surface. How does additive building register the passing of time on the surface? And to what extent does speed relate to the scale of surface and to our experience of fast and slow?

Informed by research on Indian *kōlams*, complex meander patterns and Alfred Gell's notion of cognitive teasing (1998), the second section explores duration as the time during which something continues. I look at ways in which the durational aspect of time manifests on the surface. A specific focus is the 'apotropaic' quality of patterns 'that hold the viewer, enforcing an experience of temporal variation', as was noted by Carolyn Bailey Gill, editor of *Time and the Image* (2000:80).

The notion of lifetime is the focus of the third section. Thinking about time from the perspective of the artwork itself (Groom, 2013:15), I identify temporal material processes associated with ageing. These are processes that occur over an extended period, evidence of continual becoming. If the surface of an artwork is in a continuous state of development—often irreversible, when can it be understood as complete or completed?

The final section explores the notion of palimpsest, a surface that has been reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form. I explore the multi-layered effects of time as a spatial manifestation by focusing on how merging, erasure and the interpenetration of layers (Galpin:1998) disrupt process-based sequences. Thus, the idea of chronological layering, of the sort associated with archaeological depth, is problematised. A theoretical grounding for this chapter draws on the writings of Alfred Gell (1992, 1998), Jussi Parikka (2018), Ella Hendriks (2015) and Robert MacFarlane (2019). Examples from my established practice and artworks made in the course of the enquiry inform the broader discussion. These necessarily describe my research journey forwards and backwards, mixing before, during and after, in ascertaining what surface can tell us about time, and importantly, what time can tell us about surface.

2.1 Speed and distance

In this section I use the notion of speed, the distance travelled per unit of time (Jones, 2020) and a chronological way of looking at time as it is commonly understood, to explore the relationship between time, distance and surface. Prior to my doctoral study, my spirograph drawings registered the passing of time through a process of additive building, reflecting the linear and progressive nature of the artworks. Through a slow and laborious process, the repetition of the same motif incrementally built the image. The slip of my hand, or the moment when pens ran dry, remained on the surface as a trace of the drawing's journey and a visual record of the process.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ For further writing on my spirograph process see, Halliwell, L., (2013) 'Thoughts on a Repetitive Process.' Catalogue essay to accompany the exhibition *Negotiated Positions* as part of the *Repeat Repeat Conference*, published by the Centre for Practice as Research in the Arts, University of Chester. <http://www.lesleyhalliwell.com/writings-by-lesley-halliwell/2013/9/27/negotiated-positions>

Repetition produced a surprising amount of variety with no two Spirograph motifs ever being the same because of variations caused by the pressure of the hand, ink flow, slippages and mistakes. Yet it was precisely their similarity that invited the viewer to distinguish these small inconsistencies, subtle details that would be missed if the motifs were not so analogous. This finding is allied to Deleuzean theory, where repetition and difference are closely aligned (in Williams, 2003:12).

I titled all the drawings from this period by the sum of the segments of time they took to make with each ballpoint pen containing enough ink for 40 minutes of drawing time and each spirograph motif taking 60 seconds to draw. Thus, clock-time, 'as a continuum that can be divided' (Bal, 2000:62), was recorded in each drawing's title. Yet, in my experience of drawing, sometimes time flew by while at other times it dragged, when minutes felt like hours. Helen Carnac is an artist and academic who has written extensively on craft and the 'slow revolution'. She says of her making process, '[f]ast, slow are speeds and words after all and when put into action fast may feel slow, slow may feel fast... to pin a word to an action is very difficult' (2010). Thus, speeds don't always equate to 'clock' time. Henri Bergson's distinction 'between the thought of time and its experience' (Heathfield, 2009) is useful here to understand time as it is felt, like the fast and slow that Carnac describes, rather than as something divisible and monochronic.

The disparity between experiential time and production time was further challenged by scale, in that speed is not always a factor of distance travelled. Prior assumptions about the size of artworks and the relationship to speed were questioned while studying medieval illumination techniques at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts (PSTA) in 2016. In contrast to the large scale spirograph drawings that celebrated, in a prism of multicolour glory, the time involved in their making, the miniature painting that I undertook at PSTA was postage-stamp small, yet equally time-consuming to make.



Figure 38: An example of miniature gilding work made during the medieval Illumination course, the Princes School of Traditional Arts, London (2016). Gesso gilding, gold leaf and acrylic on paper, 5 x 6 cm.

To give a sense of the scale of these works, figure 38 shows an example of raised ornament on a patterned ground placed next to the tip of a standard pencil.⁴⁵ The gilded letter 'B' sits on a 30 x 35mm hand-painted 'diaper' pattern, the detailing of which was so small that, at times, I had to use a magnifying glass.⁴⁶ Using a tiny 001 paintbrush, I found the process to be painstakingly time-consuming and slow in both execution and experience. The tiny, tightly controlled movements necessary for this level of precision demanded just as much time as my previous large-scale drawings, but the distance travelled was much smaller.⁴⁷ Holding the body still, hunched over the paper, controlling the brushstrokes with the thumb, forefinger and wrist, took a tremendous amount of physical energy and concentration; a process that could not be rushed, driving home the monumental aspect of the miniature surface. My experience of working with a magnifying glass expanded my understanding of speed and its relationship to distance. I realised that measurement could be reduced while the experience became amplified. 'To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour', wrote William Blake in 1789 ('Auguries of Innocence', in Erdman, 1988:490); an expression of the experiential magnitude of the world seen up close.

In light of the significance of speed and its relationship to distance and scale, I instigated studio investigations on a much smaller scale in comparison to my previous spirograph drawings. The reduction in scale was a significant development in my practice. Subsequent artworks made included a series of more intimate gilded drawings (*G(u)ilty* and *Tilted Plane* (2015/16)), as well as palm-sized artist's books (*Lumen, Breathe* and *Jouer La Lumiere/Play of Light* (2018)). Despite the reduced scale, the speed of execution was not necessarily quicker. Gilding is a time-consuming process which involves several different procedures: the preparation of the surface using a lacquer, the application of the glue, the laying of the metal leaf, burnishing, drawing onto and into the gilding, and varnishing.

⁴⁵ Raised ornamentation is a traditional gilding technique. Layers of gesso, the consistency of single cream, are applied to the surface. These set solid to form a raised dome which can then be gilded.

⁴⁶ In architecture and other decorative arts, a 'diaper' pattern is a decorative repeat pattern that consists of squares (chequers), rectangles, or lozenge shapes.

⁴⁷ For example, figure 38 took 9 hours work over two days to complete, which included the application of the gesso layers, the gilding and the painting of the background pattern.

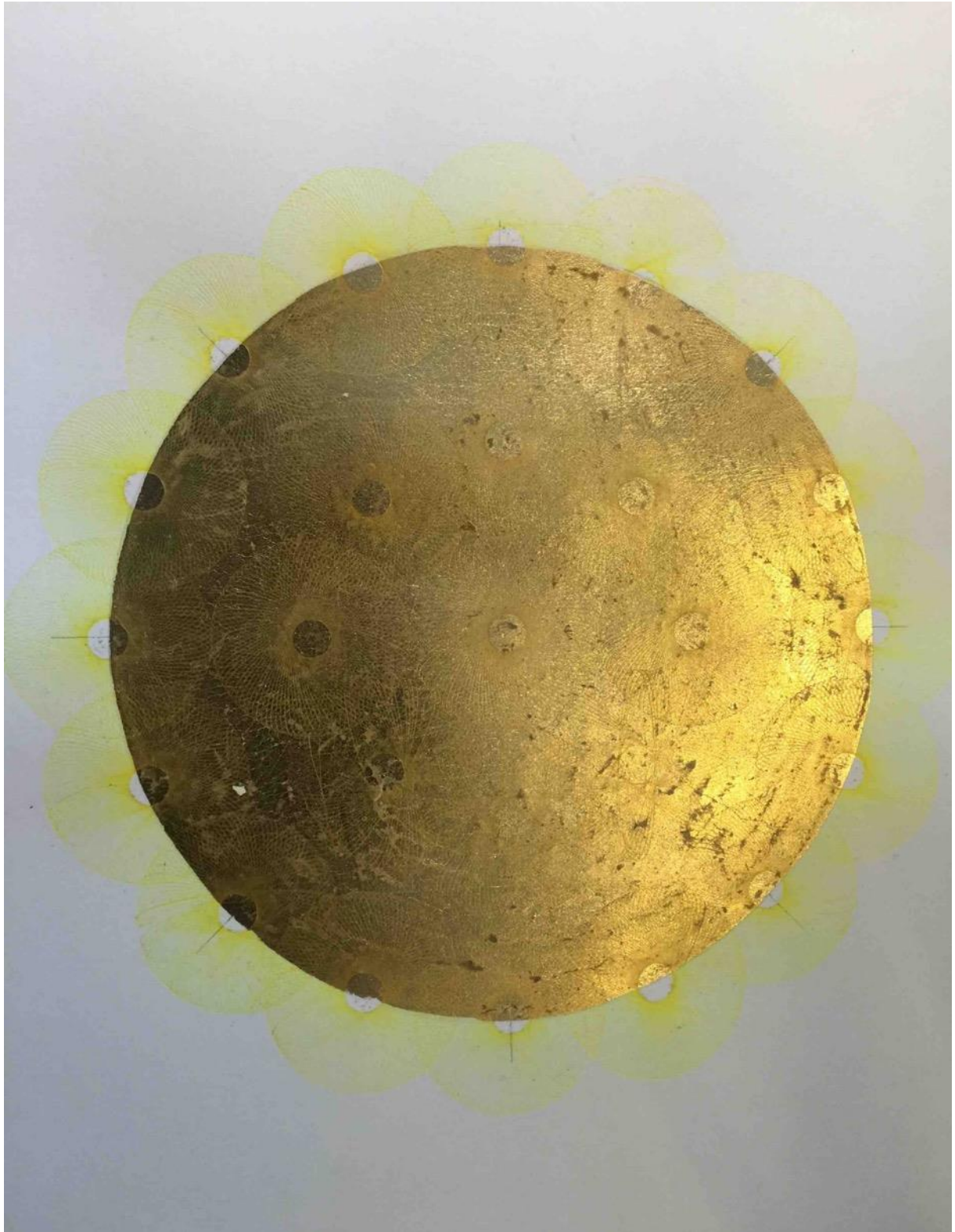


Figure 39: *G(u)ilty* (2015/16). Gold leaf, pencil, ballpoint pen and lacquer on paper, 41 x 70 cms.

After having embodied miniature drawing techniques during the medieval illumination course, these more intimate artworks continued to challenge my understanding of speed as not relating to linear length as a measurable quantity but to distance travelled as an experience. The nineteenth-century essayist, William Hazlitt, noted in 'On Great and Little Things' (1869:316-337) how, when the eye focused on something small, the distance expanded and, when looking at something large, the distance contracted. He said, 'The organs of the mind, like the pupil of the eye, may be contracted or dilated to view a broader or narrower surface, and yet find sufficient variety to occupy its attention in each' (1869:335). Here, Hazlitt articulates the adjustment of experience to fit close-up and the far-away viewing.



Figure 40: *Unravelled* (2017) film stills by Unknown Fields Division in collaboration with Tushar Prakash.

Expanding on the notion of micro and macro scales, Jussi Parikka, Professor of Technological Culture and Aesthetics at the University of Southampton, explored the multiple scales of the fashion industry. His talk 'A Planetary Surface' at the conference *Apparition – the (im)materiality of the Modern Surface* centred around a film called *Unravelled* (2017) by Unknown Fields Division.⁴⁸ Based on visits to India and Bangladesh, the film depicts the 'planetary conveyor belt' of contemporary fashion with the journey of cloth traced from the various scales of surface as they are encountered across planetary infrastructures, space and place—from screens to materials, to clothes and threads. Parikka uses the term 'media archaeology' to describe this complex landscape of surface and its various scales. Deep time was first described in 1788 by the Scottish geologist James Hutton and coined as a term 200 years later by the American author John McPhee (Farrier, 2016). The term describes the bewildering expanse of geological history where our understanding of speed is complexified by millennia, epochs and aeons rather than minutes, seconds, months or years. Both media archaeology and deep time see the vast scale of time inscribed on the temporal 'textures' of surface. Thus, there seems no limit to macro or micro scales of exploration.

It was through my studio explorations of macro and micro working—mainly testing the monumental aspect of the miniature surface—that I found that it is not only the distance covered that changes with speed, but also how those distances manifest at different scales on the surface of the artwork. From the vastness of detailed miniature surfaces to the expansiveness of large spirograph drawings, speed disrupts our sense of scale-distance ratios.

2.2 Duration

Duration describes the cultural perception of time's movement, an approach that takes in the pre-industrial social concept of circular time, rhythm and return. In Adrian Heathfield's essay 'Thoughts on Duration' (2009), he describes the aesthetics of duration as a kind of entanglement; the artworks' inability to leave the viewer alone. He goes on to reference

⁴⁸ Unknown Fields Division is a nomadic design research studio group directed by Kate Davies and Liam Young. Centred around a series of expeditions the group make provocative objects, books and films that challenge global systems, uncover industrial ecologies and draw attention to the precarious relationship between technology and culture. Further information can be found at www.unknownfieldsdivision.com

Mieke Bal who notes in 'Sticky Images: The Foreshortening of Time' (2000:79-99) that

the quality of the visual object subject to duration has a kind of 'stickiness'; such works stick around – they persist in time – and stick to their spectators, conditioning a tactile attentiveness (Heathfield, 2009:97).

Bal's choice of the term stickiness is both appropriate and vivid, communicating the idea of not being able to get away from something or shake it off. From the maker's standpoint, there is the inability to shake off a habit, a way of working, disposition or attitude. And from the viewer's perspective, there is the way an image can entice you into looking, capturing your attention and encouraging you to slow down, to change the tempo of the visual experience (Reed, 2017:9).

Stickiness is also a word that anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998) used to describe Celtic knot-work patterns and meander designs such as the Southern Indian *kōlams*. At first glance, *kōlam* patterns appear to consist of a single continuous line that follows a sinuous path between the rows and columns of dots. But in most cases, although I have come across exceptions to this rule, the *kōlam* is composed of several looped structures that are superimposed but give the illusion of contiguity. Even when you know that a *kōlam* consists of separate units, it is still difficult to decipher its construction and 'read' it other than as a whole unit. While one looping path can be followed at a time, it is difficult to mentally hold the first shape, while you follow another one. Gell compares such *kōlam* designs to a four-part musical score, such as the song *London's Burning*. Sung 'in-the-round' with staggered starting points, the four successive parts can be heard individually, yet, it is almost impossible for the amateur to listen to all four parts simultaneously (Gell, 1998:85). The mind alternates between hearing the different sections, moving between one and another. Thus, elements of the song are listened to at various times through a fluctuating continuum of advancement and recession.

Similarities can be drawn with Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting* (1963). Presenting as a flat black surface, extended viewing 'reveals more than one shade of black and an underlying geometric structure' (MoMA, no date). Divided into nine squares painted in varying hues, like the song *London's Burning*, 'as one square advances, the rest of the surface tends to recede

into obscurity' (Reed, 2017:13). Likewise, when trying to decipher the meandering trails of *kōlam* patterns, the viewers' capacity to deal with continuity and discontinuity, as well as the detail and the whole, is challenged. This grappling produces a pleasurable frustration for the viewer and a type of cognitive teasing which constitutes Gell's meaning of the 'stickiness' of patterns (1998:85).



Figure 41: *Kōlam* studies (2015) from the drawing performance *Dot to Dot*. Chalk and black board paint on board, 100 x 100 cms.

Cognitive teasing is also linked to the function of *kōlams* which have an important protective role. The most important in this context is the apotropaic quality (the power to avert evil influences) of such stickiness. The argument goes that any evil spirit trying to enter the house would be so fascinated by the coils and convolutions that they would become entangled within them and thus rendered harmless (Gell, 1998:84). Paradoxically, therefore, these complex patterns are designed both to keep demons at bay (a protective screen) and also to bring about an attachment between people and things. Thus, argues Gell, the ability of the pattern to engage and enchant the viewer (1998:74) is shared, whether that be friend or foe. *Horror Vacui* (2019), with intricate patterning that covers the entire support (figure 42), evokes Gell's sticky 'demonic fly-paper' (1998:84). Consisting of a large circle snugly positioned within the frame of the painting, the structured pattern around the edge contrasts with the looser 'disintegrating' pattern contained within the circle. A central line splits the image in half, a bit like a walnut, and presents as an organising principle, providing a sense of symmetry and a visual point of reference for the viewer. The shine of the graphite and the contrast between matt and gloss paint offers another layer of cognitive teasing as sections of the painting appear to move forward, and then recede, depending on the light and viewing angle.

As both maker and viewer of the painting, its maze-like structure continues to unsettle me. I scan the surface of the image trying to make sense of its symmetry which, once within my grasp, appears only to slip away again. I still find this painting jarring to look at, and it had gone through many versions in search of a more settled conclusion. I may revisit it in the future—raising the question of 'endings' and when an artwork is completed—but for now, the painting is finished. Perhaps, like the *Alice of Wonderland*, I too have to learn to accept the image's 'nonsense' for it to make perfect sense (Deleuze, 1997:21).

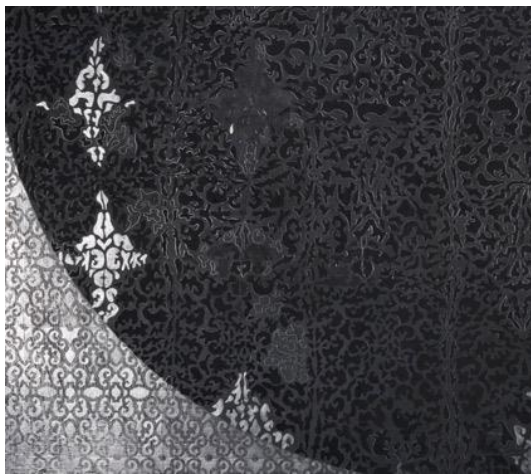
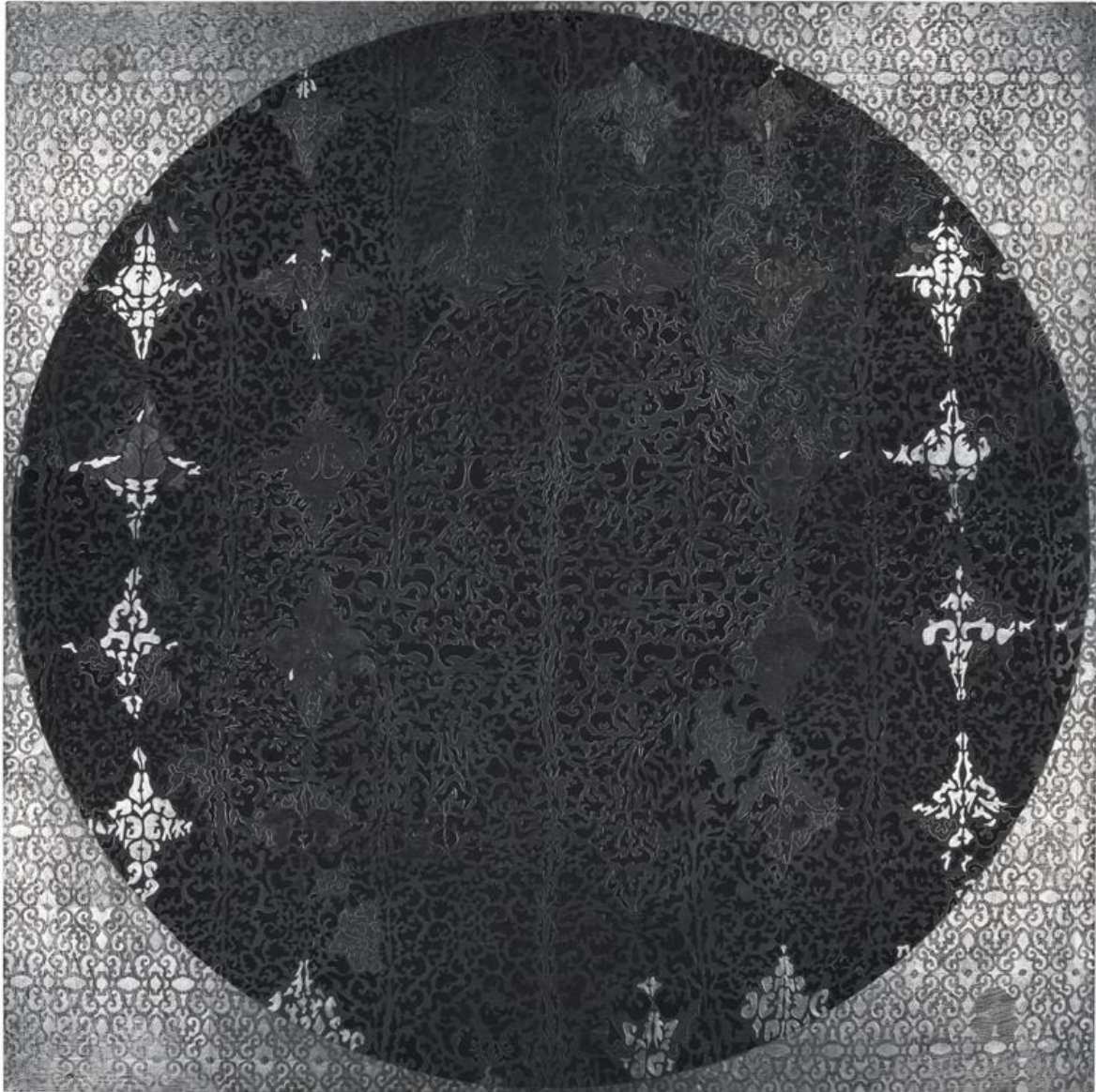


Figure 42: *Horror Vacui* (2019) Casein paint, pencil and lacquer on board, 120 x 120 cms and details (below)

Informed by broader cultural understandings gleaned from my research on Indian *kōlams*, Celtic meander patterns and cognitive teasing, my studio explorations explored complex patterning on and across the surface. The intricate patterning of *Horror Vacui* (figure 42), with its inherent tension between order and chaos, takes on board Gell's metaphor of 'stickiness', as a way of promoting attachment between the surface of an artwork and the viewer. Its surface embroils the viewer, encouraging an extended viewing experience. In the past, I tended to think of duration as connected to production but in this scenario duration is related to dwelling, enchantment and even entrapment: a much more poetic way to spend time. Thus, the durational aspect of surface is where content is deferred, unfolds or changes over the time of experiencing it.

2.3 Lifetime

If we understand duration to refer to the time during which something continues, then artworks also have an ongoing life beyond the making time. All materials gradually alter with chemical changes occurring continuously, often so slowly that we don't tend to notice, but manifest eventually on the surface. Ella Hendriks, the senior conservator at the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, explained in 'Valuing Van Gogh's Surface Colours', (Oslo, 2015), how *Bedroom in Arles* (1888) changed colour over the years. Staff at the museum used digital technology to analyse the painting's pigment degradation. They then reconstructed a digital version of the painting as it probably looked when first painted (figure 43, right) illustrating how the red pigments have faded (left hand image), turning the original purple wall blue and the pink floor brown.



Figure 43: Vincent van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles* (1888). Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; and (right) digital reconstruction.

Evidenced in his many letters, van Gogh had a good understanding of the limitations of the pigments he used. He wrote to his brother Theo in 1889 that, '[p]aintings fade like flowers'. In an earlier letter, he notes how, '*— all the colours that Impressionism has made fashionable are unstable, all the more reason to boldly use them too raw, time will only soften them too much*'.⁴⁹ There is evidence that van Gogh compensated for the colour change that would inevitably occur. Hendriks explained how van Gogh knew that the red lake pigments were prone to fading and thus painted with thick strokes, hoping that the extra paint would keep the colours brighter for longer (Evert, 2016).

In the field of art conservation, the understanding of the inter-relationship between surface and structure has developed considerably. In the past, it was thought that a surface could be restored to a reasonable condition by infilling or re-varnishing. However, recent research from material scientists has shown that although conservators are dealing with the surface, many reactions are continuing beneath the visible material plane. The surface is unequivocally related to its substrate; tampering with one will directly impact on the other, and the task of much conservation work is to maintain equilibrium between the two.

Given that I tend to work with materials that alter relatively quickly—biro ink fades with exposure to light, and metal leaf oxidises if left unprotected—I have thought much about the afterlife of my artworks and the temporal changes that will occur. The historical acknowledgement of the impermanency of materials raised the question of whether there were particular material changes that I could predict and plan for. Unvarnished silver leaf drawings made during 2016 are showing signs of oxidization in 2020, a process catalysed by polluted air containing sulphur gases. Slowly, a chemical reaction takes place at the exposed surface of the silver forming the compound called silver sulphide. Dark in colour, the silver sulphide is responsible for the tarnished appearance.⁵⁰ In my gilded drawings it was the edges of the silver leaf, perhaps more exposed to air, that began to change first, initially by turning a darker, more golden shade of silver which deepened as more time passed. The

⁴⁹ Letter 595, to Theo van Gogh, Arles, on or about Wednesday 11 April 1888.

⁵⁰ 'The principal sulphur compounds are hydrogen sulphide (probably together with other reduced sulphur species), sulphur dioxide and sulphate aerosols and mists' (Cullis and Hirschler, 1980:1263).

change of colour occurred unevenly across the gilded surface, with some areas turning darker than others. I also noted how some drawings oxidised more quickly despite being made at the same time and kept in the same conditions.

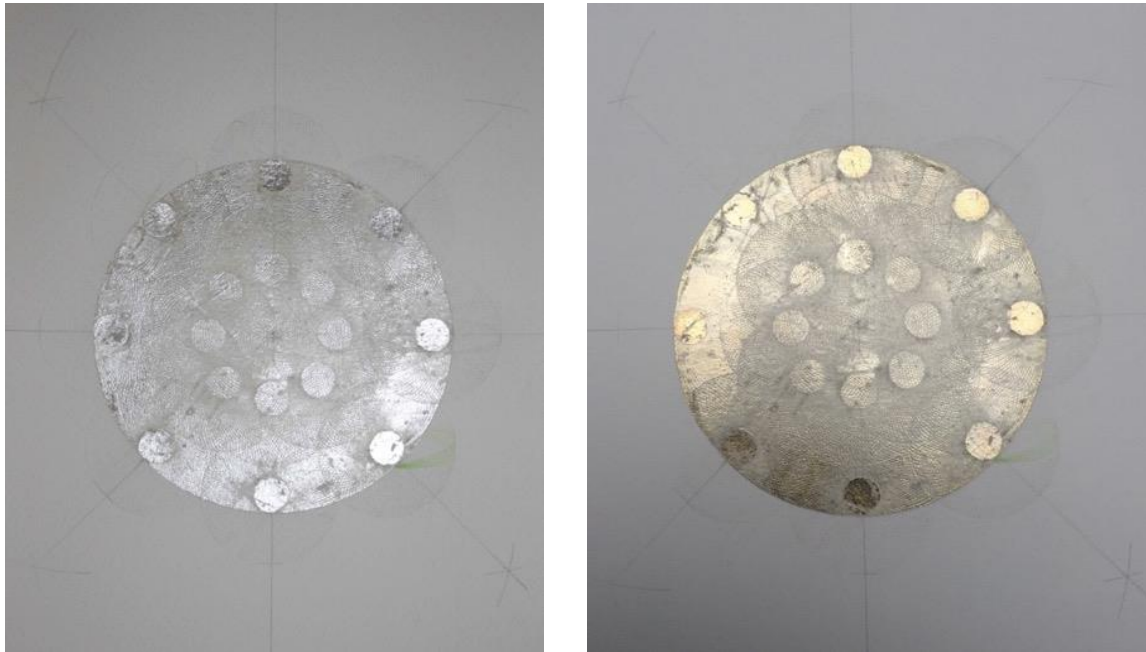


Figure 44: *Tilted Plane: Octagon with Green ink* (2014). Silver leaf and pencil on paper and (right), photographed in 2020 showing signs of oxidation.

The tarnishing added greater nuance and depth to the surface of the drawings by defining some edges and producing more significant tonal variation. However, it also meant that the initial bright silver glow was lost as the work took on a tone more closely aligned to gold leaf. The images in figure 44 show changes caused by the oxidation process. The left-hand image is freshly gilded with silver leaf and on the right, the same image six years later with signs of tarnishing around the edge of the metal leaf clearly visible.⁵¹ At any point, this relatively rapid oxidation process can be largely halted by sealing with a layer of protective varnish. Thus, with material knowledge, changes can be anticipated and planned for.

⁵¹ Note that while freshly applied silver leaf can appear 'golden' under a warm light source, these images were taken under natural light and represent their 'true' colour.

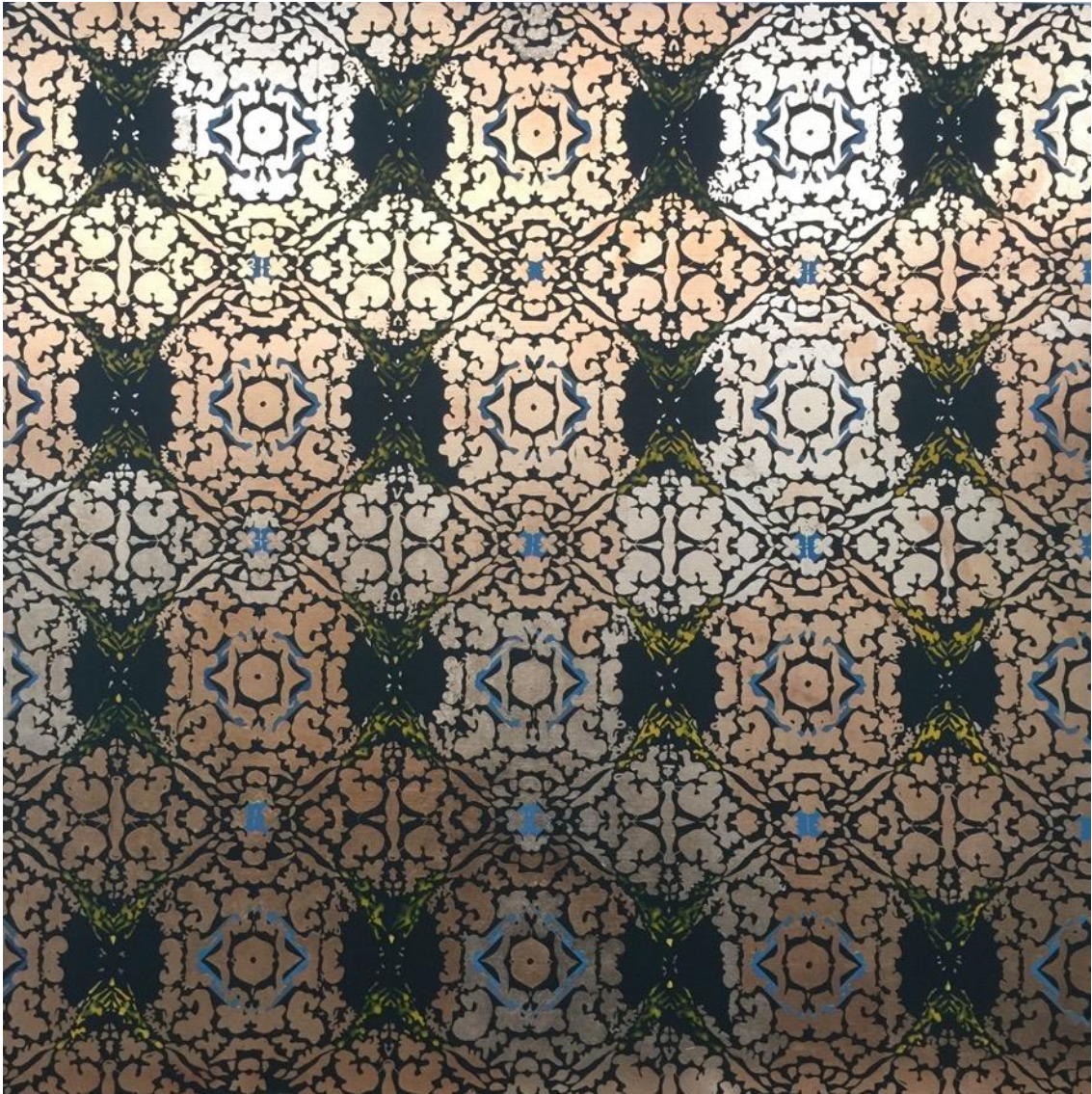


Figure 45: (Top) *Surface Splendour* (2020) and detail (below). Casein paint, gold body and copper leaf on board, 120 x 120 cm.

As discussed earlier, van Gogh expected the colour of his paint to fade over time, and therefore he used thicker paint to compensate (Hendriks & Brokerhof, 2015). I decided to allow my gilded artworks to oxidise to gain further understanding and have not yet halted the process. Two other paintings, *In Cahoots with the Sun* (2019) and *Surface Splendour* (2020) (figures 45) have been made with unvarnished copper leaf. I am expecting that, in time, the copper will eventually 'carbonate' and take on a blue/green patina typical of Verdigris. Twelve months after the first application of the leaf, the copper had deepened in tone but had not turned green. The darker and lighter tones of the copper leaf, visible in the detail of the painting, were applied ten months apart and demonstrate the change already occurring. This ongoing process raises the question of 'endings' and the finality of the artwork. Is an artwork completed when the artist has finished their work or is it in the future when chemical changes have taken their course or, is it at the extreme when an artwork falls into ruin and eventually disintegrates into dust, that its conclusion is marked?



Figure 46: Robert Smithson (1970) *Spiral Jetty*. Salt Lake City, Utah. Reproduced by kind permission of Hold/Smithson Foundation and Dia Art Foundation, New York. Photo credit: George Steinmetz.

This notion of becoming is apparent in Robert Smithson's Land Art project *Spiral Jetty* (1970); an artwork that has remained a powerful visual image and metaphor for my understanding of these lifetime processes. Two years after Smithson installed his sculpture—a vast spiral of black basalt rock which protruded into the red water of the Great Salt Lake in Utah—it completely disappeared, sinking beneath the lake's surface. After years of brief reappearances, *Spiral Jetty* re-surfaced following a drought in 2002, the black rock having mutated into a glittering white spiral of encrusted salt. Here is an example of an artwork continuing to change after it was completed by the artist, epitomised by Roland Barthes in *Death of an Author* (1967), drawing attention to the unstable nature of surface and the authorship of 'endings'.



Figure 47: *Portal* (2000 and 2017). Ballpoint pen and silver leaf on paper, 60 x 70 cm.

Portal is a small drawing made with a ballpoint pen and silver leaf on paper. The black spirograph square of the background was drawn in 2000 and existed as a work in its own right until I revisited it seventeen years later and 'made strange a surface' I thought I knew (Berman, 2015). On top of the contained and bounded square now sits a gilded porthole (or

is it a mirror?). But the apparent 'tear' in the metal leaf on the right-hand of the circle breaks the illusion, rupturing the picture plane and reminding the viewer of the materiality of surface while simultaneously revealing an 'under' surface. Nothing is stable here, over time, the ink will fade, and the silver leaf will tarnish while that tear is a window on the past, indexing the present, and signalling the instability of the future.

Elizabeth Grosz (2005) defines time as an active force characterised by chance and unpredictability. In advocating the temporality of 'becoming', she argues that grasping the actual uncertainty of time allows us to approach change in a less prescriptive way. The force of time, writes Grosz, is not just a characteristic of the living, but '... the dynamic impetus that enables life to become, to always be in the process of becoming, something other than it was' (Grosz, 2005:8). And here we have examples of time registering on the surface, not just at the point of completion by the artist, but as an ongoing lifetime process. The surface cannot be taken for granted because it is not fixed or absolute, but is, as I have encountered it, in a continual state of becoming.

2.4 Palimpsest

Palimpsest traditionally refers to partially effaced manuscripts on which later writing has been superimposed: 'a manuscript on which two or more successive texts have been written, each one being erased to make room for the next' (Price, 2004:6). Here, palimpsest refers to a surface that has been reused or altered but still bears visible traces of its earlier form. As a concept, it can be defined in three stages: the initial mark-making, the erasure, and then the addition of new mark-making. It is a term that suggests spatial rather than linear understanding of time, and this is important to the enquiry because it problematises depth and strata. Artist Richard Galpin, in his text *Erasure in Art: Destruction, Deconstruction, and Palimpsest* (1998) reiterates the idea that the process of layering and erasure disrupt an orderly sequential flow of time. Galpin (1998) suggests that palimpsest introduces the notion of erasure as part of a layering process, with a fluid relationship between the act of drawing and erasing; new erasure creates drawing, and a new drawing creates erasure. In this way, sequence is eclipsed and time 'thickened', creating multiple, interwoven temporalities.

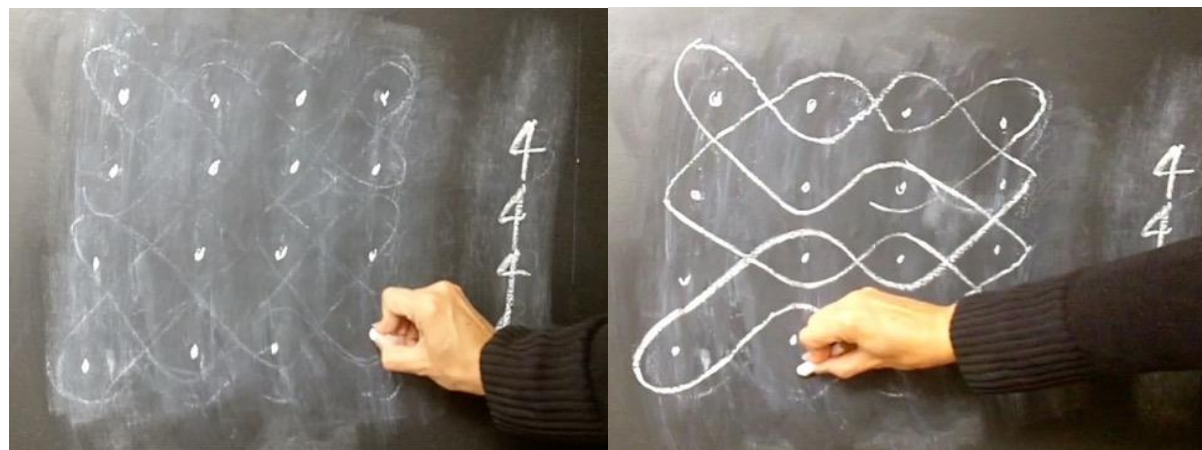


Figure 48: *Additive Trace* (2015). Video stills. Chalk on blackboard panel.

I made *Additive Trace* (2015) to explore the cycle of renewal and obliteration in the practice of *kōlam*. The resulting looped video exposed the process of drawing simple *kōlam* shapes (figure 48).⁵² Working on a blackboard with chalk, each completed image was wiped away before the next drawing was started; a process that echoed the daily drawing task of the Hindu women practitioners of the technique, suggesting the cyclical nature of time (i.e. day after day), and repetition with difference. In the video, repetition emphasised a layering effect as patterns were rubbed out and worked over, the ghost of what went before remaining as a semi-visible trace. While one is never able to bring back the previous drawings completely, the board conserves traces of the past while also being receptive to new mark-making.



Figure 49: Robert Rauschenberg (1953) *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Traces of ink and crayon on paper in gold leaf frame, 64 x 55 cm. Collection of SFMOMA.

In *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) Rauschenberg wanted to discover whether ‘an artwork could be produced entirely through erasure’ (SFMOMA, no date). Using rubber erasers to ‘rub-out’ a drawing that he had persuaded de Kooning to give him explicitly for this purpose, the ‘drawing’ took one month and about forty erasers to make/efface (National Collection of Fine Arts, 1976:75 cited in Galpin, 1998). It was a process that focused on the removal of marks rather than their accumulation with the feint ghostly tracings of de Kooning’s original drawing remaining on the surface of the paper.

⁵² *Additive Trace* can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgOLwRqaBkl>

The allure of Rauschenberg's image for me is in the remnants of what cannot be fully seen. The absence alludes to what Smithson refers to as, 'both memory and forgetfulness' (in Reed, 2017:13), with the past seeping into the present. Rebecca Solnit, in her anthology *Storming the Gates of Paradise* (2007), suggests that while 'memory is always incomplete, always imperfect, always falling into ruin, materials themselves, like other traces, are treasures: our links to what came before' (2007:20). There is an element of Richard Galpin's destruction and Solnit's material treasures at play in my own work. For example, the surface of *Tangled Time* (2016), with its heavily worked texture, grooves and gaps reflect an endless play of marking, erasing and re-marking that is 'always negotiated, always struggled over, never finished' (Price, 2004:6). Like a relic, the worn (away) surface of *Tangled Time* remains as a material treasure; a scarred surface that embodies all that has gone before.

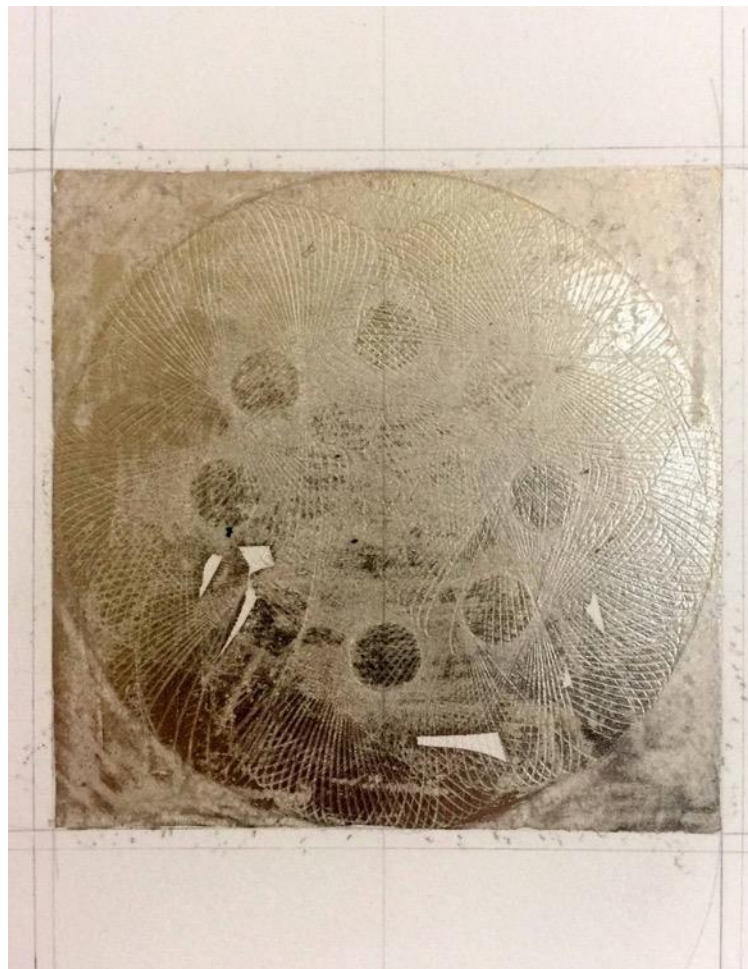


Figure 50: *Tilted Plane: Tangled Time* (2016), silver leaf and pencil on paper, 25 x 35 cm.

Landscape writer and cultural commentator Robert MacFarlane claims that ‘we live in an age of untimely surfacings’ (2019: online). Discussing a whole range of natural and climate change phenomena in *Underlands* (2019), from retreating ice, thawing perma-frost to droughts and natural disasters, MacFarlane charts a range of ‘unearthings’, which he refers to as ‘Anthropocene unburials’. MacFarlane cites the archaeologist Dora Petursdottir:

The problem is not that things become buried far down in strata but that they endure, outlive us, and come back at us with a force we didn’t realise they had, a dark force of sleeping giants (2019:14).

I took these latter words, ‘sleeping giants’ and used them as the title of a painting (figure 51). Consisting of sixteen ‘butterfly’ shapes positioned 4 x 4 on a dark brown sanded background the burnished little shapes sit proud from the painted ground. Working with a medium called ‘gold body’, used in traditional gesso gilding, I wanted the forms to present like little jewels, rising from the surface, as if they had simply bubbled up from below. The four central shapes have been gilded with gold leaf while I left the outer forms as burnished gesso, fading to a thinner mix on the bottom left to a pencilled outline (bottom right).

I completed this work while I was on my third Sidney Nolan Trust residency (2019). Time (I had four days) and material limitations (I ran out of gold body) meant that the shapes on the lower edge remained unfinished. When hung on the wall, its incompleteness did not look out of place, and I decided to leave the work as it was, with the central jewel-like shapes glistening as their raised surfaces caught the light. I liked the way the incomplete shapes, along the bottom-right edge, suggest a ‘world of depths [that] still rumbles under the surface’, threatening ‘to break through ...’ at any given moment (Deleuze, 1997:21-22). Equally, the motifs could be sinking, as in Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, only to re-emerge again in the future.



Figure 51: *Sleeping Giants* (2019). Casein paint, pencil, gold body and 23 carat gold leaf on board, 100 x 100 cm.

Like MacFarlane's Anthropocene (un)burials that 'disrupt simple notions of Earth history as orderly in sequence, with the deepest down being the furthest back', or Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), that leaves the trace of a memory, the palimpsest disrupts an orderly sequential flow and complexifies our experience of deep time. With 'epochs and periods (...) mixing and entangling', the disrupted surface embodies the multiple layered effects of time. Erasure, renewed mark-making and the trace, problematise depth and strata, and in this way, time is not only thickened but implicated in the various textures of surface.

Findings

Time is commonly understood as linear and chronological, like 'an arrow propelling us in unison from the past into the future' (Groom, 2013:2), moving always forward. Based on an additive approach to pattern, my spirograph drawings paralleled a linear approach to time and implied that the creation of surface was an extension of productive time. This 'clock time' is most closely associated with modernity and technological progress, a perspective that, once abandoned, allows us to see time as complex and multifarious. Stimulated by a change in understanding to adopt the concept of speed, new modes of working were explored: working at different scales, and with multi-layered processes. These practical investigations challenged previous assumptions. I showed that the build-up of surface over time, and the sense of that time passing, could be widely at variance with chronological notions, both for the maker and the viewer. The surface offered a field with macro and micro possibilities, where surprisingly the monumental and the miniature were not far removed because the viewer compensates for smaller scale with a wider focus. Like Alice's underground world, the experience of speed depends on this broad or narrow focus, making the inscription of time on a surface a factor of how closely that surface is interacted with. At the start of the research, my practice was conditioned to time as additive, linked to the incremental build-up of surface expanse. Working on different scales challenged this view; filling a square centimetre can be as time-consuming as filling a square metre. Understanding the inscription of time on a surface required a new vocabulary.

Informed by my research on Indian *kōlams* and meander patterns, I explored duration through the notion of the apotropaic quality of patterning, the capacity to entangle, disorientate and confuse the viewer—the dwell time of the artwork. Through the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of meander trails, I experienced ways in which complex patterning slowed perception down. By applying these understandings to my studio practice, surface was shown to elicit a tactile attentiveness, which, following Gell, is referred to here as ‘stickiness’. In this way, entanglement slowed down the tempo of looking and in turn, prolonged the viewing experience. And yet cognitive teasing was not just restricted to the intricacies of surface pattern. The viewer’s capacity to deal simultaneously with the whole image and its sectional components was further complexified by differences in colour, texture and reflectivity. These attributes worked together to lengthen the time over which surface is experienced by the viewer.⁵³

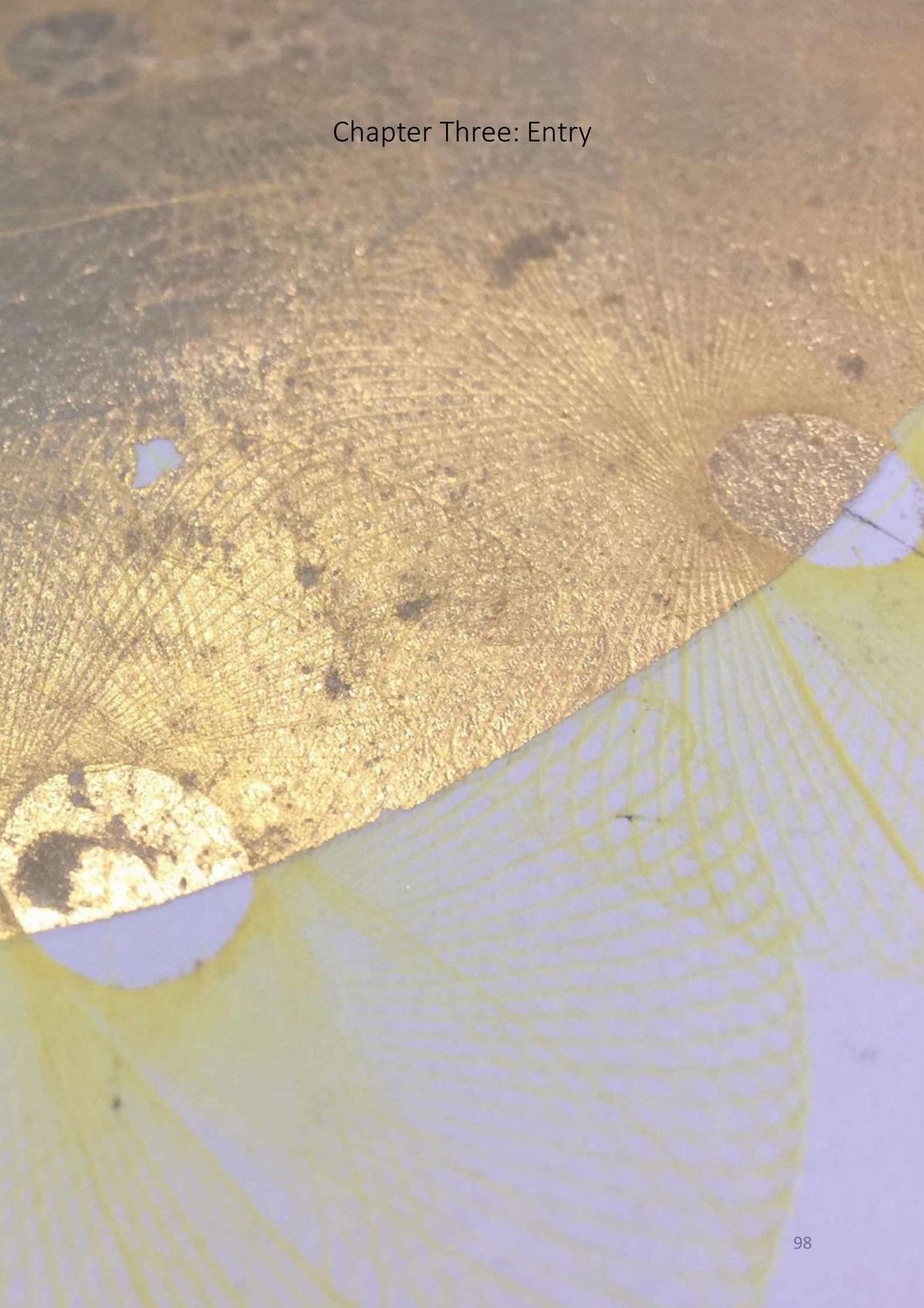
Through studio explorations, particularly the incorporation of gilding as an integrated aspect of the artworks, I also identified temporal material processes associated with ageing. While the viewer sees a work briefly, one or two times during an exhibition, artworks have their own lifetimes, and their own ageing processes. Surface is the site that references these understandings of time that are revealed through tarnishing, fading, craquelure. In this way, surface can become a metaphor for ageing. Initially, the oxidisation of the gilded surface was unplanned. The silver leaf drawings deepened in colour, taking on a warmer glow that appeared to darken around the edges of the metal leaf. Consequently, I questioned whether I should ‘fight’ the change by varnishing or accept it as part of the life of the artwork. Given that oxidisation is a process that continues to occur over an extended period and is irreversible, attention was also drawn to the difficulty of knowing when an artwork is completed, and then, moving beyond the control of the artist, evolving beyond its optimum viewing conditions. Temporal changes manifest on the surface, not because surface is inherently less stable, but because it is more exposed, and thus more visible.

⁵³ While I am aware of differentiating between the viewer’s experience of surface and my own (as both the maker and a viewer), there are times when they intermingle. For example, at first, my *kōlam* drawings seemed more about the experience of the maker and trying to embody the performative element of this type of artwork. Later, something of this embodiment re-emerged in works such as *Horror Vaccui* where similar intricacies of pattern embroil the viewer, resulting in an extended viewing experience. In this way, my initial embodied experiences of other traditions fed into artworks made later in the enquiry.

Lastly, it was found that time had a quality or 'thickness'. The surface of the artwork is built in a sequence that may involve the application or removal of layers. But these layers do not behave in an orderly way. When I paint, the paint doesn't respect the layer of application—instead, layers can come forward or recede in a different sequence to which they were created. Marks are added 'on top' of the metal leaf yet when this surface is indented with the pen nib the layers are compressed and, in a particular light, they appear embossed rather than indented. By refusing to be seen in a neat sequence, even a shallow surface can confuse our sense of layered time. In this way merging, blending, rubbing out or peeling back are processes that problematise the idea of chronological depth, and thus challenge understandings of surface as an under/over dichotomy. What emerges instead is a qualitative understanding of space in which surface cannot be separated from embodied experience (this is explored further in Chapter Five: The Viewing Body). And amidst all this surface interplay, the blank canvas can be inferred as a past state. The past, present and future become entangled in the thickness of these layers both experientially and symbolically. The surface is a site in which we expect to find time's passage like the wrinkles or scars of a time-weathered body. In this way, the surface is redolent of time.

Surface tells us that there are many different temporalities, conceptual and actual, simultaneously at play. The surface somehow holds these multiple temporalities in place for the viewer to orchestrate. While providing a record of the passing of time, the hand-crafted surface enables the viewer to negotiate an understanding of time through scale, trace, mark-making and spatial composition. Expressed here as speed, duration, lifetime and palimpsest, surface collaborates with time through its interactivity (metaphorical distance travelled), its stickiness (an ability to promote attachment and longer viewing experiences), its continual becoming (life-time material changes) and its thickness (multi-layered and multi-directional). I suggest that we need to think of surface as a site that enables an ongoing encounter—surface is active in time.

Chapter Three: Entry



In the previous chapter, I discussed ways in which time is manifest on the surface of my artworks. I showed how surface embodies multiple temporalities—from speed and duration, productive and experiential time, to material changes, erasure and palimpsest. In these ways, sequence is eclipsed, time is thickened, and surface gains depth. However, if surface has depth, how does the viewer enter that depth apart from via its temporal dimensions? Does this involve ‘seeing-through’ the so-called skin and, if so, what lies ‘under’ the surface? This chapter challenges the notion of layering and the above/below dichotomy that characterises much discourse on surface, building on the ideas introduced in the previous chapter. To explore alternatives to dimensional depth, I develop here the concept of surface ‘entry’ as a conceptual and actualised presence.

While Renaissance art offered us a ‘window on the world’, the modern era was increasingly characterised by greater attention to the physical surface, which by the twentieth century became an explicit concern of painting. In modern art, painting asserted its separation from realism by proclaiming the impenetrability and truth of its surface. In the first section, I survey some of these conceptual shifts, noting that, at odds with the apparent ‘flatness’ of modern painting, there remain conditioning stimuli that can act as thresholds to a reading of depth.

In the second section, I develop these ideas by focusing on intervals and gaps to explore how breaks operate on a patterned surface. Informed by the construction of Celtic meander patterns, the work of Richard Wright and my own practice-based investigations, I demonstrate how the gap offers the possibility of entering into an implied interior.

In the third section, the phenomenon of entry is examined further through spatial interruptions such as rips, tears and glitches; process-derived inconsistencies on and across the surface. These interruptions include, for example, the accidental slip of the hand, the moment when a pen runs out of ink or actions that wear away, erode or indent. Using examples from my practice, I analyse these different forms of rupture and find breaking through and breaking into the surface at what I call points of entry.

The focus of the final section is on the notion of breathing space, as a necessary intermission that provides an opportunity to rest and take stock. While slowing down changes the tempo of the visual experience, the philosopher Sylviane Agacinski claims that if we slow down enough, we eventually stop. A 'simple pause, a suspension of time' (Reed, 2017:9) creates a liminal space between preparation and action. I identify physical and conceptual ways in which the breathing space, as a temporal pause, manifests on the surface, and indicate what is gained by this silent point of entry.

3.1 Thresholds



Figure 52: Olafur Eliasson, *Window Projection* (1990). Photographed at the exhibition 'In Real Life' (2019-2020), Tate Modern, London with myself in front of the image, looking through and beyond. Photo credit Nick Dykes.

Within the Western pictorial tradition, a representational image leads the eye to ignore the surface of the painting. The surface is the part we see-through, 'to get at subject matter, narration and figuration' (Robbins:2002). The viewer by-passes the surface of the painting, which effectively dissolves as the mind focuses on the depicted three-dimensional space beyond. The viewer is encouraged to approach the scene successively, with the foreground, mid-ground and background neatly sequencing space, time and distance. Space, as defined by linear perspective, is described by film-maker Hito Steyerl (2011), as 'calculable, navigable, and predictable'. Think, for example, of the role of the horizon line in visual navigation and how its certainty fixes the viewer's position. By contrast, when linear perspective is not present, there is no vanishing point, and we perceive the artwork as offering only a continuous present. This flattened surface is difficult to 'see-through', and its surface is contiguous with the picture plane. Tentative experiments with illusionistic painting grew from its Renaissance inception until they culminated in the early twentieth century rejection of this representational space. This was famously described by Clement Greenberg (1940) who outlined the rejection of linear perspective as an evolutionary process in which the different planes of illusory painting struggled towards one another until they finally met on the 'material plane that is the actual surface of the canvas' (Greenberg, 1993:156). Thus, as artists began to explore visual realms beyond representation, surface, argued Greenberg, was exposed for what it is: a picture plane. In Greenberg's words:

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space... (cited in O'Brian, 1986:34).

And yet, the accultured Western eye persists in finding perspective and depth at the slightest provocation and from the most elementary of signs. We are so conditioned as viewers of Western graphic representation, from theatre to photography to fine art, that a horizontal line across a painting panel can be read as a horizon, allowing the viewer's gaze to recede 'behind' the picture plane and access depth. In *Shape-shifter* (2018) I explored this ambiguity (figure 53). A graphite reflective patterned strip sits across the top of the painting, its lower edge suggesting an inverted horizon or mirage beneath which an object seemingly floats in a

vast expanse of cloudy space.⁵⁴ Alternatively, the upper band can be read as a framing device that entices the viewer to look beyond. Olafur Eliasson used a similar viewing structure in *Window Projection* (1990) (figure 52). A silhouette of a window frame, made by partially masking a spotlight with a stencil, is projected onto a wall. The viewer immediately reads the shadow effect as the threshold into the imaginary space beyond.

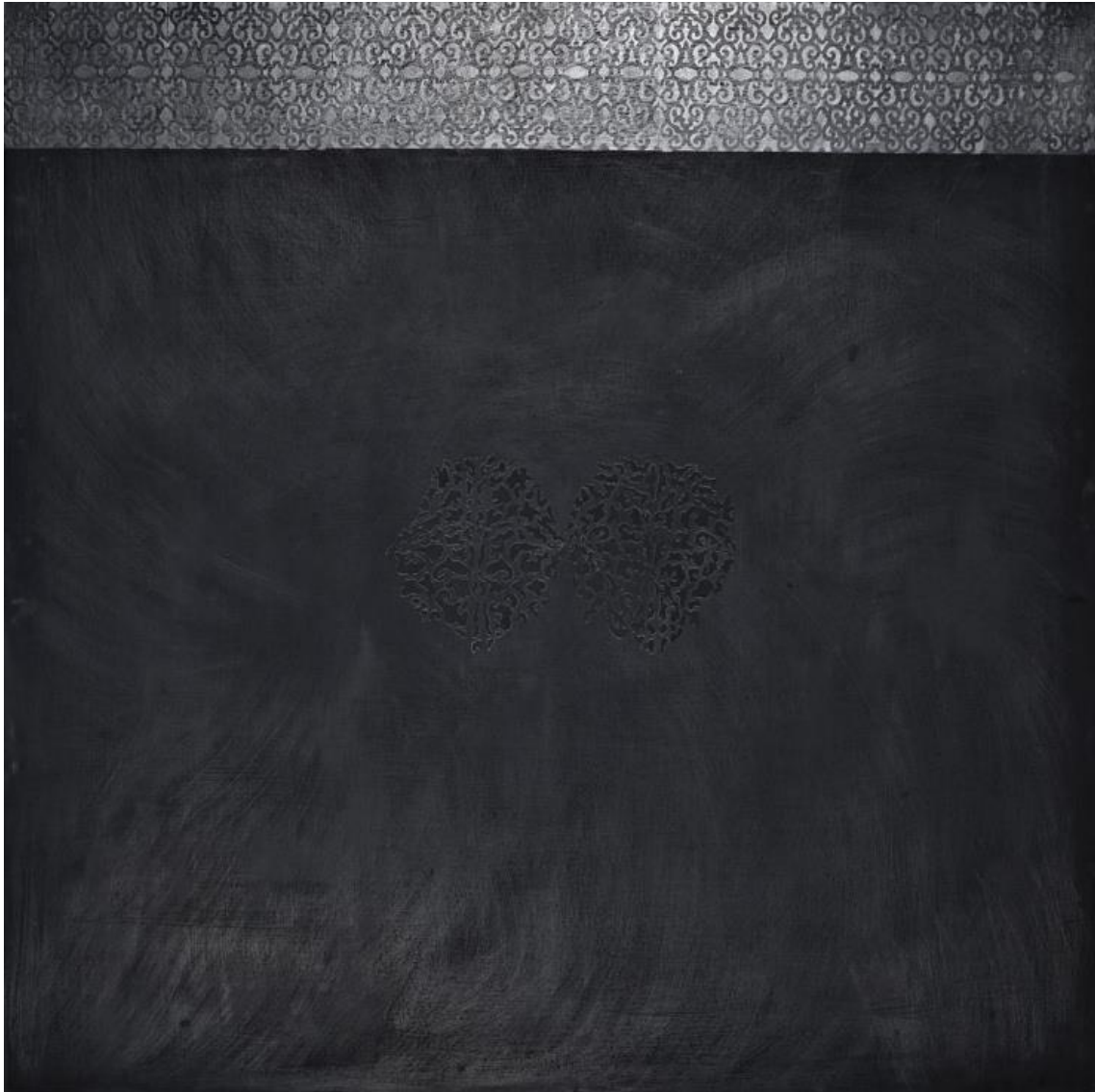


Figure 53: *Shape-shifter* (2018). Casein paint, graphite pencil and lacquer on board 120 x 120 cms.
Photo credit Tony Richards.

⁵⁴ I use the word 'mirage' here to refer specifically to the optical phenomenon of Fata Morgana mirages that occur within a narrow band across the horizon, usually seen at sea, in deserts or polar regions. The mirage consists of several inverted and upright images stacked one on top of the other, characterised by a significant distortion of the object(s) on which they are based, typically boats, islands or coastlines. Often, the distortion warrants the original object unrecognizable, especially because the mirage can quickly change form and appear to 'hover' in the distance (skybrary, no date).

Shape-shifter

A metallic patterned strip sits proudly across the top of the painting,
An anchor point and horizon line.
Below it, an expanse of smoky black space,
A myriad of tiny scratches covers the surface, reminding me of wire wool.
A glint of a pencil line amongst a cluster of free-flowing shapes of the darkest
deepest black.
But there isn't much colour here, only darkness.
Yet strangely, there is much light.
A pulsating shape, easy to miss, hovers in the centre of the painting.
A heart, brain, lungs? I can feel its beat, its rhythm, like the taps on a drum.
Hold me close and keep me safe, in this quiet space balanced on the cusp of the
picture plane.
But it is only a mirage surely, a momentary glimpse, if we are lucky enough to catch
it.
And, as I shift position, it disappears as quietly as it came.

Lesley Halliwell, 2018. Notebook no.3

Figure 53: Creative writing (2018) based on the painting *Shape-shifter*.



Figure 55: *Shape-Shifter* (details) (2018). Casein paint and graphite pencil on board. Photo credit Tod Jones.

Despite being ostensibly abstract, *Shape-shifter* achieves pictorial depth. However, from some viewing positions, it presents as a curiously vacant flat black monochrome. The painting plays with the tension between the image as a flat surface that resists interiority and one with undulation that offers a spatial dimension. Both positions can exist simultaneously within the same painting. Richard Wollheim's notion of 'twofoldness' is useful here to help understand that 'strange duality—of seeing the marked surface, and of seeing something in [on, under or above] the surface' (Gaiger, 2007:53). Unlike Gombrich, who argues that we either see the content of a picture or its paint marks (1962:209–17), Wollheim stresses the fact that they are 'two aspects of a single experience (...) distinguishable but also inseparable' (Wollheim, 1987:46).⁵⁵ In other words, the viewer can be visually aware of the materiality of the surface but, at the same time, conscious of the depicted scene and of something standing out in front, or receding behind it.⁵⁶ In the case of *Shape-shifter*, there is both a flat plane and also one with a deeper interior space. The viewer negotiates the threshold between the two and can experience contrasts of visual depth, from flat to infinite, within the same image.

3.2 Pattern: gaps and intervals

As a means of coalescing a surface through sequence and repetition, pattern remains a foundational engagement within my artistic practice. An all-over pattern focuses the viewer's attention on the surface, unifying it with the picture plane in such a way that entry is blocked. However, a pattern-articulated surface differs from the flattened 'horizon-less' planes of modernism in that visual complexity offers the promise of entry.

Pattern, through strategies such as the grid, repetition, tessellation and rotation, provides a structure on and across the surface. Pattern theorist Amy Goldin proposed that the defining characteristic of pattern is not one of repetition (the repeat of a motif) but rather the 'constancy of interval' (1975:50). In this scenario, the negative spaces—a series of gaps

⁵⁵ For a critique in support of Wollheim's twofoldness see René Jagnow's paper 'Twofold Pictorial Experience' (2019).

⁵⁶ Wollheim's twofoldness resonates with Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker's (2010) exploration of a metamodern experience – contemporary artworks that are characterized by the oscillation between a modern commitment and a post-modern detachment as aspects of a single experience (discussed further on page 184)

distributed by a set of rules—articulate the pattern rather than the positive space of the repeated motif. Goldin’s constancy of interval is evident in Celtic meander patterns in which the symmetrical arrangement of blocks (discrete shapes) and obstacles (linear barrier) provide intermissions around which the constancy of interval forms and re-forms.

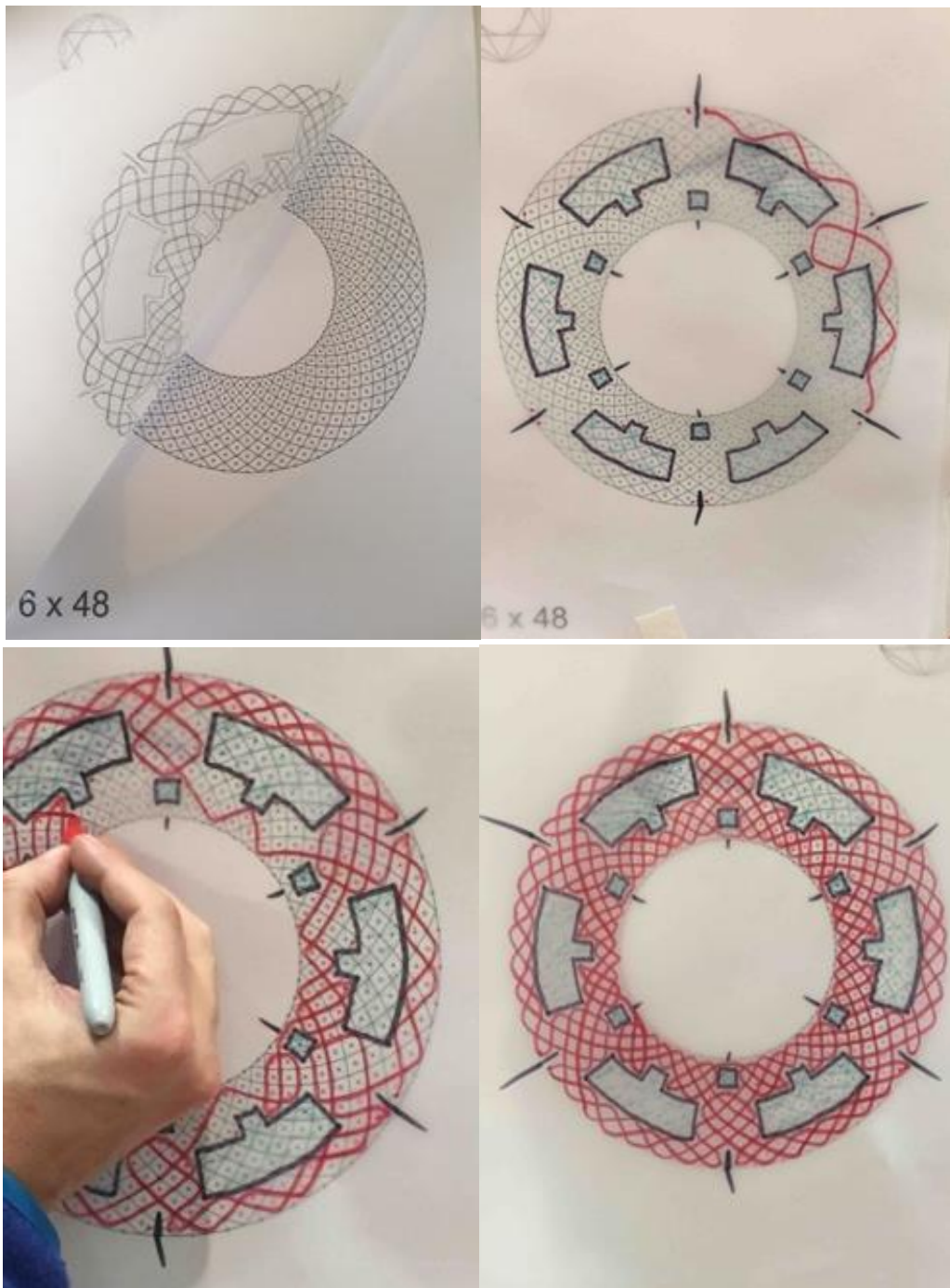


Figure 56: Adam Tetlow (2016) demonstrates the use of blocks and intervals within a circular meander pattern. Tracing paper is placed on top of a gridded and dotted template consisting of 6 rows of 48 dots. The template provides the guideline for the meandering trail. Reproduced by kind permission of Adam Tetlow.

In the example (figure 56), a gridded and dotted guide allows the designer in Celtic mode to navigate a series of blocks (outlined in black ink) with a consistent pattern interval. The pattern in red follows the guiding path beneath until it reaches an edge of a block, then turns in the opposite direction, continuing until its next encounter with an obstruction. In Celtic patterning, the blocks need to be placed symmetrically for the system to work. The method produces orderly gaps, discrete negative spaces, like mini windows, that punctuate the otherwise pervasive pattern. These spaces offer the viewer a possibility of entry, experienced, for example, as a surface behind or below the meander pattern. In this scenario, depth is an opportunity opened by the break in the pattern.

Artist Richard Wright, known for site-specific work—ranging from minimalist patterns and baroque ornamentations, to gothic iconography and typography—used pattern interval in a permanent commission for the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. *No title* (2013) (figure 57) consists of 50,000 hand-painted star motifs radiating across the ceiling. The interval between the stars modify the flat ceiling into a plane that appears curved. Through the use of graduated interval, Wright creates a sense of dimensional space that alludes to Renaissance perspective, countering the notion that pattern always flattens the surface. However, this unbroken undulating plane leaves no opportunity to ‘hole-through’: there is no gap and no entry point.



Figure 57: Richard Wright, *No title* (2013). Acrylic on wall, dimensions variable. Permanent commission, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

In contrast with Wright's smooth wavering surface, when the regularity of the interval is relaxed, entry becomes possible. For example, in *Horror Vacui* (figure 42, see page 82), the inner circle is filled with small repeated shapes. The title of the painting comes from the Latin 'fear of empty space'. In physics, 'horror vacui' reflects Aristotle's idea that 'nature abhors an empty space'. The term is also associated with the Italian art critic Mario Praz who used it to describe the suffocating atmosphere and clutter of interior design in the Victorian age (in Lidwell et al., 2010:128). Reminiscent of the 'filling-in' of colouring books from my childhood, I chose the title to refer to my constant striving for completed-ness by filling the entire surface of an artwork with detail. In *Horror Vacui* almost every piece of available space was worked into and worked over, creating a sense of confinement and compressed energy. It is the filling-in that results in an all-over surface that flattens the plane, creating an initial sense of impenetrability. However, the subtle variation between the motifs and their spacing create points of disjuncture. These irregular intervals encourage a degree of entry by suggesting shallow depth, as in low relief sculpture. Paradoxically, the 'all-over-ness' also enhances the irregularity of the interval because, when there is finally a gap, the release it provides is enhanced, offering a point of entry where above-ness and below-ness of surface are experienced.

The all-over surface of *Horror Vacui* also resonates with Alfred Gell's notion of 'unfinished business'; a particular reading of pattern in which it 'remains "unfinished" inasmuch as the technical, formal and specifically ornamental complexity of the art object exceeds the viewer's ability to organise the visual field' (Rampley, 2004:14). In *Horror Vacui*, the central circular structure is filled-in with semi-regular repeat motifs. The pervasive all-over patterned background, and the circular shape as a repeatable unit (see page 46) suggest that the image has the potential to exist beyond the frame of the painting. That is, the image remains unfinished in the imagination of the viewer. In this scenario, the complexity of the patterned surface also reveals itself 'over time'. This results in a 'delay, or lag, between transactions that (...) never result in perfect reciprocation, but always in some renewed, residual, imbalance' (Gell, 1998:81). Gell argues this 'imbalance', where the complexity unsettles the viewer's comprehension of the pattern, causes a lag in the process of looking. This delay

provides the gap that offers the viewer a point of entry by actualising the painting's conceptual depth of surface.

Gell's unfinished business stands in contrast to Roger Fry's 'purposeful order'. As an alternative scopic regime, in 1909 Fry wrote, '[t]he perception of purposeful order and variety in an object gives us the feeling which we express by saying that it is beautiful' (Harrison and Wood, 1992:83). Unlike Gell's unfinished business, Fry's ordering principle regulates the surface, by balancing compositional order and emotional sincerity, and prevents the viewer from becoming overwhelmed. Jason Hoelscher, in his discussion on the deregulation of pattern (2013b), notes that the contemporary viewer's relationship to purposeful order is different now than it was in the 1900s. He proposes that, 'in a culture of slick, binary-coded and focus-grouped order, a degree of painterly *non-order*' now serves a similar role for the viewer (2013b:24). Returning to *Horror Vacui*, we note how a central vertical line divides the circle and presents as an organising principle, offering a sense of symmetry for the viewer. The structured pattern around the outer edge contrasts with the looser 'disintegrating' motifs within the circle and, in places, the rim of the circle begins to break down.⁵⁷ By employing a degree of irregularity, the image hovers on the edge of pattern, alluding to orderly interval but without fully manifesting it—an abstraction that invites the viewer, as unfinished business, to decipher the grammatical structure embedded in the work and prolong the viewing experience. Hoelscher describes a pattern like this, which references and then relaxes its sense of strict orderliness, as 'experiential deregulation'. Thus, *Horror Vacui* contains a move towards 'purposeful order' and constancy of interval but then veers away, presenting as orderly in some sections and contradicting that order in others. The pattern threatens to break—to disintegrate upon movement of the viewer as the reflective surfaces change position, switching between above and below. The small disorders in the orderly interval remain the key to entry, whether offering possibilities of metaphorically getting under or hovering over the surface.

⁵⁷ For further information on the degree of approximation permitted before 'ideal forms' become unidentifiable, see 'Principles of Approximation' in Walter Shepherd's *Glossary of Graphic Signs and Symbols* (1971).

3.3 Spatial interruptions and glitches

Hoelscher argues that contemporary artists have replaced the aesthetic of Fry's 'purposeful order' and Goldin's constancy of interval with what cultural theorist Paul Virilio refers to as an 'interruption'—a rupture that inserts 'uncertainty into a constructed system' (Lotringer and Virilio, 2005:109). Studio research brought to my conscious mind the recurrence of actions that corrupt the surface—such as indenting, eroding or burrowing in—aspects of my work that are a particular preoccupation. These process-derived inconsistencies are interruptions that operate on or across the surface, offering an opening that reveals and problematises depth. I recall, for example, the process of making an early spirograph drawing: *Green Circle, 1304 Minutes*, (2001).

I began from the centre of the paper, working outwards in a series of concentric rings which increased in distance apart by three millimetres per ring. This tiny distance meant that the density of the shapes and thus, the accumulation of ink in the central area, was more significant than on the outer edge. Consequently, where the motifs overlapped, the nib of the ballpoint pen began to wear away the fibres of the paper. Five hours into the drawing, I thought it was 'ruined', but rather than stopping, I decided to continue and follow the system I had set up at the start of the work. Once completed, it was evident that the contrast between the 'over-worked' centre and the lighter periphery produced a dynamic tension that strengthened the drawing. Such traits work hand in hand with practice-based methodologies where studio explorations embrace the 'messiness' of discovery.

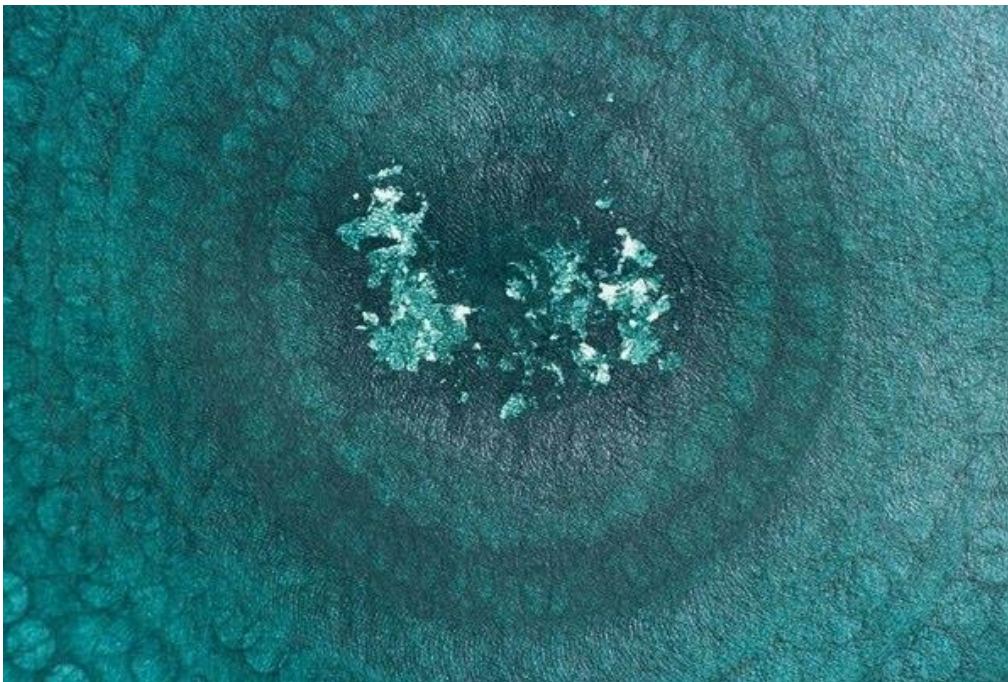
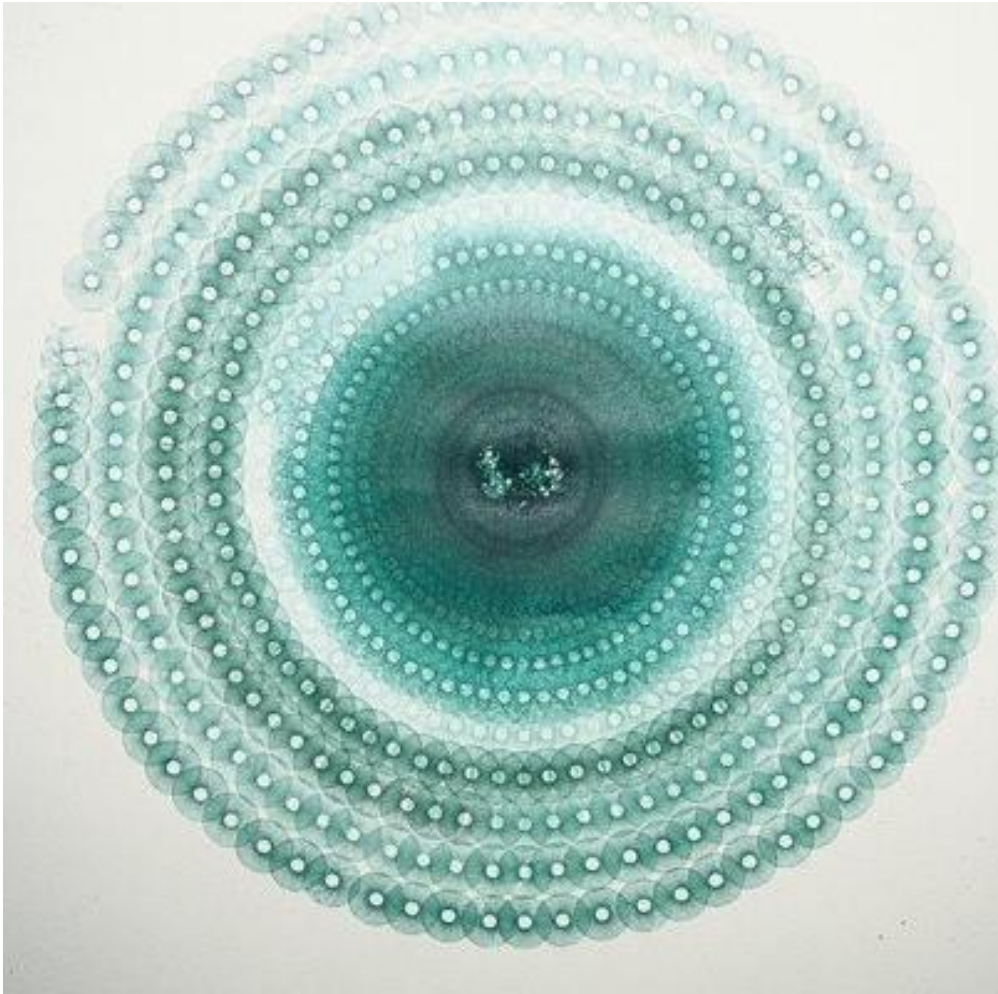


Figure 58: *Green Circle, 1304 Minutes* (2001). Ballpoint pen on paper, 125 x 145 cm.

While the wearing away of the paper fibres in *Green Circle, 1304 Minutes* was the accidental result of the systematised drawing process, in the series *G(u)ilty* (2016) (figure 39 & 59) the wearing away was intentional. Here, I used the metal pen nib to indent the gilded surface, creating shallow profiling of the surface that interacted with the gilding and captured light and shadow effects. The process involved texturing the gilded surface by creating another surface 'on top' of the original surface. The line that indented the gilt paper drew attention to the subtle variations of the material surface, playing with the outwardness and inwardness of the paper support whereby a line drawn on top is experienced as indented when lighting places it in shadow. Actual wearing through, which occurred from time to time, corrupts the gilded surface by breaking it apart and blurring the sense of above and below. This process is what Hubert Damisch (on describing Dubuffet's work) referred to as 'working in the *thickness* of the ground (...) to reveal the underneath of it: to scratch the paper, to incise and to beat the impastoed material, to flay it, to whip it...' (Parrot, 1944:12). The exposure establishes the ground as a surface defined in all its particularity by its thickness. Damisch characterises this attention towards thickness-as-surface as being essentially experiential; the exposure of the drawing's substrate is evidence of its depth. That depth, or thickness, claims Damisch, can only be experienced by the viewer as surface.

The tendency to distrust surfaces and the meanings they convey is one of the reasons why we often 'feel the need to break through them [and] peel them aside' (Ingold:2017). In *Painting Bitten by a Man* (1961), for example, Jasper Johns gouges a deep mark in the centre of the thickly applied encaustic—an attempt to bite through the surface and see what's there. With its connotations of superficiality, to physically dig down suggests that deeper or more substantive aspects of artworks are located beneath and not on the surface. However, design historians Glenn Adamson and Victoria Kelley dispute the way that '... commentators rush past the surface in their hurry to excavate more complex inner truths', endorsing Tim Ingold who also challenges the assumption that 'the truth can never be on the surface but somewhere deeper down' (in Adamson & Kelley, 2013:1).

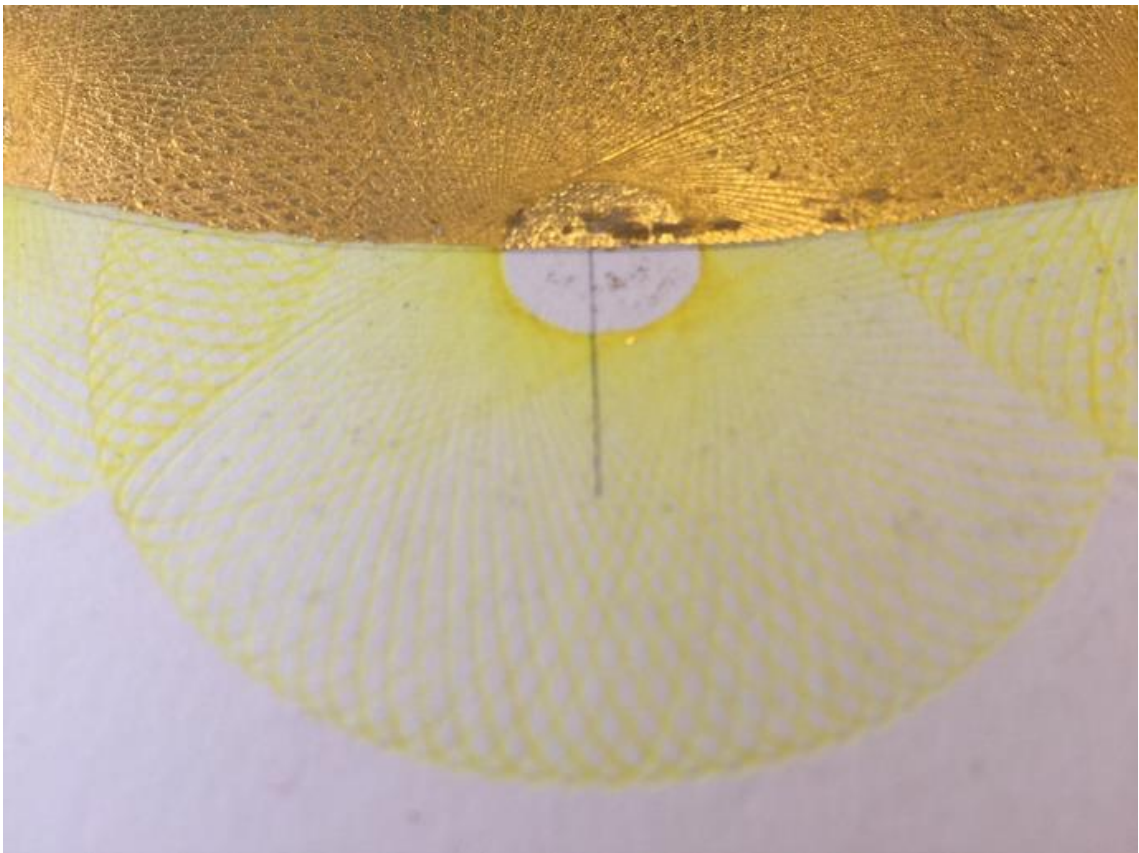
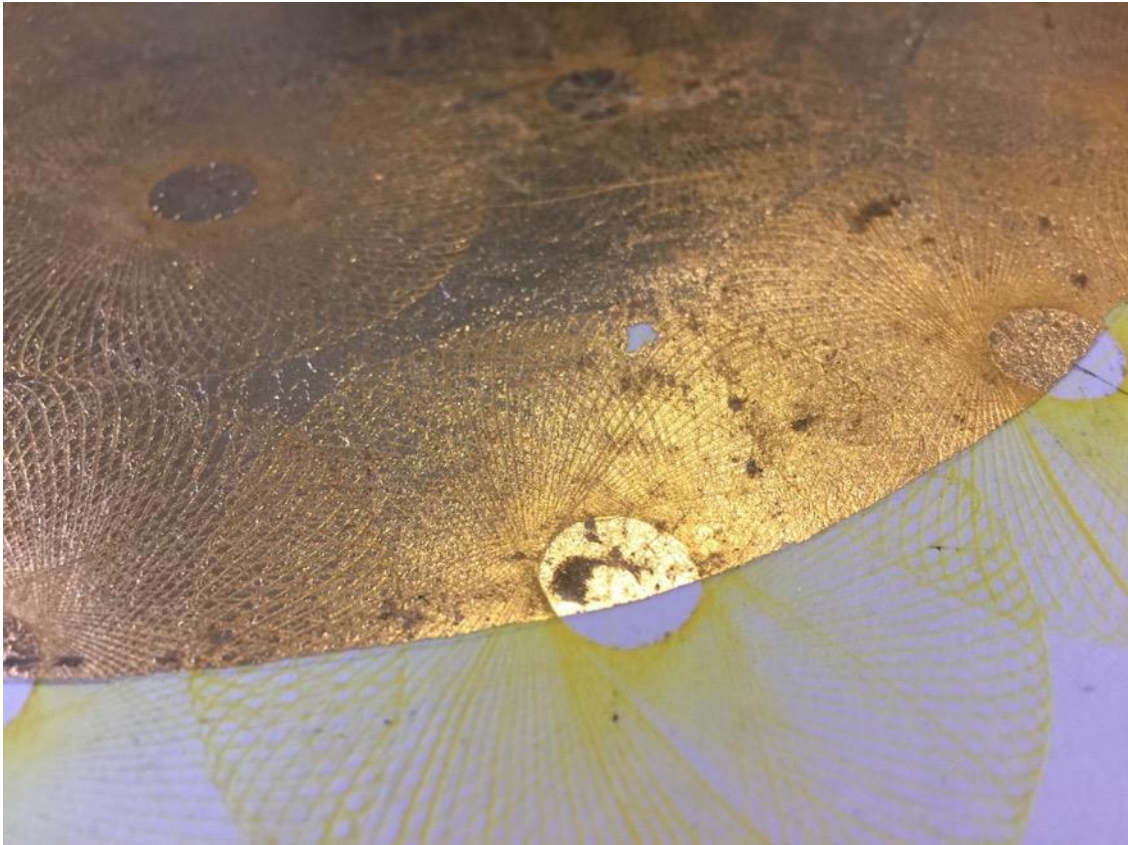


Figure 59: *G(uilty)* (2016) details. Gold leaf, lacquer and pencil on paper, 41 x 70 cm. See figure 39 for full image.

A series of four small paintings: *The Old Ways* (2016) (figure 60), embrace this contradiction by exposing how, when we cut and peel back the surface, yet another surface typically confronts us. In this scenario, peeling back the cardboard just revealed another surface. Such a reveal can expose the truth of materials, but it is not a point of entry that actualises the depth of the initial surface. Thus, the depth of surface is not archaeological, but experiential.

The glitch is also evident in my video *Additive Trace* (2015), which recorded and re-played my hand movements while I attempted to master the art of *kōlam* drawing. Exposing my drawing errors as the chalk squeaked, scraped and snapped clumsily over the board, I hesitated, thinking about where to position the chalk, which direction to take the line and how to navigate between the positioning dots. Manifest as minor glitches, these moments of uncertainty were recorded as an interruption in the flow of the drawn line. Virilio's picnolepsy is useful here to understand the implication of these repeated 'tiny deaths' as momentary sensory deprivations.

Epilepsy is little death and picnolepsy tiny death. What is living, present, conscious, here, is only so because there's an infinity of little deaths, little accidents, little breaks, little cuts in the sound track (...) (2008:48)

Virilio's idea is that the viewer somehow manages to reconnect these interruptions so that vision becomes a 'montage of temporalities'. So, while there is an unsettling, as evident in *Additive Trace*, I came to realise that these 'cinematic stutters' cannot be too long or too big; otherwise, the image falls into chaos. This may also explain why peeling away the surface is too extreme while wearing it away aligns more closely with our experience of depth.



Figure 60: *The Old Ways: A Short Cut* (top left), *Good as Gold* (top right), *Squinch* (bottom left) and *Two Empty Hands* (bottom right) (2016). Casein paint, lacquer, pencil, correction fluid and metal leaf on card, 21 x 35cm (max).

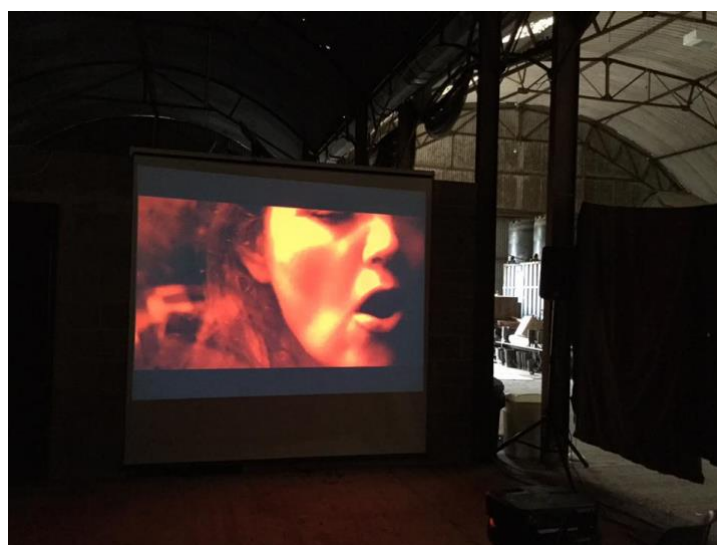
3.4 Breathing space

Writing about ‘taking a line for a walk’, Ingold explains that when a line is ‘jiggled’ about on the spot, it creates a dot where all the energy and movement is focused; an ‘isolated and compact moment, broken off from those preceding and following it’ (cited in Mall, 2007:72). He continues that when he lifts his pencil away from the paper, before returning it to the next spot, he creates a ‘...transverse movement’ that, while playing no part in the process of inscription, offers a space in which to pause. Caesura is a term used to describe a break in a verse where one phrase ends, and the next one begins, often denoted by a comma, dash or full stop. In time value, this break may vary between the slightest moment of silence up to a noticeable pause. Considered as a breath, a caesura in traditional music represents a similar resting point during which clock time continues through the silence. It is the point at which the musician or singer inhales and takes a breath—a brief pause that is vital for the continuation of play. As an intrinsic part of the composition, silence creates a contrast; an active space, integrated into the body of the music. Like Goldin’s interval, the silent pause contributes to the rhythm of the music so that when a musician sees a rest in the score, it does not equate to something absent or missing. Data experts Kenneth Cukier and Viktor Mayer-Schonberger also champion the potential of ‘empty space’ for the ‘unspoken and not-yet thought’ (*Big Data*, 2013:196). The importance of such negative spaces endorse Bergson’s claim ‘that there is not *less*, but *more* in the idea of nonbeing than that of being’ (in Deleuze, 1991:17). Here, the pause confirms the falseness of the assumption that ‘nothing’ is less important than ‘something’.

It was while studying gilding techniques at the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts, learning about different mordants (glues) used during the gilding process, that the notion of the breath took on greater significance. Some of these mordants are activated by the warmth and moisture of the breath. The sound of students taking a deep breath in, bending downwards towards their artwork and slowly exhaling on to the paper (like a call to prayer) stayed with me as a powerful image and sound. This experience inspired me to think about how I could use the condensation of the breath to create a temporary surface on which to draw, on a pane of glass or window, for example.

During an Artists' Camp Residency (Sidney Nolan Trust, 2017), an opportunity arose to collaborate with film-maker Pavel Prokopic. Rummaging in one of Nolan's barns filled with abandoned household objects from old prams to bicycles, we came across a wooden window frame, its glass caked in layers of dust. Using it as a base, we worked in the barn with shafts of light entering beneath doors and between broken roof tiles, birds flitting in and out from their nests in the rafters.⁵⁸

The finished film (*Drawing Breath*, 2017) combined my research theme and performance with Prokopic's direction and resulted in an atmospheric montage of moving images. I exhale, long and slow; an elongated moment, as I lean in towards the glass, mouth opening, condensation trickling down the windowpane. At the beginning of 'The Biographer's Tales', A.S. Byatt describes '[a] real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A thing' (2001:2). Bill Brown, in his analysis of 'Thing Theory' and human/object interactions (2001) uses Byatt's description to articulate how the viewer confronts the materiality, or 'thingness', of objects at the moment they stop functioning. In *Drawing Breath*, the water droplets, mixed with years of dirt, filled the pane thwarting our ability to look *through* the glass, arresting the gaze *at* the material surface. Like Giuliana Bruno's (2014:231) description of the surface 'as a form of contact that enables intimacy', here was a surface that merged the stains of time with the intimate exchange of warm breath.



⁵⁸ *Drawing Breath* can be seen at <https://youtu.be/q2-vePmpHrk>



Figure 61: Halliwell and Prokopic, *Drawing Breath* (2017). Installation shot at the Sidney Nolan Trust, 'Research and Practice in Action', Artists' Camp residency (2017) and film stills.

What struck me about the completed film, however, was not just the out-breath—the exhalation of vapour forming condensation as it collides with a colder surface that I had planned for—but the in-breath. I was surprised by the effort involved, and I was taken aback by the sound. As I became tired, the breath was more laboured, louder and the tackiness of my dry mouth resonated with an intensity that shocked me: a bodily noise, a carnal breath. In my preoccupation with the idea of condensation I had, in hindsight, initially overlooked the significance of the in-breath, the support mechanism and underlying structure: breath in through your nose, out through your mouth. Inhale (prepare)—exhale (action). The inward and outward components of breath support each other, yet between these two movements, there is also a suspension—a liminal space:

I hear a rising, then a falling, in and out. A greatness, a lightness. I grow heavier, and then so inert that my body seems without life. Between breaths, I lose feeling. And then my chest fills, a resurrection. (Schwenger, 2006:81).

Peter Schwenger describes this liminal space as a point where 'being is suspended', creating a pause between the end of preparation and the moment before action. During this moment, the body and mind pause in preparation for the release of controlled energy. While studying Islamic geometry I watched as the tutor, Adam Williamson, demonstrated how to draw *rumi* and *tepelik* motifs from the Islimi tradition of biomorphic drawing (figure 62). Williamson shifted his body weight from left to right, right to left, firmly rooting his feet to a fixed spot on the ground. Once grounded, he drew a line. The impulse for the movement travelled the full length of his body; from his feet, through his legs, torso, arm and hand. It was a coordinated action that involved the simultaneous movement of several parts of the body, suggestive of the preparation an athlete would make before throwing a discus, for example. The bodily gesture contained in one continuous rhythmic movement resulted in the smooth, confident lines required for biomorphic drawing. Here, the liminal space between the inhale (preparation) and exhale (action) of breath offers a moment of potential, of multiple possible futures—the momentary stillness before action. This brief and transitory pause appears to be the temporal equivalent of the spatial interruption that forms a point of entry.



Figure 62: Tutor Adam Williamson demonstrating how to draw rumi and tepelik motifs. Rumi are 'pivotal balls' around which different shapes revolve (similar to the shape of tadpoles), while tepelik, meaning 'points' or 'hilltops', are used as either symmetrical freestanding motifs or as half-forms attached to a spiral or curve. Reproduced by kind permission of the Art of Islamic Pattern (left) and Esra Alhamal (right).

Findings

If surface has depth, then how can we access to see into that depth? The concept of 'entry points', as a conceptual and actualising presence, was developed to aid understanding. Conditioning to illusory perspectival space in the work of art leaves us able to have both a 'flat' and a 'perspectival' reading of a work. Thresholds encourage a movement between these states and thus, the experience of the viewer is not a static image, like a photograph, but a built understanding. As is evident in my experience of making, these entry points—thresholds, intervals, gaps, interruptions, breathing spaces and pauses—are essential, both conceptually and materially; their presence expands the depth of surface for maker and viewer.

Informed by the legacy of linear perspective, the trained Western eye is accustomed to looking and translating images in a particular way. Using the example of *Shaper-shifter*, I showed how its upper patterned band created in the viewer an expectation of perspectival space. However, viewed from a different angle and under different lighting conditions, the painting appeared as flat. With no suggestion of a vanishing point and no clear view to any foreground or background, the viewer is in danger of 'free-fall'. This term is used by Hito Steyerl to describe the 'groundlessness' of modern life: 'And with the loss of horizon also

comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity' (Steyerl, 2011). In other words, the horizonless plane disrupts 'any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries'. (Steyerl, 2011). My research has shown how the viewer looks for ways to off-set the falling, floating and weightlessness of a depthless plane in order to (re)ground themselves within the visual field.

Another finding was that these alternative ways of experiencing an artwork could co-exist simultaneously within the same painting. Wollheim's 'twofoldness' expresses this phenomenon, highlighting ways in which the viewer experiences variations of visual depth—ranging from deep infinite space, undulating shallow depth to a flat impenetrable plane—within the same image, but as aspects of a single experience.

I also showed how Goldin's concept of the constancy of interval could be applied to Celtic meander patterns. Here the orderly gaps offered the potential of entry. The Celtic blocks produced spaces that interrupted the otherwise all-over pattern, suggesting a surface as if 'behind' the meandering trail. Thus, depth is an opportunity opened by the break in the pattern. Because the human brain is conditioned to see pattern, these interruptions allow space for the eye and mind to wander, to see into, to enter. The interruptions that act as blocks to the pattern simultaneously form spaces to look into. What is significant is that although the breaks provide an opening, they are also obstacles that sit on the surface and force the pattern to change direction. Thus, interruptions are ambiguous because they can be both 'spaces' and 'things'. In a similar way to the 'twofoldness' of Wollheim, this dual flatness and depth exists simultaneously.

Distorting a pattern, as revealed through Wright's painted ceiling of little black stars, can result in a warped plane, but only a more spontaneous relaxation of the pattern interval creates a point of entry. Using *Horror Vacui* as an example, I showed how the complexity of an all-over pattern creates the initial sense of impenetrability. Yet, the minor irregularities of interval produced a sense of shallow space, allowing the viewer access to the above-ness and below-ness of the surface. I also drew links between the 'all-over' surface of *Horror Vacui* and

Gell's notion of unfinished business. When, for example, there are no, or very few, gaps on a surface the senses can quickly become overwhelmed. I argued that the introduction of a degree of deregulation, some form of rupture that inserts an element of uncertainty, is the key to entry.

By introducing a degree of deregulation into the underlying system, the viewer is forced to deal with multiple planes simultaneously. These interruptions, or glitches, are devices that let the viewer in, allowing the gaze to look into the surface. These entry points are not passive but are experienced both in the maker's engagement with the image and in the viewer's response. As my drawings revealed, the indentation of the pen nib on a gilded surface produced shallow profiling that captured light and shadow effects—subtle variations that blurred the boundary between the outward-ness and inwardness of the paper support. The depth of surface ignored the logic of the physical depth in favour of the experiential.

Entry points are also where the activity of mark-making has paused, leaving a pregnant gap, and prompting an active and productive tension for the viewer. When, for example, the pressure on the pencil is withdrawn, it hovers above, tracing an unrecorded path in the expanded zone of surface. A zone of energy rather than a mark, it is sensed in the completed work as the 'negative space'—the pause. Gliding across the paper, the retraction of the stylus and freehand gestural mark-making result in pause, realignment and return. The human alternation of action with pause and the timing of exertion with exhale, are elements transferred into the process of drawing. If the interruption is experienced as temporal, the gap becomes a pause. Again, this is both experiential and symbolic. The lifting of the pencil or brush is like the moment between inhaling and exhaling, replete with potential. This links the entry point to the body as well as our experience of time.

While my focus had initially been on the notion of the out-breath, as the point of action and production, my collaborative film, *Drawing Breath*, drew attention to the importance of the inhale. And then there was the liminal space in-between—a silent pause—the temporal equivalent of the spatial interruption that provides a moment of stillness to rest and prepare

for action. As is evident in my experience of making, these caesuras are essential because their presence expands the depth of surface for maker and viewer.

Spatial and temporal interruptions are entry devices that enable the mind to understand surface topology in a new way. Interruptions and pauses encourage the viewer to read the surface topology as a depth that can be entered, seen into rather than seen through. The different forms of entry promote the expansion of surface by allowing the viewer to sense wider zones of interactivity, from shallow to deep and from physical to conceptual topographies. My entry points—thresholds, intervals, gaps, interruptions, breathing spaces and pauses—prevent the surface being a flat skin contiguous with the picture plane.

Chapter Four: Shine



In the previous chapter, I mapped out ways in which the interval, glitch, hesitation and the pause facilitated the experiential and conceptual entering of surface. My argument is that these entry points are where the activity of mark-making pauses, where the surface is literally or metaphorically ruptured in some way, prompting a productive tension in the viewer. When illusory imagery or perspective is not present, an entry point offers a way through the picture plane. Such interventions can be contrasted with qualities that mask the penetrability of surface. Pattern, for example, coalesces the surface, flattening it so that the gaze is encouraged to pass over and across. This chapter looks at reflective materials. These interfere with or modulate the reception of the surface. For the viewer, the glow of a shiny surface can make the image appear to hover 'above' or 'in front of' the surface, further complexifying the sense of the surface's depth.

The significance of shine and its implications for the way that we encounter surface was instigated by studio investigations in which the use of metal leaf took a more central role in the finished artworks, although painting mediums with a range of reflective properties were also explored. Shine raised questions about perceived notions of 'above' and 'below' and the relation of surface to light and viewing interaction. The effects of reflectivity altered the reception of the surface, sometimes dramatically. Shine, in tandem with light, alternatively affirms and negates the (im)materiality of surface. The discussion of these phenomena is informed here by the practices of Richard Wright, Jane Harris and Pierre Soulages.

The chapter begins with an overview of historical approaches to shininess from medieval illumination to modern and postmodern shine providing context to 'all things shiny'. From there, I explore what my practice could bring to the understanding of shine from the full-on glare of gold leaf to the subtle sheen of graphite. Shiny surfaces were manipulated with increasing subtlety to probe the subject further.

Reflective surfaces, however, are only one side of the issue as without light, there would be no effects of shine (Barnaby, 2013:168). Thus, the focus of the second section is illumination and the immaterial surface. Through a discussion of *Im Theseustempel Wien*, a site-specific work by Richard Wright, and an analysis of my gilded drawings, I highlight the ephemeral

qualities of shine, viewed as a moment between believing and not believing. I also look at some of the problems that the transient nature of the illuminated surface brings. If the surface of an artwork alters because of changes in the light, which is the real and true image? How might such a surface be documented?

The final section explores shadows and darkness, qualities that are caused by the blocking of light or its absence. If the colour black is the complete absorption of visible light, then what can a darkened surface bring to our understanding of light and reflection and its relationship to surface as a concept?

4.1 Shininess and meaning

Shine is a physical attribute of surface and also a symbolic carrier of meaning. My survey broadly glanced at medieval and Islamic illumination through to modern and postmodern shine. Maffei and Fisher's 'Historicizing Shininess in Design: Finding Meaning in an Unstable Phenomenon' (2013) gave a broad historical overview of the changing meanings and uses of shine, proposing that while shine was materially unstable, it was culturally fixed. For the social role of shine, I looked to a range of anthropological texts including those on Dogon textiles (Douny:2013), Victorian drawing rooms (Barnaby:2013) and Japanese lacquer (Tanizaki:1933). These offered perspectives on the meaning and value of reflective surfaces across cultures. Studio works drew on visual research from Islamic art, Celtic art and manuscript illumination, focusing specifically on metal leaf. Also, time spent at the British School of Rome (November 2019) reinforced the rich cultural history of gold, particularly within the western tradition.

Gold, a deep yellow, lustrous precious metal, has been used throughout history for jewellery, decorative ornamentation and coinage. Its longevity, malleability, aesthetic qualities and rarity all contribute to its status as a symbol of wealth and power. In the sacred arts of many religions, gold symbolised divine presence, glory and spiritual light. Traditionally manuscripts contain text embellished with gilded decoration, typically on initial letters, borders or as discrete illustrations. In religious books, the incorporation of gold was a way of exalting the text and praising God (Janes:1998). Yet, there is always the cultural danger of 'shiny' slipping into vulgarity. In her critique of the Victorian dining room Alice Barnaby described the

dilemma between a shine that communicated good taste and one that appeared as a 'tacky' aesthetic error of judgement. Barnaby quotes from a James Roberts manual from the 1800s on watercolour painting: 'I do not advise a scholar to varnish too highly; it spoils the delicacy of the atmosphere and gives a picture the appearance of a tea-tray ... or a Birmingham sign' (cited in Barnaby, 2013:170). Thus, the type and quality of shine signified a specific status and standard of taste.

My studio investigations tested a range of different gilding metals, from 23-carat gold leaf to more base imitations which brought out the delicate line between decorum and vulgarity. There was a noticeable variation between different qualities of shine; the glow of some metals looked cheap (like metallic wrapping paper, for example) while others had a delicacy and tone that indicated value and status. Distinguishing between different types of shine is explored by Carole Biggam (2007) in her research on the language of colour, where she identified five properties. These included tone, hue, saturation, transparency and brightness. Brightness was then sub-divided into various light emissions that ranged from dazzling to shining, stretching reflectivity from 'shiny' to 'lustrous-matt'; her extensive list illustrates the multiple manifestations of shine. Thus, the meaning of shine is expansive. Maffei and Fisher state, '[w]e think we know it, but through infinite physical variety and countless cultural contexts its meanings become multiple' (2013:231). For example, in the wild silk textiles of the Dogon of Mali in West Africa (Douny, 2013) it is the sheen of silk fibres that signify wealth, social status and prestige for the women of these rural areas. Imbued with spirituality, durability and medicinal properties, the lustre of the garment cloth (known as a 'wrapper') is drawn out 'through complex transformative processes involving cooking, beating, carding, spinning, and washing the threads' (Douny:68). The lustre of the silk is also said to improve over time. Thus, the cultural significance of silk wrappers involves a complex relationship between economic and aesthetic factors with the visuality of the cloth, magnified by virtue of reflecting light, maintaining its place as a much sought after characteristic.⁵⁹ My studio research initially experimented with a range of metal leaf to

⁵⁹ The wrapper's production involves multiple costly stages, ranging from the collecting and processing of raw materials (cocoons and silk) to indigo dyeing, that reflects a series of complex gendered economic networks (Douny:61). A comparison can be drawn here with Jussi Parikka's research on the micro and macro surfaces of fashion production in India and Bangladesh (Chapter Two: Marking Time) where he describes a complex landscape of surface(s) and their various scales.

identify which to take forward, to the exploration of what different qualities of shine (from the lustre of burnished metal leaf to the sheen of graphite pencil) bring to our understanding of surface.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, shiny new materials became available for mass consumption (Bille and Sørensen, 2007:234). They were used to express values associated with modernity such as progress, speed and efficiency. American diners, for example, used materials with sparkling finishes such as glossy tiles, polished aluminium and stainless steel to suggest hygienic and 'speedy' service. These mirrored reflective surfaces of postmodern architecture stood as symbols of progress and technological advancement. Others found alternative meanings in these bold and shiny surfaces. For example, Reyner Banham's contribution to the 1966 Aspen conference, 'All that Glitters is not stainless,' written at the dawn of postmodernism, is a commentary on the mass production of gleam. In an anti-elitist stance, Banham suggested that shininess could erase differences of class, signalling a 'design democracy' in which those of limited means could access a previously unobtainable universe of gleaming goods (Banham, 1974:156).

Earlier the architectural critic William H. Jordy held the opposite view; in 1960 he considered the profusion of glitz the symptom of throw-away culture and belittled shininess (Maffei and Fisher, 2013:235). Some decades later art historian Dieter Roelstraete, in his re-appraisal of the American Photorealists (2010), refused to associate the 'hyperrealist rendition of shiny, glossy, and glassy surfaces' with the consumerist frenzy of the 1960s commodities boom and Frederic Jameson's notions of postmodern 'depthlessness'. Roelstraete viewed the photorealists as revolutionaries celebrating their places of labour and 'finding deep authenticity in the fleeting surfaces of the capitalist landscape' (Maffei and Fisher, 2013:236). The doubling of glossy reflective surfaces (depicted imagery and surface finish) of such paintings presented a 'confusion of opacity and transparency, of inside and outside' (Maffei and Fisher, 2013:236) that simultaneously invited and deflected the gaze. Artist Donal Moloney explored this complexity further in 'Visual slippages between the picture plane and the painting surface in Richard Estes' Double Self-Portrait (1976)'. The crux of his argument is that in photorealist painting, there is a visual slippage between the conception of the picture

plane and the painting's surface, and an oscillation between different ways of looking. Maloney's focus is on painted depictions of light which he refers to as 'specular highlights'. However, these static representations are different to the shine of a gilded surface, for example, where the specular highlight is fundamental to the materiality of the metal leaf rather than an illusory quality of the depicted highlight. My material (rather than illusory) explorations of shine reveal it as a way to unsettle the stability of the physical surface. In this way, the viewer potentially perceives the image as hovering somewhere above or in front of the picture plane.

While the reflective surface is perceptually unstable, it is, argues Maffei and Fisher (2013), also conceptually 'fixed' to cultural markers specific to historical moments in time. There is, therefore, a paradoxical relationship between the perception of shine and its historical context. From the Victorian's contemporary taste for gleaming polish and glistening surfaces as analysed by Barnaby, the Japanese celebration of antique sheen (Tanizaki, 1933), to the highly reflective surfaces of postmodernism, it is 'across these reflecting and refracting surfaces that we can catch glimpses of the extent to which ... [lives are]... subtly affirmed or challenged...' (Barnaby, 2013:173). When understood in these historical and culturally specific contexts, Maffei and Fisher argue that luminosity becomes conceptually fixed and a 'solid carrier of meaning' (2013:238) despite being visually unstable.

4.2 Light and the immaterial surface

Working on paper, drawings made from August 2015 onwards focused on the use of metal leaf as an integrated aspect of the artwork. Following on from *Stasis* (2015) and *Drift* (2015), (see pp. 10-13), I made two further bodies of drawings; *G(u)ilty* (2015/16) was made with gold leaf and *Tilted Plane* (2015/16) with silver leaf. The reflective qualities of the gold and silver leaf produced very different optical effects. The gold gave a warmer and more 'colourful' tone, more closely aligned to painting, while the silver had a graphic quality similar to drawing.

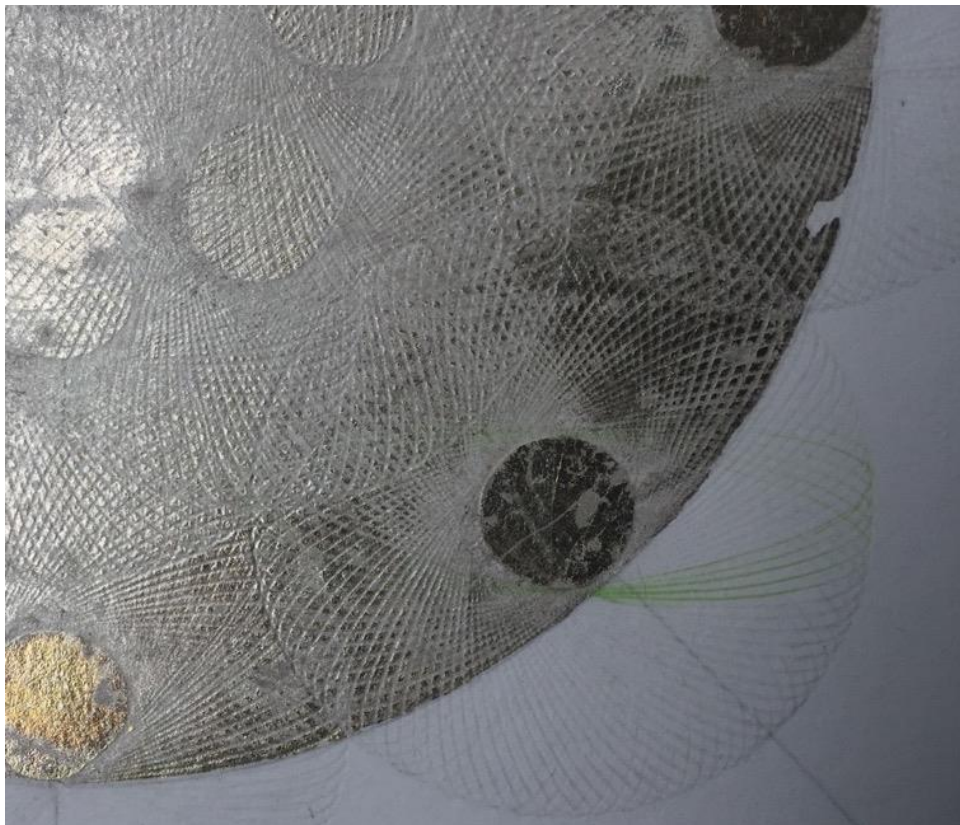
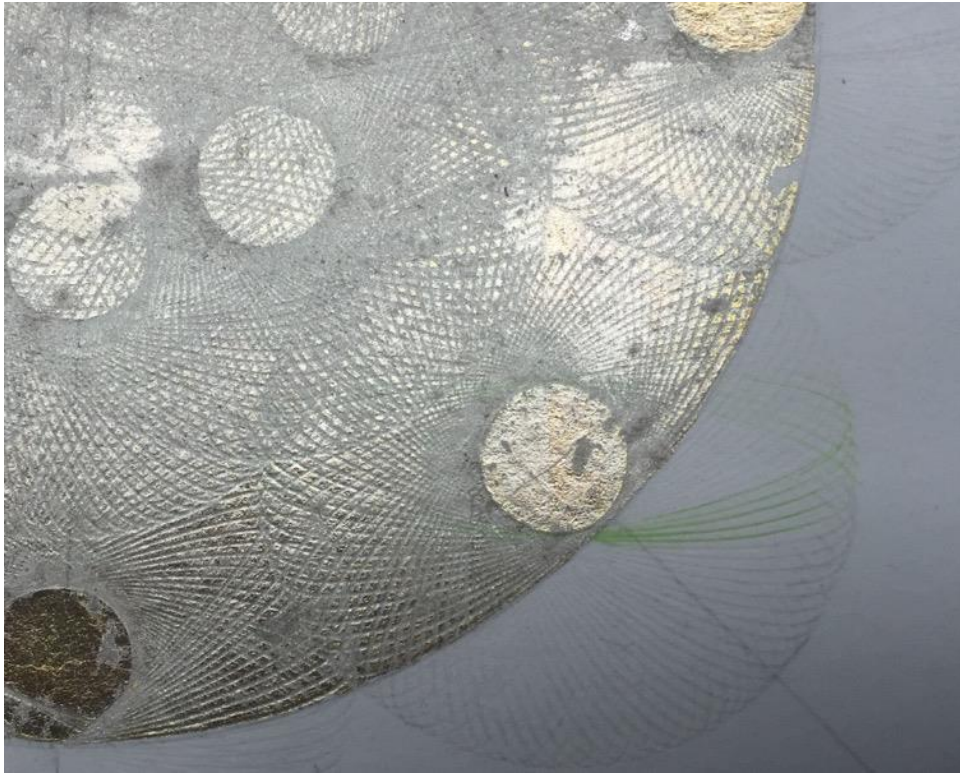


Figure 63: *Tilted Plane (Circle with green ink)* (2015), detail. Silver leaf, pencil and lacquer on paper. The same drawing photographed under different lighting conditions.

The silver leaf, more so than the gold, also altered considerably under different lighting conditions. It could fluctuate between, for example, a state of high reflectivity that presents as a luminous bright white, to a matt flat black as though all the light had drained away. (figure 63). Artist Richard Wright spoke about the phenomenon of the fluctuating effect of silver leaf during a video interview in which he discussed his gilded installation *Im Theseustempel Wien* (2013), an interior wall painting commissioned for the Theseus Temple in Vienna. Made entirely in-situ and using traditional gilding techniques Wright worked with a team of assistants for over a month to complete the work. Like a triangular shaft of light suddenly appearing through a skylight, *Im Theseustempel Wien* strikes the back wall of the building which, when viewed close up, consisted of a series of densely packed gilded contour lines. Wright described how he wanted to produce a work that almost disappeared—for it to exist between believing and not believing. Silver leaf has, Wright explained, ‘the possibility to be dark and light at the same time (...) of just not being there, of just catching the light and then disappearing’ (Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, 2013:2min 13):

As the light entering the space changed, the surface remained in constant movement. A visitor wishing to identify something in the swirling lines might have seen apocalyptic cloud formations, tattoos or bodily orifices. But everything was forever dissolving across axes of symmetry, as in a Rorschach blot. (Weh, 2013).

Silver leaf was a medium of choice for Wright because it produced a surface that both entices and delights, only to slide elusively from being to non-being as it appears and disappears. Reflective materials, however, are only one side of the ‘perceptual partnership’ as without light (artificial or natural) there would be no effects of shine (Barnaby, 2013:168). It is light that activates the surface. The materials I used in my studio practice—such as gold and silver leaf, graphite pencils, lacquers, varnishes, and matt and gloss paint—reflect and absorb light in different ways. Sometimes there is a sense of the image appearing to hover somewhere above the surface while at other times it darkens, flattens and seems to recede. A shiny surface entices the viewer to look, drawing us in only to prevent us from adopting a singular viewpoint, confounding our attempt to see (what is on) the surface as a singular image.



Figure 64: Viewer in front of Richard Wright (2013) *Im Theseustempel Wien* and detail (below), Theseus temple, Vienna. Silver leaf on wall. Photo credit Alexandra Matzner (photographed on 16.04.2013, 10-11am)

The task of documenting my artworks accentuated the difficulty of capturing this non-singularity that light and shine instigated. It was proving impossible to produce one image that, to my mind, was an accurate representation of the artwork. Jean-Paul Leclercq identified a similar problem when he curated the textile exhibition, *Jouer la lumière* (25th January 2001 – 3rd February 2002), at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, a show that combined ‘the science of vision and optics with the history of art and its techniques in order to shed light (literally and metaphorically) on the directional visual properties of textiles’ (Leclercq and Labrusse, 2016). Leclercq’s dilemma was that the warp and weft of the textiles presented differently depending on the angle of the light source. He explains how ‘[s]een and lit in line with the warp, a shot taffeta is the color of its weft; seen and lit in line with the weft, it shows the colour of its warp’ (Leclercq and Labrusse, 2016).⁶⁰

The directional visual properties of textiles was an area of research that Leclercq identified as having remained relatively unexplored since Michel-Eugène Chevreul’s *La Théorie des effets optiques que présentent les étoffes de soie* (1846).⁶¹ Chevreul, a chemist and colourist working in Paris in the mid-1800s, identified the various effects of light particular to different textures of silk (Chevreul, 1846).⁶² In order to document the fabrics for the exhibition catalogue, Leclercq took Chevreul’s ideas on the optical effects of silk textiles a stage further by using directional light to maximise the contrast between the warp and weft of the cloth.⁶³ He took photographs of the same fabric under three different lighting conditions and camera positions: photographed in the same direction as the light, in the opposite direction to the light and at right angles to the light.

⁶⁰ A ‘shot’ fabric is made up of thread woven from warp and weft yarns of two or more colours producing an iridescent appearance. The weaving technique can also be applied to other fibres such as silk, cotton, linen, and synthetics (Takeda & Spilker, 2010:49).

⁶¹ An English translation of *La theorie des effets optiques que presentent les etoffes de soie* is, ‘The theory of optical effects of silk fabrics’.

⁶² Chevreul’s international reputation is based on his research on colour contrasts, specifically, the interaction of colours when placed next to each other, published in *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* in 1839. An English translation of the title is, ‘The principles of harmony and contrasts of colours’. The first French edition of the book, published in 1839, provided a comprehensive theory of colour for the visual arts. It notably influenced the Impressionists, particularly the Pointillist movement as developed by George Seurat and Paul Signac. Their signature technique of using tiny juxtapositions of complementary colours can be traced back to Chevreul’s research on colour theory.

⁶³ To document the textiles for the exhibition catalogue, Leclercq designed a circular photographic table (1.15m in diameter) that he named the Goniophotoscope®. With its backlighting and articulated arms, it was possible for the material, light source and imaging equipment to be positioned independently, giving Leclercq greater control over the photographic process (Leclercq and Labrusse, 2016).



Figure 65: Jean-Paul Leclercq, *Jouer la lumière*. Exhibition catalogue showing a series of six image and (below) detail of image III 8. Photo credit Philip Sykas.

Figure 65 shows how Leclercq presented the series of images in the exhibition catalogue. While no one image can be said to be an exact representation, the three together gave the viewer a more rounded understanding of the cloth's visual character.

Working with photographer Tony Richards from The John Rylands Library in Manchester, I applied Leclercq's idea of lighting and systematic camera positions to document my gilded artworks and paintings. Figure 66 shows three photographs of the same drawing: lit from the left-hand side (top), lit with a top light (middle) and then lit from the left-hand side (bottom). The images demonstrate how the drawing changed when photographed under different lighting conditions. While each photograph serves as a record of one aspect of the play of light, seen together, they provide a fuller experience of the material surface. Shine is not static. It comes and goes, thus changing the perceived appearance of the surface.

Artists use this material knowledge, manipulating the interactions between paint and texture to produce specific effects. For example, the way light reflects off the painted surface is pivotal to the paintings of British artist Jane Harris. Working with elegant elliptical forms,⁶⁴ edged by what appears to be a continuous brush-mark, Harris repeats and mirrors shapes, often with subtle alterations. Her use of metallic paint adds a lustre to the painted surface helping to create a figure-ground ambiguity that at times pushes the surrounding image forwards and then, at the next turn, pulls it back again. This quality is evident in Harris's painting *Blue Bleu* (figure 32: see page 61) where the outer edge of the two almost identical ellipses present as different tones of blue as the paint marks either absorb or reflect the light.

⁶⁴ Note that an ellipse is also a shape that has two focal points and can be seen simultaneously as both a flat shape and a shape in perspective, reminiscent of Holbein's anthropomorphic skull (see figure 78). Thus, Harris's choice of the elliptical form as a structural strategy complicates the figure/ground ambiguity.

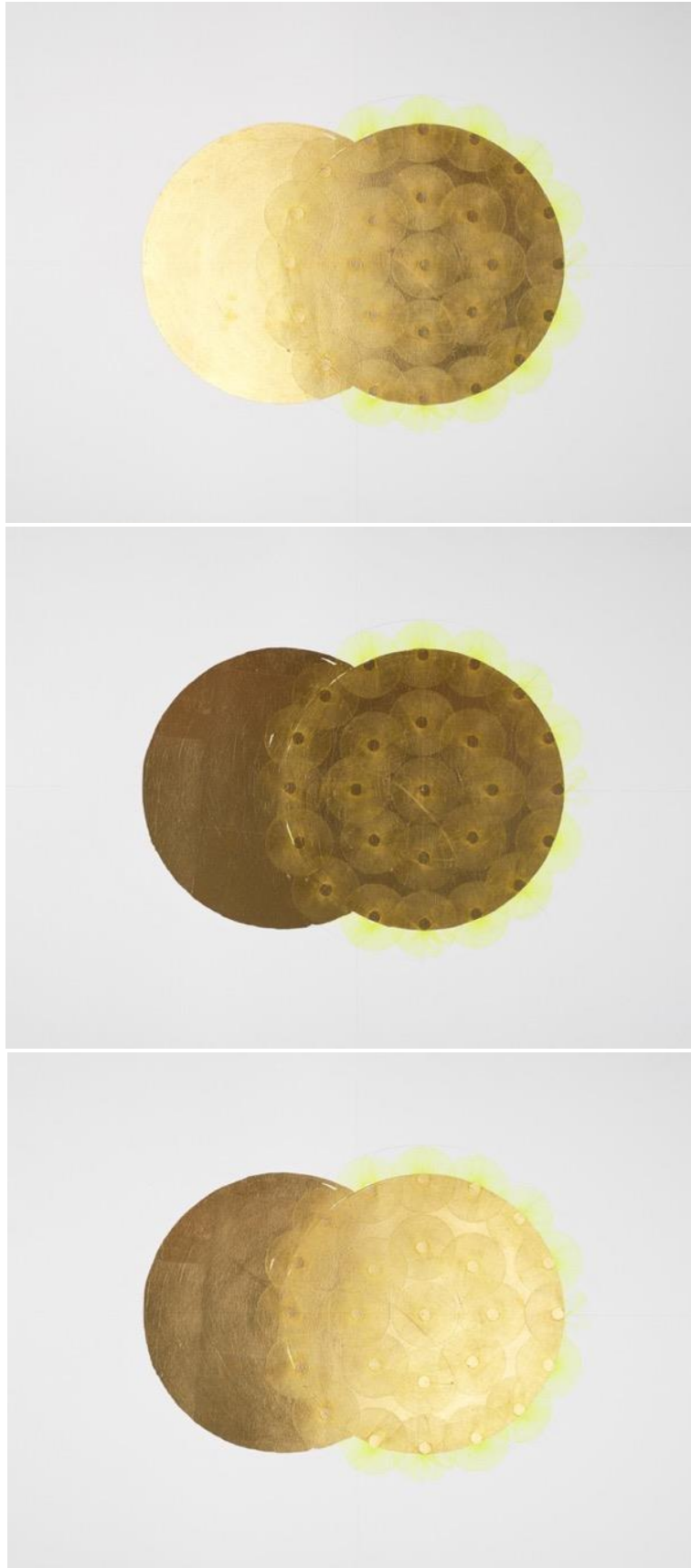


Figure 66: *G(u)ilty: Shroud* (2016). Gold leaf and yellow ballpoint pen on paper, 70 x 55 cm. The same drawing photographed under three different lighting conditions. Photo credit Tony Richards.

This push-pull effect was noted by art critic Martin Hentschel (2001) who, in his catalogue essay, 'Transforming Geometry and Ornament - On the Paintings of *Jane Harris*', reflected on how parts of the outside ellipse appear darker than the inside (and vice-versa) despite being rendered with the same paint. The reflective properties of the painted surface attract and distract the eye, pulling the viewer 'into the [paintings'] depths only to be pushed back up to the surface again' (Hentschel, 2001). The paint and the light work together to generate changing relations between dark and light, flatness and depth, producing the push-pull effect with sections of the image appearing to alternate between hovering somewhere below to somewhere above the picture plane.

Alberti famously recommended that a painting be conceived as an open window through which its subject – the *historia* – might be seen.⁶⁵ Yet, even during the Renaissance, artists tested the limits of this space and revelled in ways to manipulate it. Foreshortening, for example, created the illusion of an object appearing 'in front of' the picture plane. In, for instance, Benedetto Rusconi's *Salvator Mundi* (figure 67) foreshortening was used to make Christ's hand appear to 'poke through' the picture plane into the space of the viewer (Gombrich, 1995: xvii). In other paintings, such as *Trompe-l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain* (figure 68), Adriaen van der Spelt painted a shimmering curtain in front of the still life, interposed between the viewer and the *historia*. The curtain, while seemingly not part of the 'official' image, tested the limits of representation. Here, states Panofsky, 'objects (...) appear to stand in front of the "space box" rather than in it', unrestricted by the front by the picture plane (1991:56). Through varying techniques and strategies, Wright, Harris and myself also play with the imaginary space in front of the picture plane. Not by Albertian methods of foreshortening, perspective or illusory trompe-l'œil, but through the immaterial qualities of shine.

⁶⁵ Modern critics loosely translate *historia* as narrative in painting and it is used to describe the literary subjects of Renaissance painting. For a more in-depth analysis of the term and its changing usage, see Grafton, A. (1999) 'Historia and Istorica: Alberti's Terminology in Context.' *I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance* (8) pp. 37-68. Illinois: The University Chicago Press.

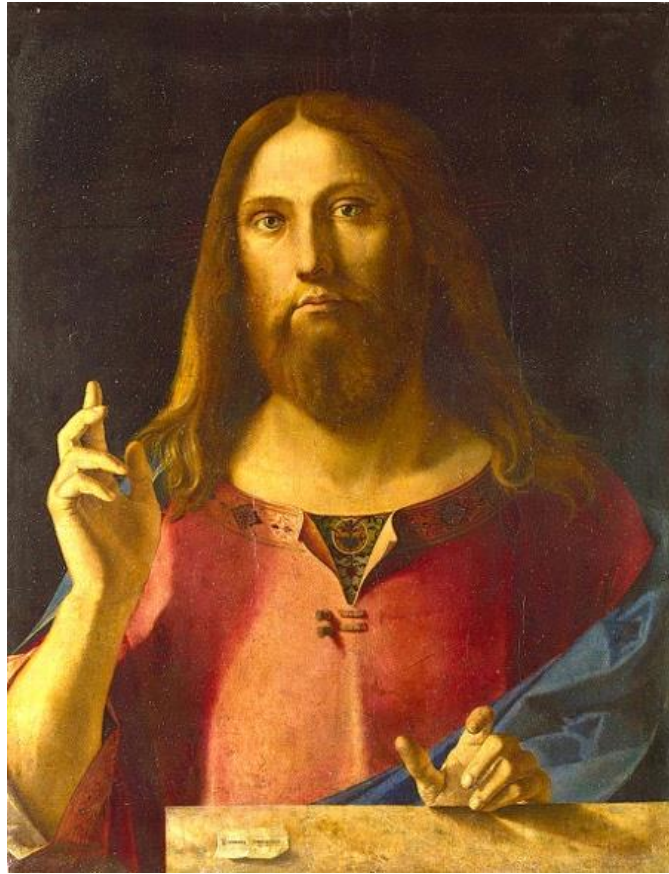


Figure 67: Benedetto Rusconi (c.1920-20) *Salvator Mundi*. Oil on panel, 76.2 x 59.1cm. National Gallery, London.



Figure 68: Adriaen van der Spelt (1658) *Trompe-l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain*. Oil on panel, 46.5 x 63.9 cm. Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 69: *In Cahoots with the Sun* (2019). Casein paint, copper leaf, gold body, pencil and lacquer on board, 120 x 120 cms. In progress (left) at the Sidney Nolan Trust, Artist Camps (2019) and (right) in situ, during the opening event.

The immaterial quality of shine was most apparent to me during an arts residency at the Sidney Nolan Trust (2019) during which I had been working on the painting *In Cahoots with the Sun* (2019). It was laid flat on a large worktable, and I was excited because it was nearing completion. But, as the days progressed, I started to feel deflated. The painting wasn't exciting me anymore. The copper leaf, in this horizontal position, looked flat and dull; there was no tension in the painting, nothing to grab you.

However, this all changed when the painting was hung on the wall for the opening event—as it was lifted from its horizontal position on the workbench the vertical surface caught the evening sunlight shining in through the top windows of the barn. The light reflected off the copper leaf and cast a warm flickering glow, shimmering on the surrounding white wall, beyond the boundary of the painting's physical surface. The copper, once activated by the sunlight, came alive and created a shared surface—an interface—where the artwork and viewer could meet and come together. Here, the immaterial glow presents as an extension of the material surface but is intimately anchored to it.

4.3 Shadows and darkness

In the darker houses of the past, the use of gold, silver, mirrors, jewels and other surfaces with reflective properties were not merely visual extravagances. As reflectors of light, they also functioned as a source of illumination; candles flickered in mirrors, and polished silver reflected light from the window. The ritualised care of possessions was often the care of shine. Processes that maintained the substance of surface, protecting against those things that could interfere with its ability to reflect light—such as dirt, tarnish and dust—included the waxing of wood, the polishing of silver and the dusting of mirrors.

During the Victorian period, advances in artificial lighting brought greater visibility to the interiors of rooms and the objects displayed there. Yet this did not reduce the necessity to care for surfaces. On the contrary, greater exposure resulted in the need for greater cleanliness because there was no-where to hide (Barnaby, 2013:173). Modernity, in its striving for progress, searched for light and clarity. In his essay *In Praise of Shadows* of 1933, the Japanese novelist, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki 'celebrated the antique sheen of traditional

Japanese interiors in the face of modernity's glare' (Maffei and Fisher, 2015:232). In contrast to the West's gleaming surfaces, oriental art and literature are known for seeking subdued forms that encourage an appreciation of shadow and subtlety. Unlike the gleaming silver, steel or nickel of the West, polished to a fine brilliance, Tanizaki explains how Japanese culture enjoys shine 'only when the lustre has worn off, when it [has] beg[un] to take on a dark, smoky patina... a tarnish so patiently waited for' (Tanizaki, 1933:18). Another example from this tradition are the bold patterns of lacquerware which are, for the most part, hidden in the darkness. Lacquerware, intricately decorated with gold, is not something to be seen in brilliant light or to be taken in at a single glance.⁶⁶ Instead, it should 'be left in the dark, a part here and a part there picked up by a faint light. Its florid patterns recede into darkness, conjuring in their stead an inexpressible aura of depth and mystery, of overtones but partly suggested' (Tanizaki, 1933:24). Similarly, the American poet and playwright May Swenson describes how, in her own work, she traces the edge of great shadows, 'whose outline shifts and varies (...) because all is movement – all is breathing change' (Poetry Foundation, no date). What I take away from Swenson's poetry and Tanizaki's writing is that beauty is found within the subtlety of the darkness where glimpses of light, caught within the shadows, are made all the more poignant because of their ephemerality.

Between 2017 and 2020, I made a series of 'black' paintings. I investigated the darkened surface as a space for reflection, serious thought and consideration. The architect Charles Moore proposed that darkness 'helps us to look deep into ourselves – to our own inhabitation of the world' (cited in Tanizaki, 1933:2). We dwell, however briefly, in this darkened space (of the page or canvas) and light, argued Moore, is an ally in this inhabitation. The intention for these paintings was to foster a quiet contemplation of space that allows us to shift between believing and imagining. Because of the contrasts between matt and gloss paint, forms appear to recede below the picture plane, only to move forward to somewhere above as the viewer changes position or lighting conditions alter. Through their velvety blackness, the paintings uphold a sense of elegant formality, strength and mystery, with

⁶⁶ Characterised by its lustrous finish and intricate designs, Japanese lacquerware is the craft of applying layers of lacquer (usually black or deep red) derived from the sap of the Urushi tree. By mixing gold or silver into the lacquer artisans depict intricate designs. Over time and use, the shine of the surface becomes more pronounced.

partial glimpses and reflected light seducing the viewer to want to see more. The materials, in collusion with the light, are complicit in the revelation of shape and shadow. The silvery sheen of *Still Point of the Turning World* (2018) (figure 70) produces fluctuating qualities of reflectivity and visual sensations. The five painting panels are butted up against each other in a line, inviting the viewer to walk the 3 metres from one end to the other. Each panel consists of a circle and outer edge, infilled with a stencilled motif. Using different combinations of matt casein paint, graphite pencil and lacquer I played with the reflective qualities of the materials. Like a modern-day daguerreotype, the images appear as either positive or negative depending on the angle at which they are viewed, and how light is reflected off the surface. Because of their reflectivity the images have an expansiveness which projects beyond the frame of the painting. Yet, at the same time, they have a distinctive interior: a contemplative space that allows the viewer to be physically still and for the eyes to take in all the detail and enter deep within its mirror-like graphite finish. Neither the external or internal space dominates, but rather the viewer's attention alternates, back and forth, between the two positions.



Figure 70a: *Still Point of the Turning World* (2018). Casein paint, graphite and lacquer on board, 60 x 60 cm each panel.

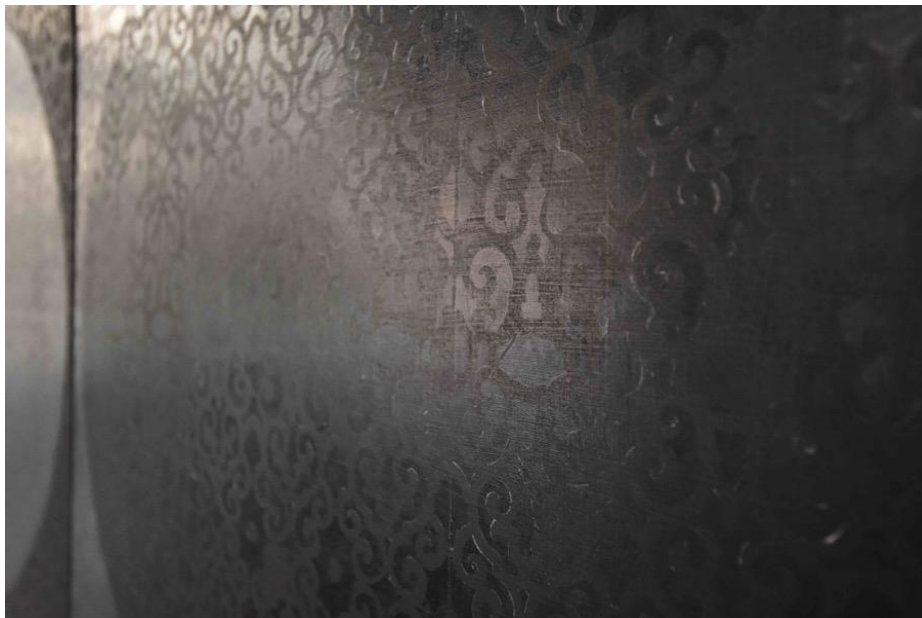
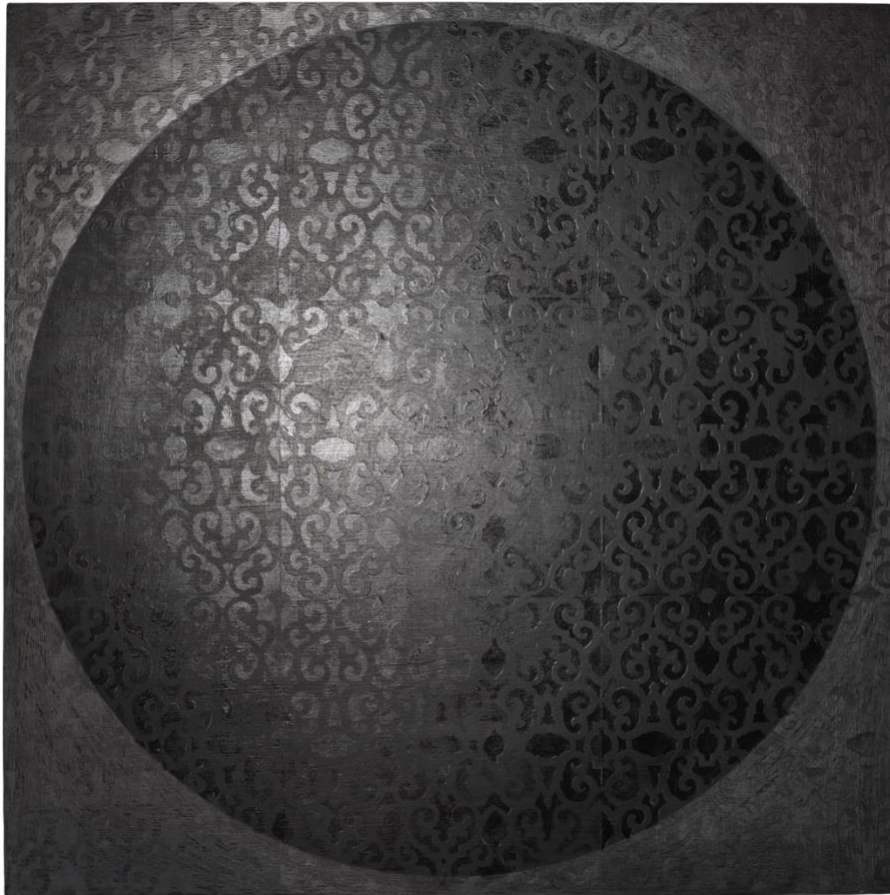


Figure 70b: *Still Point of the Turning World* (2018). Casein paint, graphite and lacquer on board, (details). The lower image shows the pink of the photographer's shirt reflected in the shine of the graphite pencil.

In *His muted geometry mating on her virtuoso butterfly wings* (2017), the simplicity of the image provides an intensity that betrays the painting's small size (figure 71). The restraint offered by the darkness encourages the viewer to focus on the central form, set against a cloudy sanded background that captures raking light. At times, the motifs are difficult to distinguish and the surface appears more uniform, yet in other light, the matt 'butterfly' shapes appear to pop forwards against the illuminated ground.



Figure 71: *His muted geometry mating on her virtuoso butterfly wings* (2017). Casein paint, pencil and lacquer on board, 20 x 20 cms. Photo credit Tony Richards.

Textile artist Maxine Bristow, in her 2006 exhibition catalogue, coined the phrase 'sensual austerity' referring to the aesthetic intensity of her work created by the use of a limited colour palette and material rigour. Darkness offers a similar but different kind of sensual austerity. Tanizaki, for example, refers to the sensual pleasure of a dimmed environment in his discussion of the erotic power of Japanese Noh performers (2001:40) noting how the darkness around them intensifies the bright colours of their costumes. Here, glimpses of the body caught in the darkness create greater eroticism than if the whole was revealed at once. Similarly, the reveal of these darkened surfaces, as exemplified in *His muted geometry*, are not given away easily and can be overlooked or missed entirely by the viewer. Yet the reveal can also be instantaneous like the flick of a switch, as in 'now you see it, now you don't'. This effect produces a sense of mild disorientation that results in marked visual and sensual pleasure.

Black is commonly described as 'the very darkest colour owing to the absence of or complete absorption of light; the opposite of white' (Oxfordify Dictionary: no date). Yet black paint also has the potential to appear light, just catching the light and then disappearing again, qualities that I exploited in this series of black paintings. By setting up contrasts between different surface finishes, I experimented with the different effects in various combinations; matt on gloss, gloss on matt, matt on sheen, sheen on gloss and so forth. The result of this research is most notable in *Still Point of the Turning World* (2018/19) where changes in surface effects disrupt the viewer's sense of certainty.

There are, however, many different types of 'black' pigments (spinal black, iron oxide, vine black and lamp black for example), each producing a different type of 'blackness'. Additionally, the tone varies depending on what colour is next to it, as explained by Chevreul's research on colour theory. For example, the brownish tinge of spinal black is accentuated when next to a deeper and darker shade of lamp black. With an understanding of the pigments and how they behave, a limited palette range still holds infinite possibilities and, ironically, much colour variation.

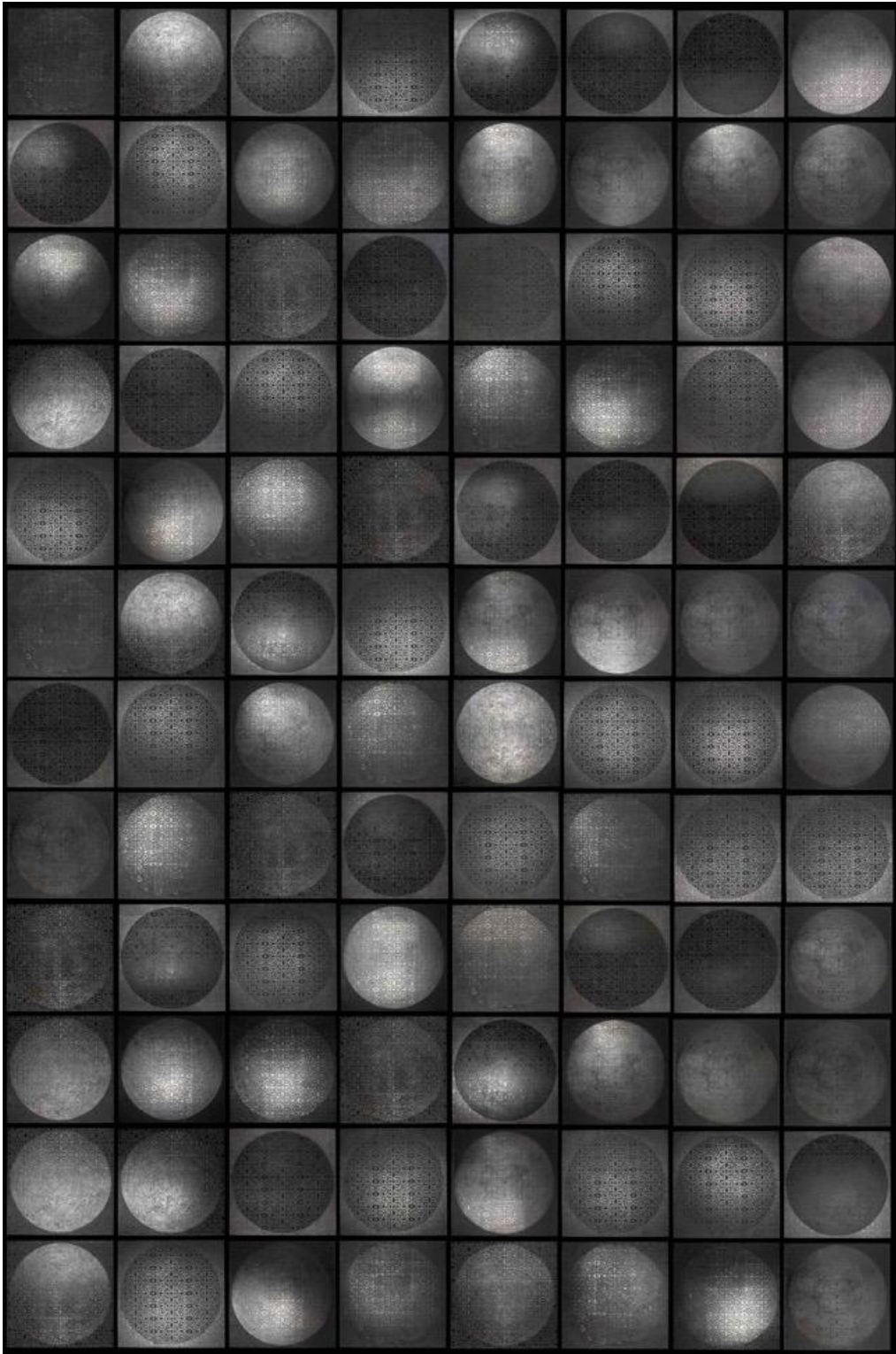


Figure 72: A gridded composite image of *Still Point of the Turning World* (2018/19), demonstrating the multiplicity of material and lighting effects seen in one series of paintings. Photo credit Tony Richards.

For more than seventy years, the French artist Pierre Soulages has worked primarily with black pigment and, since 1979, he has painted exclusively with the colour black. By using complex and distinctive textures, Soulages modifies the density of the black:

Painting 304 x 181 cm, 9 December 2007 is made of a stack of four horizontal canvases each exhibiting a different textural treatment. The top panel presents a duality of long striations running across its width and a flattened plane below. The two middle panels are restrained. The upper one has a matt finish. This is off-set by the silky sheen of the third panel, which seems to have been begun by subtle vertical strokes smoothing the paint surface. The lowest panel of *Painting 304 x 181 cm, 9 December 2007* is the most textured and thus echoes the very top of the composition. (Tate, no date).



Figure 73: Pierre Soulages, *Painting 304 x 181 cm, 9 December 2007* (2007). Acrylic paint on four canvases, overall, 307 x 181.6 cm Tate, London.

While Soulages is interested in the matter of paint itself and the contrasts between different textures, he notes, 'I don't work with black, I work with the light that reflects it' (in Stillpass, 2014). In this way, his paintings enable 'a perceptual experience of light that lies ... outside the materiality of the object itself' (Tate, no date). Thus, it is not the optical effect as such that he is interested in but more the mental field that the images open up while simultaneously inviting a physical relationship. Soulages coined the term *Outrenoir* to define his practice. It is a term that, as he explains in an interview in 2014, does not have a direct English translation, with the closest being *beyond black*. 'In French', explains Soulages, 'you say "outr-Manche," "beyond the Channel," to mean England or "outr-Rhin," "beyond the Rhine," to mean Germany. In other words, "beyond black" is a different country from black', (Stillpass, 2014). Soulages' paintings conjure up a heterotopic space of otherness, which is neither here nor there but is simultaneously both a mental and physical space.⁶⁷

In my practice, paintings made between 2017 and 2020 explore surface reflectivity through the use of black pigments and lacquer combined with graphite pencil to produce a metalwork character that evokes damascening.⁶⁸ These restrained paintings elicit a quiet, contemplative space; shapes and shadows recede on the darkened plane of the painting only to jump forward as the lighting changes or the viewing position is altered. A dense dark shiny black, for example, appears to hover in front of the picture plane while in other instances it recedes, suggesting a vast depth—an expanse of deep space like a black hole. This deepest darkest black endows the surface with qualities that cooperate with the viewer in revealing depth. Whether it is the sharp shaft of light emanating from a gilded surface, the silvery sheen of graphite on deep black or the quiet sensuousness of black on black, the viewer is encouraged to reflect on being present in a world of detail that is revealed and obscured on the surface through shadow effects.

⁶⁷ Michel Foucault's heterotopia (1966), a term used to describe the point at which several spaces from elsewhere come together (heterotopiastudies.com: online), is elaborated on further in the section '*Surface is...*' (see page 181).

⁶⁸ Damascening is the art of 'inlaying different metals into one another—typically gold or silver into a darkly oxidised steel background to produce intricate patterns. The English term comes from a perceived resemblance to the rich tapestry patterns of damask silk' (Wikipedia: no date).

Findings

Shine has the potential, along with the glitch, the hesitation and process led inconsistencies discussed in the previous chapter, to unsettle the surface and disrupt the process of looking. Early on in the doctoral study, I used metal leaf as a way of embellishing the surface but, over the course of my research, the disembodied strangeness of shine became a central aspect of my studio practice and an integrated component of the paintings and drawings. Artworks discussed operate in the realm of an expanded surface that encompasses areas experienced as lying above or below, but most importantly, that are closely connected to the surface.

My experience of shine strongly demonstrates the need to re-evaluate surface; shine can make surfaces oscillate between light and dark and can make objects seem to hover or sink. Shine couples the material properties of the surface with the immaterial properties of light. Shine elicits from the viewer an image built from multiple encounters rather than a singular image captured at one moment. Meanwhile the viewer, while aware of the reflected light, experiences the material and immaterial surface as a homogenous whole. The immaterial glow of shine and the material surface resonates with Wollheim's twofoldness as distinguishable, but inseparable, qualities contained simultaneously within the one image.

Shine has the potential to create a visible immaterial surface revealed by reflection. A useful example of this phenomenon is the spectacle of the sun's corona; the outermost part of the sun's atmosphere, the 'aura of plasma that surrounds the sun', and which extends millions of miles into outer space. As a giant ball of plasma (electrified gas), the sun does not have a distinct solid surface like Earth (NASA Science, no date). Yet it does have a surface, but one that is only visible at the point at which it is revealed by reflection. The corona is most easily seen during a total solar eclipse (figure 73) when the moon passes between the Earth and the sun, blocking its bright light. Like the luminescent surface of *In Cahoots with the Sun* (2019), the glowing white corona can be seen surrounding the eclipse, an immaterial surface with surface-like qualities.

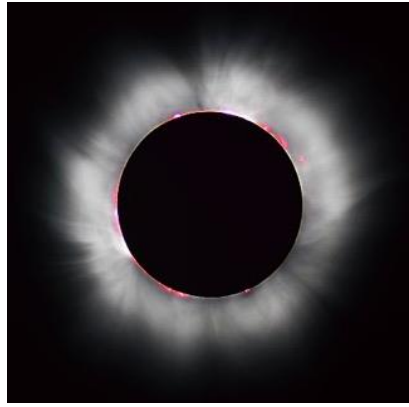


Figure 74: The sun's corona during an eclipse. (1999). Reproduced by kind permission of Luc Viatour.

The variegated effects of light also bring movement to the surface and further complicate the perception of surface and image. I have shown, in examples of my paintings and those of Wright and Harris, how light activates the painting's surface. This activated movement is assimilated by the viewer into an experience which is difficult to capture in a single image.

To speak of shine also entails that we equally recognise the power of shadow and darkness. Darkness absorbs light but seldom so completely as 'absolute' black. The visual response to the remaining reflectivity is enhanced, so the viewer attends more closely to subtle shades of darkness. Shadow draws the viewer in and invites the intimate view. In a body of 'black' paintings, I explored the subtleties of darkness through the use of graphite pencils and the contrasts between matt and gloss finishes. And while I acknowledge that there are differences between a surface that is highly reflective and one with a slight sheen or glow, I have shown how light emitted from the darkest surface compounds its materiality. In this way, even the darkest surface reflects, absorbs, transforms and transmutes the light it collects.

Shine, in conjunction with light (or the absence of light) and light in conjunction with shine, brings ambiguity to the surface and disrupts our sense of certainty. The illuminated surface creates thresholds that are neither in nor out, shimmering mirages that absorb our gaze and moments when the surface appears to hover or dissolve. Shine implies an expanded surface where experience contradicts material reality. And this is where shine is at its most illuminating, enabling the viewer to experience the depth of surface.

Chapter Five: The viewing body



In the previous chapter, I showed how light impacts the surface of artworks. Absorption and reflection alter our visual experience of the illuminated surface. I argued that reflective materials modulate our reception of the surface, disrupting our sense of visual certainty. But the experience of surface is not only affected by how it is lit and the materials from which it is made; it also entails the embodied interaction with the observer.

The importance of the viewing body came to the fore during test-bed exhibitions of my artworks. The use of reflective materials complexified how the viewer approached and moved around the artworks and aspects of display took on greater significance.⁶⁹ At the beginning of this research, I had, in my preoccupation with making and surface finish, overlooked the importance of the spectator. Artworks are experienced by the act of looking within a viewing environment—a physical encounter with the thing itself—and this has implications for the understanding of surface that I wanted to address. This chapter explores surface from the perspective of the viewing body.

In the first section, I focus on ways in which the viewer, as an active and mobile participant, negotiates an encounter with surface. In contrast to Alberti's formalised conventions of western perspective, focused around a single, immobile point near the centre of the image, the artworks discussed here invite a range of what I call 'viewing postures'. I draw on Mark Paterson's text 'Architecture of Sensation: Affect, Motility and the Oculomotor' (2017) to help theorise the viewer's bodily encounter with surface, ocular vision and multiple viewing positions.

In the second section, I question how display angles affect the viewer's experience of surface. Theoretical context is considered through contrasting notions of pictorial orientation, the vertical (Alberti), and the horizontal plane (Steinberg). How do verticality and horizontality

⁶⁹ My discussion of surface adopts Brett Kelly-Chalmers (2016) expanded understanding of the term 'viewer'. A more appropriate term might be "experiencer", states Brett Kelly-Chalmers, 'but the word "viewer" is favoured here for its simplicity' (2016:6). Her approach is based on the idea that the spectator's engagement with an artwork is multi-sensorial and embodied rather than solely based on visual apprehension.

tap into the viewer's cultural inheritances? And what happens to the picture plane and our understanding of surface when artworks are tilted or angled?

An assertion of the importance of visual 'touch' is explored in the final section through the notion of viewing distances and intimacy. We find understandings can be gleaned from proxemic theory (Hall, 1966) in terms of the movement between the detail and the whole—viewing close-up and more distant. Informed by an exhibition of American quilts (Whitney Museum of Art, 1971) and further scrutinised through a series of handmade books, I explore what is lost and gained through different viewing distances.

Theoretical propositions about the viewing body and the position of the artwork in relation to its environment were explored during exhibitions of my artworks: *Re(Con)Figure*, Grosvenor Gallery (2017), *Tilted Plane*, Alexandria Library, Manchester (2018) and *In Praise of Shadows*, Made In Wolves Gallery, Wolverhampton (2019). Examples from these exhibitions inform the broader discussion throughout the chapter in terms of how display impacts on the viewing body's experience of surface.

5.1 The viewing body

In her opening review of *Hmhm, Haha*, a solo exhibition of Sean Penlington's paintings (2014), Catherine Ferguson writes:

The visitor walks into the Gallery and the body of the painted surface immediately invites the body of the viewer to occupy that same space; to come up close and inspect the ins and outs of the material surfaces, to move around and take in the installation at a distance, looking across, looking down, catching sight of a fragment here and another there out of the corner of the eye and then round again – building up a picture of each work from a series of perspectives; a picture revealed through the physicality of looking.

The exhibition was about the act of looking, and Ferguson traced ways in which, on entering the gallery space, the visitor was drawn to interact with the artworks. The exhibition title alludes to the viewer's thinking process ('Hmhm') followed by the realisation ('Haha') of the

'solution to the puzzles that the paintings represent' (International 3, 2014). The architecture of the space, the lighting of works, and curatorial decisions of arrangement can significantly impact the viewing experience. For example, in my solo show, *In Praise of Shadows* (2019), the gallery space directly affected the viewing experience of the artworks. Made In Wolves Gallery, adjacent to one of the main entrances of the Millennium City Building at the University of Wolverhampton, is an irregular-shaped space with one side open to the lobby, and windows spanning the full width of its frontage. The flow of the gallery is interrupted by central pillars, three porthole roof windows, strip lighting and, in the middle of the large wall opposite the windows, six permanent video monitors; a cacophony of varied intrusions that the viewer has to negotiate while viewing the exhibition (figures 75 and 76).

In addition to the architectural details, the natural light in the space fluctuates depending on the weather and time of day. At certain points during the exhibition, sunlight poured in through the windows, casting shadows and reflections across the surface of the artworks. Two drawings from the *Tilted Plane* series were displayed horizontally on a Perspex-covered plinth. The Perspex presented its own idiosyncrasies, such as finger prints and scratches and caused me to think much more about the space (the interface) between the viewer and the physical surface of the work as a plane of activity with certain surface-like attributes (Bruno, 2014). Light from the porthole window above also reflected onto the Perspex, echoing the gilded circle beneath. It was also difficult, on first glance, for the viewer to tell whether a slash of strip lighting was part of the image or a reflection; shadows and reflections from the external space merged with, echoed and impacted on the artworks. My experience of exhibiting at Made in Wolves Gallery emphasised the multi-faceted context of the gallery. The viewing experience is a layered and multisensory bodily encounter (Paterson, 2017:1), impacted by the architecture of the space and changes in the lighting conditions.

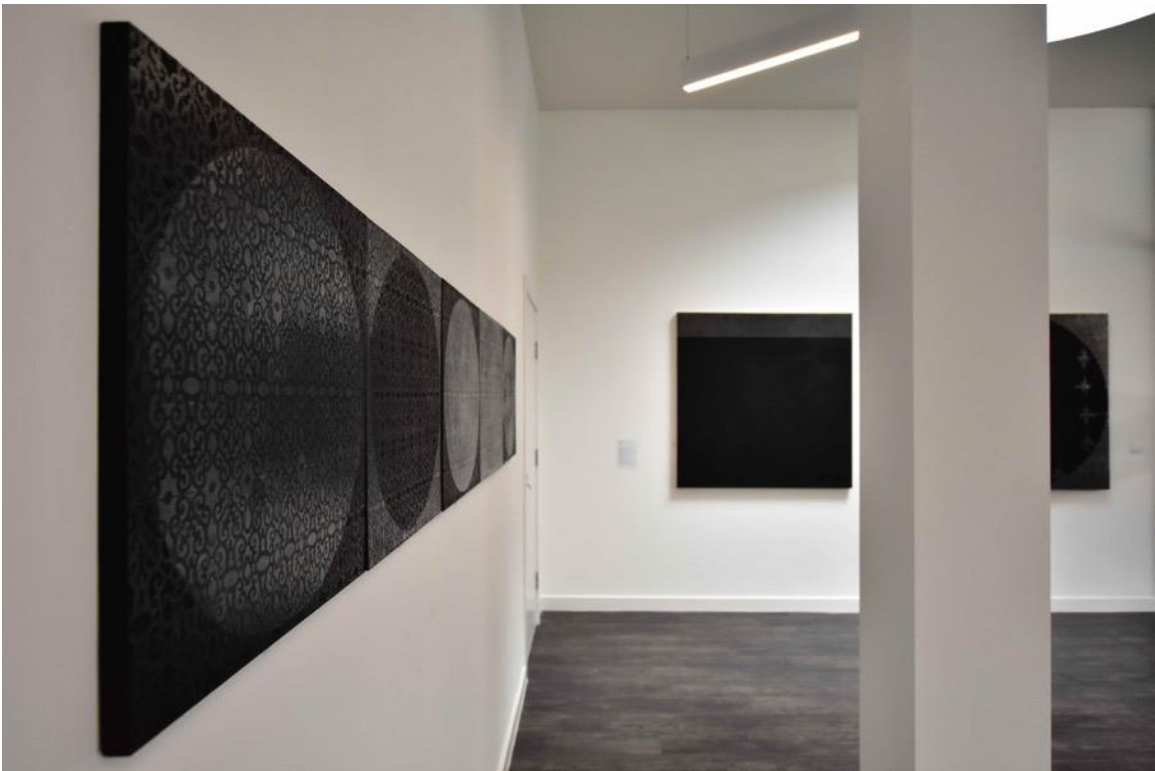


Figure 75: *In Praise of Shadows* (2019) Made in Wolves Gallery, Millennium City Building, University of Wolverhampton.

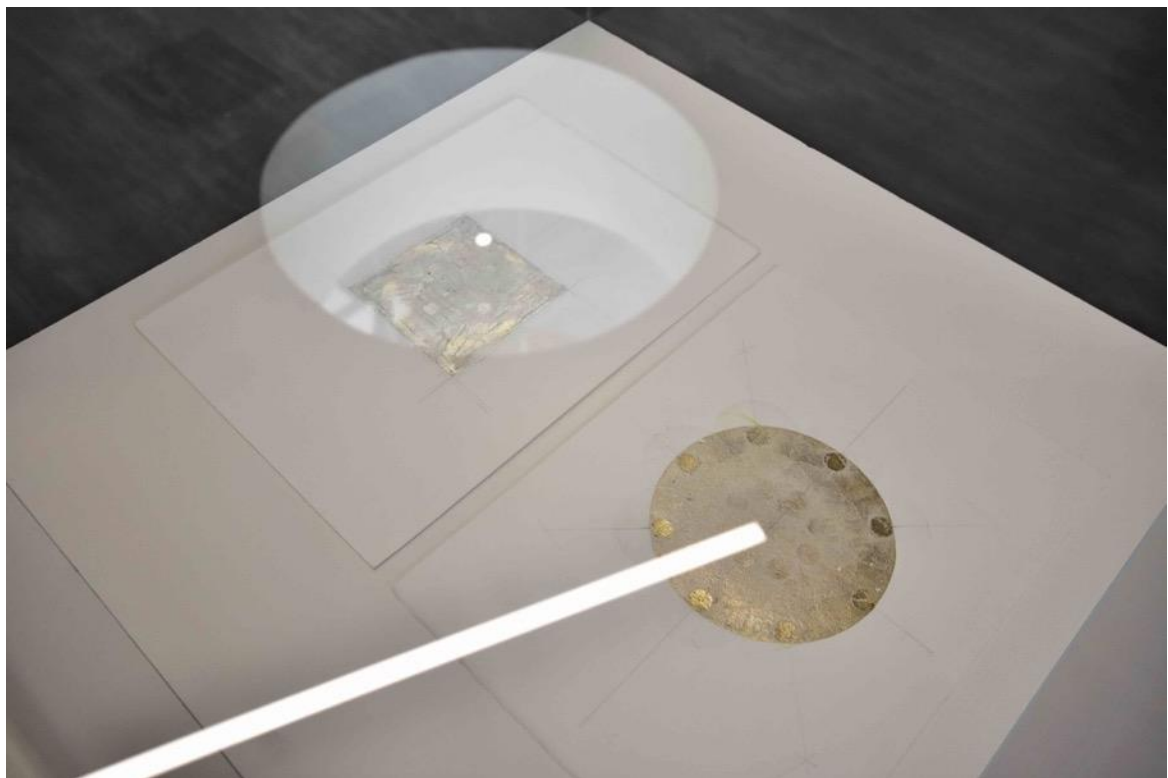


Figure 76: *In Praise of Shadows* (2019) Made in Wolves Gallery, Millennium City Building, University of Wolverhampton.

Ferguson's description of the viewing body as a mobile participant, and of looking as a physical process, can be contrasted with Alberti's formalised conventions of western perspective where the viewer assumes a static position in order to experience the artist's intended spatial effects. *The Master of Perspective* (2011) by Elodie Hiryczuk and Sjoerd van Oevelen elucidates this static model of vision by showing the correlation between the viewer's eye, the vanishing point on the horizon line and the imaginary picture plane. The rays, indicated by the yellow ropes, converge at both the vantage point (the eyes of the viewer) and at the vanishing point on the horizon at the far end of the field (Hiryczuk and van Oevelen, 2013). However, over the centuries, there have been many developments in the way reality is visually represented—how the viewer experiences an artwork is complex, not always best defined by a static viewing posture.



Figure 77: Hiryczuk/Van Oevelen, (2011) *The Master of Perspective*. Archival pigment print, 90 x 120 cm.

Holbein's well-known painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) (figure 78), for example, is a perspectival 'conundrum' that continues to fascinate to this day. The large double portrait includes a variety of still life objects including a 'skull' positioned on the lower edge of the composition. In order to see the central elliptical form as an accurate rendering of a human skull, it is necessary for the viewer to approach the painting from either high on the right side, or low on the left side. As an example of anamorphic perspective, the viewer must occupy a specific vantage point to experience the image fully.⁷⁰ When viewing *The Ambassadors* at the National Gallery, I watched in fascination as gallery visitors moved about in front of the painting, shifting their position until they found the point at which the skull slipped into perspective. To 'see' the normative rendering of the skull, it was necessary to locate the exact viewing position. To find it, however, much movement was required. In this way, *The Ambassadors* invites the viewer to play with the idea of multiple viewing points, thus resonating with Ferguson's idea of the viewer as a mobile participant, moving around the artwork to view it from various angles until the *Ha-ha* moment is located.

While exhibiting *Shape-Shifter* (figure 53, see page 104) at the Sidney Nolan Trust (2018), I observed a similar critical moment when the viewer became aware that the appearance of the painting was dependent upon their position toward it. I noted how one particular visitor stood facing the painting, moving in and out, up and down, and from one side to another. Speaking together afterwards he explained how (on referring to the amorphous shape in the middle), he 'had nearly missed it'. He went on to say how he would have left thinking the painting was a black monotone if he had not glanced back at it again, just as he was about to move on. While *Shape-Shifter* is not an anamorphic image its appearance relies, in a similar way, on the agency of the viewer as an active participant.

⁷⁰ In the visual arts 'anamorphism' is a perspective technique that gives a 'distorted image of the subject represented in a picture when seen from the usual viewpoint but so executed that if viewed from a particular angle, or reflected in a curved mirror the distortion disappears and the image appears normal. Derived from the Greek word meaning "to transform", the term *anamorphosis* was first employed in the 17th century, although this technique had been one of the more curious by-products of the discovery of perspective in the 14th and 15th centuries' (Britannica, no date).



Figure 78: Hans Holbein the Younger (c.1533) *The Ambassadors*. Oil on oak, 207 x 209.5 cm. The National Gallery, London.



Figure 79: Jean Metzinger (1911) *Le Goûter (Tea-Time)*. Oil on cardboard, 75.9 x 70.2 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

As a metaphor for static and mobile viewing experiences, Jane Harris recalled her trip to the Royal Gardens of Japan, where she described two types of garden: the 'sitting down' type and the 'walking around' type. The first (static and still) is contemplated from one single viewing terrace. In contrast, the second (mobile and active) consists of a series of discoveries from the different vistas along the winding paths. In an email dialogue with curator Richard Klein (2006),⁷¹ Harris explained how she continues to hold these concepts in mind, striving to create a surface that combines multiple perspectival positions within the same image. Her aim, to reveal 'contradictory spatial relationships, inversions and counter-points' (Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2006:2min 38), was a bid to offer the viewer both types of encounters—experiences that rely on the agency of the viewing body to engage physically and mentally with the painted surface.

Unlike the singular viewing position of traditional linear perspective, the post-impressionists (including Cézanne, Braque, Picasso and Metzinger) experimented with multiple viewing positions: the perception of space from two or more points (Wild, 2015:44). Compared to perspectival projection, their use of slanting surfaces, with objects angled towards the viewer (referred to as *Cézanne's wedge*), is a projection model that enables an object to be represented 'with the minimum of hidden parts' (Marcikic, M. and Paunovic, 2017). In *Le Goûter* (Metzinger, 1911), for example (figure 78) the seated woman is visible straight-on and in profile, while the teacup is depicted both from above and the side. The method of observing a subject simultaneously from different points in space and time and fusing it into a single image was a considerable move away from Alberti's conventions of western perspective. However, in recording the subject from multiple angles, it is the artist body that is mobile while the viewing body remains static. In this case, the reception of the image still relied on an act of vision that premises a fixed viewing position.

⁷¹ The 'dialogue' between artist Jane Harris and The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum's director of exhibitions Richard Klein is based on Email correspondence (December 2005) during the exhibition *Jane Harris: New Painting*. The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, USA. August 21 2005 – March 12 2006.

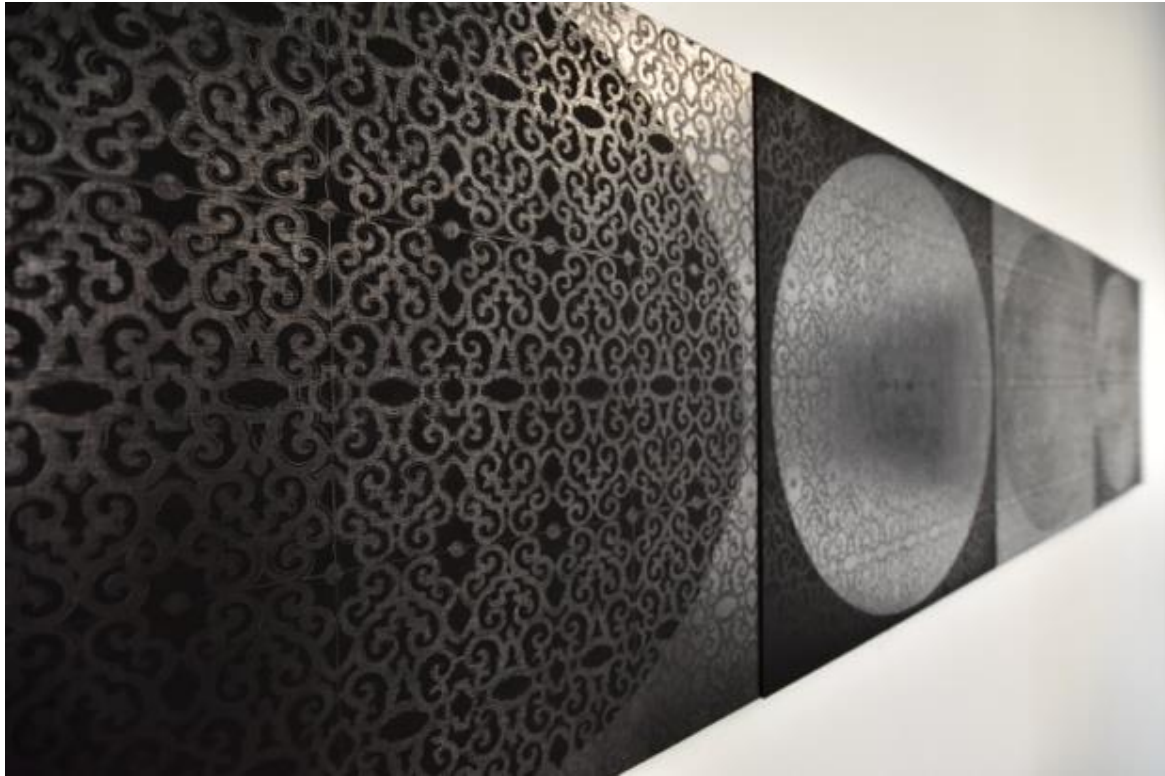


Figure 80: *Still Point of the Turning World* (2018/19). Casein paint, lacquer and graphite on board 50 x 50 cms each panel.

However, even this stationary viewing position may not be as still as first assumed. Mark Paterson presents the argument that the complex ocular processes involved in constituting the visual field are anything but static. Paterson writes specifically about the 'inherently oculomotor nature of the perceiving subject' and how 'light is transposed from surfaces, canvases, or walls onto the decidedly non-planar concave surfaces of the retina' (2017:4). By describing the complex and rapid muscle movements that control the eyeball, he argues that there is nothing static here. On the contrary, these quick glimpses and visual remakes are combined in the brain to constitute the experience of a continual 'visual field' (Paterson, 2017:9). For example, in *Still Point of the Turning World*, the viewer does not experience the image in an ocular sense, as through a camera lens, but builds an impression of the image from multiple angles in the attempt to make sense of the interruption caused by reflectance and shadow.

Although the motifs move from 'positive' to 'negative', the viewing experience is of a single painting. Thus, the viewing body's experience of surface involves multiple viewpoints mentally assembled from rapid eye movements, in addition to the whole body 'moving about', as observed by Ferguson and Harris. Human physiology mandates that the viewing body, even when still, is never a passive receptor of surface. On the contrary, the viewing body's encounter with surface is as an active and mobile participant with the experience of surface built up from multiple perspectives and viewing postures.

5.2 Verticality and horizontality

Having seen the contribution of the viewing body, this section questions how display angles affect the viewer's experience of surface, looking first at the contrast between vertical and horizontal. In the formal presentation of western art, two-dimensional artworks are typically hung vertically on a wall. Indeed, in Albertian terms, the picture plane is ordinarily vertical, perpendicular to the ground, and in line with the axis of vision. So what happens when an artwork is positioned horizontally? And how does tilting the plane affect the viewer's experience of the work mediated by cultural conditioning?

During the exhibition *(Re)configured*, at Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester School of Art, I displayed drawings from the *Tilted Plane* series in different positions: vertically on the wall, and horizontally on a low bench and a waist high table-top.⁷² Each different arrangement of the same work resulted in a different viewing experience with the viewing body either upright, leaning over or bending down.



Figure 81: *(Re)configured* (2017) at Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester School of Art. Installation shots.

In turn, each placement was affected differently by the light and how it reflected off the surface. For example, when hung vertically on the wall, the silver drawings appeared flatter and greyer with minimal reflection and shine. There was far more visual variation when the drawings were laid horizontally on the low shelf. Still, it was difficult to get close to them without leaning in or bending over—both an uncomfortable viewing position and one that blocked the light and cast a shadow over the work. Later, I positioned the same drawings on a waist height table nearer to the window where there was more variable natural daylight. As the viewer walked around the table, looking down at the drawings, the works were close enough to see the detail yet far enough away to get the overall effect of subtle lighting

⁷² The exhibition *Re(con)figured* was devised to be a test-bed for different display methods and configurations of my artworks at the half-way point of my doctoral study (2016). The Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester School of Art, is a tall rectangular space with one short end an open arcade, and the opposite end containing exterior windows. The main lighting comes from a large light-well in the roof. Because the Grosvenor Gallery is generally a bright room with a lot of natural daylight, the ability to control the lighting is limited. Exhibition space is on the two long walls adjacent to the windows, one of which has a bench-like shelf at a low level, and on the parquet floor.

changes, resulting in a fuller, more vibrant viewing experience. The horizontal orientation engages with a mode of vision that includes the 'carnal', contrasted with an upright position that Yves-Alain Bois refers to as being 'purely visual,' describing art as 'addressed to the subject as an erect being, far from the horizontal axis that governs the life of animals' (1997:25). Associated with the vertical visual field, innate to our upright human stance, Bois and Krauss propose that this is a position that has been 'theorized since the Renaissance by means of the conception of painting as a "window opened onto the world"' (1997:27). When hung vertically, images are read with a strong central orientation, as if perspectival, with the viewer relating visually to the painting 'as from the top of a columnar body'. Laid horizontally, they are seen as objects of equal weight spread across a space.

In contrast to vertical and horizontal viewing positions described above is the horizontal visual field as identified by art historian Leo Steinberg in his concept of the flatbed picture plane. Introduced in a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, Steinberg took the term 'flatbed' from the horizontal printing press.⁷³ He used it 'to describe the characteristic picture plane of the 1960s—a pictorial surface whose angulation with respect to the human posture is a precondition of its changed content' (Steinberg, 1972:949). Even the multiple viewing positions of Cubism, 'where the Renaissance world space concept almost breaks down,' hark back 'to implied acts of vision, to something that was once actually seen' (Steinberg, 1972:949).⁷⁴ By contrast, the 'all-over' paintings of Rothko, Newman, de Kooning and Rauschenberg no longer represented a 'world space which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture' (Steinberg, 1972:949).

Robert Rauschenberg's painting *Bed* (1955) illustrates the paradigm change that Steinberg observed in 1960s art. This was a period during which surface became a central concern, for artists and critics alike, through the notion of flatness championed by art critic Clement Greenberg in his praise of Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field Painting. No longer a

⁷³ Steinberg's lecture was later published as 'Reflections on the State of Criticism' in *Artforum*, New York, in 1972. It then appeared in its definitive form in an anthology of Steinberg's writing under the title *Other Criteria* (1972), pp. 61-98.

⁷⁴ Anne Friedberg in *The Virtual Window* (2009) argues that it is only with the introduction of computer screens, where multiple 'windows' coexist and overlap with space and time, that the dominance of linear perspective is truly challenged.

vertical orientation that correlated with 'the conception of the picture as representing a world', *Bed* shifts to a horizontal orientation in which the pictorial surface operates less like a window than the surface of a table. Although *Bed* hangs vertically, the picture plane is sensed as horizontal giving the viewing body the impression of seeing the artwork from above and, as a result, becoming the 'all-seeing' viewer. In this scenario, the viewer encounters a surface that no longer affirms verticality as its essential condition, but one 'on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion' (Steinberg, 1972:950). Thus, through the notion of the flatbed, Steinberg questions the way the viewer interacts with the (vertical) surface of painting.



Figure 82: Robert Rauschenberg (1955) *Bed*. Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports, 191.1 x 80 x 20.3 cm. MOMA. Courtesy of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Between Alberti's vertical and Steinberg's horizontal sits the tilted plane. My exploration of the tilt can be traced from *Compression Culture* (2015), where I first exhibited gilded drawings laid flat on a horizontal base, to *Tilted Plane* at Alexandria Library (2017), where the arrangement of artworks deliberately set out to test tilted effects.⁷⁵ In this latter exhibition, I hung fourteen of the gilded drawings from the *Tilted Plane* series (also the name of the exhibition). Only this time, I angled the drawings, like a concertina, at decreasing angles from the centre of the wall so that the first and last drawing lay flat. Butted-up against each other in this way, the individual drawings read as one piece of work (270cms in length). Echoing the book format and reflecting the context of the gallery/bookshop, this display method established pairings, visual conversations and actual reflections between and across the images. The long concertina shape, positioned at eye level, encouraged the viewer to walk back and forth, from one end to the other, reminiscent of Harris's 'walking around' type of viewing experience that is mobile and active. Meanwhile, the angled drawings encouraged the viewer to stop, lean in and angle their head, embodying an intimacy associated with horizontality and a scale that was relative to the human body.



Figure 83: *Tilted Plane* at Alexandria Library, Manchester (2018), with *Portal* (2000 and 2017) and *Ingress* (2000 and 2017) in the foreground (top).

⁷⁵ *Compression Culture* was a group exhibition in the Vertical Gallery, Benzie Building, Manchester School of Art, November 2015 –January 2016. Curated by staff from the Media Department, I exhibited two drawings from the series *G(u)ilty*, gold leaf and ballpoint pen on paper (2015). Alexandria Library is a small intimate gallery in a multi-cultural bookshop in the heart of Manchester's infamous Curry Mile. Since 2017 it has partnered with ZELLIJ ARTS, an artist-led project founded in 2016 by artist and curator Elizabeth Kwant to promote the work of emerging artists working trans-nationally across geographic borders from the Middle East, Africa, Asia and diaspora. Kwant and Alexandria Library host a regular programme of temporary exhibitions and events connecting with the multi-cultural communities of Manchester.



Figure 84: *Liquid Geometry* (2017). Casein paint, lacquer and graphite on board, 30 x 30 cm each panel.

In the painting *Liquid Geometry* (2017) (figure 84), I angled the two lower panels from the wall by 30 degrees. This slight tilt off-set the symmetry of the pattern and allowed for greater variations of reflected light. The tilted planes also unsettle the culturally conditioned axis of sight by producing a fold—a movement from one surface to the next—encouraging an anamorphic reading. The tilting frees the viewer from the conditioned reading of the central subject as ‘frontality’ (Payne, 2008:73; Bowman, 2017:2) inviting greater intimacy in observing the effect of raking light or light bounced off the adjacent tilted plane.⁷⁶ Despite such encouragement, the cultural baggage of perspectival realism may eventually work to ‘correct’ the key-stoning of the image, and yet we tend to settle upon Steinberg’s horizontal, as an all-seeing positionality, as if directed by gravitational force. This horizontal viewing posture is more suited to a focus upon surface as it avoids our conditioning to ‘look through’ the vertical view. It does not depend on the physical horizontality or verticality of the picture, but on the posture we bring to viewing.

5.3 Intimacy

From far away to up close, from fleeting glances to still and concentrated looking, an encounter with surface encompasses a range of movements and viewing positions. There are multiple levels on which artworks operate and different distance zones that produce particular types of encounters. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall coined the term proxemics in the late 1950s to refer to the study of people and their ‘use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture’ (Hall, 1969:1). Through a range of specific examples, Hall showed that people from different cultures inhabit distinctive sensory worlds. He identified four distance zones—intimate, personal, social, and public—within which he proposed people operate in particular ways. Beverly Gordon, in ‘Intimacy and Objects: A Proxemic Analysis of Gender-Based Response to the Material World’ (1997), takes Hall’s ideas and suggests ‘that individuals do not only interact with each other in this way, but they also interact with *objects*

⁷⁶ In *Painting as an Interdisciplinary Form* (2008) Alistair Payne stresses the importance of reconnecting with a redefinition of frontality in terms of the viewer’s perception of painting, with their altered and ‘flexible (elasticated) surface[s]’ (2008:72). Similarly, Matthew Bowman explores ideas of ‘frontedness’ in a number of conference papers (2015 and 2017) by analysing how flatness is reconceptualised in the writings of Stanley Cavell and Michael Fried. Relevant here is Cavell’s notion of frontedness which involves issues of ‘public address’ (rather than Greenberg’s autonomous flatness), that takes account of a subject-object relationship between the surface of the artwork and viewer.

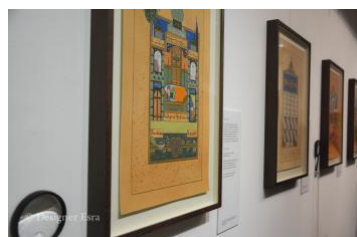
from these distances' (1997:239). I would add to this that they also interact likewise with surfaces and that proxemic theory brings greater understanding to how the viewing body encounters surface.

At an intimate distance, often referred to as an emotional zone, physical contact and touch are encouraged and the visual encounter has a heightened sense of physicality. In this scenario, the surface is so close that the image appears highly detailed, ambiguous or fragmented. My film, *Drawing Breath*, enters into this emotive space. Such intimacy is also evident in the highly detailed miniature illuminated manuscripts, works that are so detailed they are often exhibited with a magnifying glass by their side.⁷⁷

Moving away from the intimate distance, the viewer enters the personal zone. This also involves close relationships, physical contact and touch as the viewing body examines from a 'nose-away' intricate surface detailing. Texture, surface details and the potential of three-dimensionality is particularly apparent at this distance. It is typical of the viewing distance for *G(u)ilty* and the *Tilted Plane* drawings, as well as the larger paintings that entice the viewer to come 'up-close'.

Social distance, also referred to as the impersonal zone, is the point at which the surface can no longer be reached and touched. While much of the visual detail is also lost, a more general over-all impression is gained. As the viewer moves out into the fourth zone—referred to as the public distance (from 12 feet to the end of the visible range)—low touch continues, and objects lose their detail as well as their dimensionality. At this distance, surfaces tend to appear homogenous as low relief and minor disruptions disappear.

⁷⁷ Examples of miniature artworks include Helen White's detailed illuminated paintings (below left) and Farkhondeh Ahmadzadeh's Persian paintings. Ahmadzadeh's solo exhibition, *Haft Paykar* (2016) at the Prince's School of Traditional Arts displayed several highly detailed paintings each with a handheld magnifying glasses by its side (below right). Reproduced by kind permission of Esra Alhamal.



In her exhibition *Susan Gunn: Ground Evolution* (HOME Projects: 2018), Gunn played with these distance zones, manipulating the viewers encounter with the work. By strategically positioning a small golden painting high up on the wall and 'out of arm's reach', Gunn denied the viewer access to the intimate and personal zone. This placement withheld much of its textural and visual detail from the viewer. I craned my neck to look up at the painting, taking

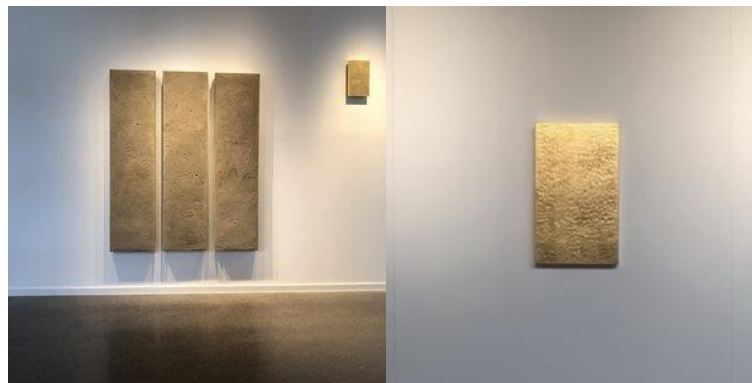


Figure 85: Susan Gunn (2018) *Ground Memorial III*. 24 carat gold leaf on ground coal, lamp black gesso on canvas and museum grade aluminium stretcher, 50 x 30 x 4cm. Reproduced by kind permission of Susan Gunn.

my glasses on and off in an effort to focus on its detail. I wanted to get closer, to examine its texture and decipher the construction of its pitted surface. However, this social distance prevented a full encounter. But, like the darkness of Japanese Noh performers, this only added to the allure of the painting. It was a tantalising distance, with the artwork shimmering high up in the light, teasing me. In 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology' (1992:48), Gell proposes that the power of art objects stem from the technical processes that they objectively embody. With my viewing body placed at a distance from the work, I struggled to see how Gunn created the pitted effect. In this way, a close encounter with the artwork was denied, and its enchantment intensified as I was left wanting to see more.

An exhibition of American quilts (1971) at the Whitney Museum of Art⁷⁸ (Gordon, 1997:239) also illustrates how proxemic theory can help us understand a surface encounter from up-

⁷⁸ The exhibitions *Abstract Design in American Quilts* (1971) Whitney Museum of Art and *American Pieced Quilts* at the Smithsonian Institution, were seen as turning points in the acceptance of the quilt as a legitimate art medium. A further critique of Holstein's exhibitions and display methods can be found in Mainardi, P. 'Quilts' (1973). *Feminist Art Journal*, pp. 48-49.

close to far-away, and what may be lost, or indeed gained, from vertical and horizontal encounters. For the exhibition, the curator Jonathan Holstein wanted to elevate the status of quilts and therefore hung them vertically on the wall, as though they were large-scale geometric paintings. Designed to have an immediate overall impact (on entering a room, for example), American quilts, perceived from a distance, constituted whole units. In her critique of the exhibition, Gordon reminds us (1997:244) that this impersonal distance, from 7-12 feet away, is best suited to abstract contemplation rather than emotional involvement. From this distance, and especially from its upright position, the quilt's main pattern could be seen clearly and enjoyed by the viewer.

But what was lost from this vertical hang? Visually, quilts function on several levels simultaneously. In addition to the pieced design of the quilt 'top' (in this case, the primary geometric pattern) the quilts also have an entirely separate level of patterning created by tiny stitches that go through the layers of fabric and filler and hold the quilt together. The quilting moulds the material and defines a shallow three-dimensional space which can only be seen from close up or perceived tactually: a sensual experience for the hands or body. Quilts are highly personal objects designed not only to be viewed from a distance but also to be looked at and touched intimately, contiguous with the body; we sleep, sit and wrap ourselves in a quilt, they keep us warm, comfort and protect us. It is at a distance aligned with Hall's intimate and personal zone where the surface is experienced as though inside the perceived body boundary (1969:18). This is the far end of intimacy, where the division between the surface and the viewer dissolves. In this way, the surface encounter is all-encompassing, experienced internally, not from outside looking in, but inside looking out.

I wanted to encourage the viewer to experience a similar intimate distance with my artworks, where the potency of mark-making, texture and detail are more salient. As a development from the concertina-form and ideas around intimacy and viewing postures, I made three cloth bound artist books: *Lumen*, *Breathe* and *Jouer La Lumiere/Play of Light* (2018), each of which explored the drawings' relationship with the audience (intimacy) and light (reflection). Here, the drawings extended across the folds of the page, introducing a further interruption to the planar surface and thus challenging the frontal two-dimensional aspect of the

drawings. Their reduced scale also established a different type of experience as the viewer examined, from a 'nose away,' the scratched, worn and subtly layered surface(s). Artist Malcolm Morley claimed that a close examination of a painting, under a microscope for example, changed his approach to painting: 'that's really where the energy of the painting was—in all those tiny strokes' (cited in Lebensztein, 2001:64; Bracey, 2014:130). I wanted my small handheld books to offer the viewer a similar experience, of entering into the work by encountering the surface on a more intimate scale.

The largest of the three books, *Jouer La Lumiere*, is the size of an adult hand while *Lumen*, the smallest (15 x 9 cms), was made to fit snugly in the palm. The viewer has control here; reflected light can be altered by tilting the angle of the book. And, as the viewer turns each page, new compositions, juxtapositions, pairings and reflections across and between the drawings are created. These little books encourage greater intimacy by allowing the viewer to get even closer to the surface of the page. The glitches and rough edges are more visible at this close distance, and shallow indentations and surface textures can be felt beneath the fingertips. Looking at the books is a physical and sensory experience; holding them and feeling the weight of the paper, hearing the sticky sound of glue residue as each page is turned and playing with the way light reflects off the page.

This close interaction between the artwork and viewer, focuses, like a microscopic image, the viewer's attention on the minutiae of detail. At this intimate level, the viewer directly encounters moments of depth, visual, aural and textural, that could not otherwise be experienced. The viewer's distance from the surface is fundamental to the type and quality of the encounter. And, as has become apparent through proxemic theory, different viewing distances result in various types of visual information. The viewing body moves physically between the different distance zones, from public to social, personal to intimate and back again, each time accruing an understanding of the surface through multiple distances and angles.



Figure 86: *Lumen, Breathe and Jouer La Lumiere/Play of Light* (2018) Photo credit Tony Richards.



Figure 87: *Breathe* (2018) Detail. Photo credit Tony Richards.

Findings

Because the spectator's viewpoint is central to the experience of surface, this final chapter focused on surface from the perspective of the viewing body. In the early stages of the research, I had underestimated the extent to which the artwork needs the viewer in order to realise itself. It was through exhibiting my work at regular intervals during the research that the significance of the viewer's agency in the experience of surface came to the fore. Each opportunity to show my work informed the development of the practice, demonstrating how exhibitions function as a practice-based method to investigate and develop ideas.

I focused on the viewer as an active and mobile participant, physically moving around artworks in the context of the exhibition space. Harris explained how she wanted the viewer of her paintings to encounter both the 'moving around' as well as the 'sitting down' type of experience. It is equally important, she states, to find a moment to be still with the artworks – to pause, get up close and face the vertical planar surface. The viewer, as demonstrated most significantly during my exhibition *In Praise of Shadows*, is not a passive receiver of images. The experience of surface is a corporeal activity. The eye does not passively take in but recomposes multiple views into an understandable whole. Paterson (2017:9) describes how rapid glimpses and remakes of visual data are pieced together and negotiated within the viewing environment. Thus, the viewer can stand looking at a vertical surface but understand this as viewing a horizontal surface from above. My paintings were also altered by shifting patterns of light and shade; shapes, shadows and reflections appeared, morphed and disappeared across the surface of the artworks merging the external space of the gallery with the surface of the artworks. In this way, surface, described by Rebecca Fortnum as 'the site of activity, where dilemmas (ways of seeing & understanding) are played out' (2004:140), is seen to operate within a complex temporal and spatial environment.

Paintings often incorporate multiple scopic regimes within a single surface, inviting a form of complex looking that relies on the agency of the viewing body to engage, physically and mentally, with the painted or drawn surface. This sense of active participation is further confounded by ideas of ocular vision and rapid eye movements (Paterson, 2017) so that even when 'still' the viewing body remains physically active. Yet the viewing body is about more

than the eye and brain. It is about ways of looking that respond to distance and environment, ways of looking that can flatten or volumize the surface.

How surface is experienced is embedded in historical and cultural ways of looking, notably two different pictorial orientations, the vertical, and the horizontal viewing planes. The 'continued dominance of a static model of vision as the principal organizing modality' (Paterson, 2017:4), has been challenged here through a consideration of Steinberg's flatbed picture plane. Steinberg offers an alternative concept through which to understand the material, visual, and haptic aspects of surface. By tilting the plane, merging both vertical and horizontal viewing positions, *Lumen*, *Breathe* and *Play of Light* are experienced from multiple viewing angles: pages are tilted, opened, revealed, turned, closed, expanded or rotated at the discretion of the viewing body. These works also facilitated an intimate encounter between the object, its surface(s) and the viewer, thereby highlighting the impact of viewing distances on how surface is experienced. Proxemic theory brought greater understanding to the relationship between the detail and the whole. Far-viewing distances homogenise the surface, reduce detail and allow the viewer to focus on the whole image. On the other hand, close-up viewing almost merges into the microscopic. By focusing on low relief of the indentation of the gilding or how the raking light brings out the texture, the depth of surface is volumized.

This expansion of surface is further compounded by architectural space, lighting conditions and the materiality of artworks themselves. Thus, understanding surface encompasses a 'more-than-visual' approach that broadens the viewing register to include proxemics, haptic effects, and fluctuating ocular sensations, producing 'multisensory (...) bodily encounter(s)' (Paterson, 2017:1). However, a haptic understanding of surface is not in opposition to the centrality of the visual experience. On the contrary, together, they expand the viewer's encounter with surface as a complex multi-faceted affair that takes place both within and outside the viewing body.

Chapter Six: *Surface is...*



Surface is...

Surface is ... the dust across my computer screen, the wrinkles on my ageing hands as I type, the soft black fleece of my dog's fur coat and the rippled reflection on my cup of tea.

Surface is... an endlessly shifting idea; it is about how we understand art history; it is what we see through; it gives way to narration; it is a material manifestation, and, at the same time, it can have a spiritual dimension (Berman, 2015).

Surface is... expansive; it is where light is reflected and absorbed.

Surface is... where most of the action is (Gibson, 1986:254).

Surface is... a heterotopic space that enables multiple temporalities to come together and interact.

Surface is... a place that is made and re-made, performed and re-performed, an always-becoming entity.

Surface is... (re)invested with significance, not only by artists but by a whole array of agents including viewers, readers, art historians, galleries, critics.

Surface is... 'a site where complex forces meet' via the acts of patterning, finishing and maintaining (Adamson and Kelly, 2013).

Surface is... visible from a distance and touched by proximity (Massumi, 2011).

Surface is... processual, polyvocal and multi-dimensional.

Surface is... both a material entity and a medium of representation, capable of both 'hiding and externalisation' (Bowman, 2017).

Surface is... limitless and expansive in all directions (Brown, c2014).

Surface is... on, across, over, under and above.

Surface is... floating, sinking, hovering, rising, seeing, feeling, merging and touching.

Surface is... about relationships; a series of fluid zones that overlap, merge and intermingle.

Surface is... like a piece of silk, with frayed edges that you can get tangled up in.

Surface is... elusive and doesn't lend itself to easy definition.

Surface is... just a word for this complexity.

Creative writing, Lesley Halliwell (2020)⁷⁹

⁷⁹ 'Surface is...' is a piece of creative writing inspired by choreographer Katrina Brown's 'Surface might', written in response to her drawing performance *Perfect FLAT circle* (2013).

Surface is elusive and doesn't lend itself to easy definition. This concluding chapter draws upon a piece of my creative writing that played with such definitions. Presented as six short tableaux, these are a way to reflect on the complexity of surface. By drawing together and expanding on my research findings I cut across and unite the themes as presented in chapters one to five. The content reflects the voluminous and multifaceted dimension of surface as a conceptual and actualised presence.

(i) Surface is... a heterotopic space that enables multiple temporalities to come together and interact.

Surface registers the (re)surfacing of gestures and rhythms from autobiographical, cultural and historical inheritances. In *The Blue Cupboard: Inspirations and Recollections*, artist Tess Jaray states that you 'cannot hide what is fundamental to the spirit of a person' (2014:34). A landscape is mapped out, even before we begin to draw or paint because there is something mentally underlying the surface that isn't necessarily visual. These resurfacings are described by William Hazlitt (1869:357) as 'unsightly masses of our past experience [that] presently resume their power of deception over the eye'. Like MacFarlane's *Anthropocene (un)burials* (2019) or Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), the past is still present, if not always immediately visible. In this way, ingrained habits and gestures learnt long ago, from childhood drawing games to values gleaned from a 1980s art school training, seep into the present and manifest on the surface.

By acknowledging this 'continuous dialogue (...) across times, in multiple directions at once' (Groom, 2013:14), surface reveals a heterotopic nature. Foucault's heterotopia (1966), describes the point at which several spaces from elsewhere come together—a museum, for example, is a heterotopic site because it brings together, in a single space, things from different periods and places that are not usually seen together. Although the term was originally used to describe physical or conceptual spaces which coexist with our everyday spaces but considered 'other' in some way, it is a useful concept through which the complexity of surface can be articulated and (re)imagined. For example, surface, as a site for a heterotopic encounter, can embody techniques, gestures and motifs from different histories, cultures and periods. *Still Point of the Turning World*, for instance, evokes traditions

of panel painting, of pigment technologies (lamp black and bone black versus graphite) and modern conceptions of the grid all within the one space. Equally, *Shape-shifter* raises expectations of landscape traditions while countering my inherited approach to 'fill-in' the entire surface. Therefore, while time exists independently of surface, surface is a site that enables multiple temporalities to collide and interact.

Thus, surface engages time in divergent modalities, rather than as a singular symbol, theme or representation. Brett Kelly-Chalmers in *Beyond the Clock: The Aesthetics of Time in Contemporary Art* (2016: ii) claims for time 'the accumulation of dust on the mantelpiece, the fast-paced digital connections of contemporary technologies, and the incremental boredoms of everyday experiences'. From the vastness of detailed miniature surfaces to the expansiveness of large spirograph drawings, speed disrupts our sense of scale-distance ratios. The term used to describe the scale of detail is 'granularity'—the finer the granularity, the deeper the level of detail. This phenomenon was evident in the miniature illumination work where, despite the small scale, fine granulation drew attention to the highly worked surface. This detailing created a spatial relationship where the micro-world expanded in the imagination of the viewer—an expansiveness that creates an intimate relationship with the surface, augmented by proximal distances (Hall, 1969; Gordon, 1997).

In contrast, a coarser granulation has fewer and larger components. The exhibition of American quilts exposed how viewing distances affected the viewer's experience of surface in terms of qualities lost and gained by viewing from a distance (coarse granulation) and close-up (finer granulation). I deliberately explored these concepts through the practical works, such as my handheld gilded books (*Lumen, Breathe* and *Jouer La Lumiere/Play of Light*), works on paper (*G(u)ilty* and *Tilted Plane* series) to larger paintings (*Shape-shifter, Horror Vacui, In Cahoots with the Sun* and *Surface Splendour*). I found that scale and proximity are determinants of the reading of surface.

(ii) ***Surface is... a place that is made and re-made, performed and re-performed; an always-becoming entity.***

If my work embodies a past, where ingrained habits and inheritances (re)surface, then it also has a future with the possibility of material changes and unfinished endings. Despite the artist's best efforts at permanence, artworks have a finite lifetime that extends from the moment of creation. Material changes that occur over time, including oxidation, deposition of atmospheric soot, scratches, the patina of handling, fading or yellowing, manifest most strongly at the surface. Roland Barthes in *Death of an Author* (1967) questioned the role of the artist in the making of artworks. He proposed that an artwork gains a life of its own through the absence or metaphorical death of the author. Thus, Barthes advocates an artwork's independence at the point it leaves the hands of the artist, with its unity lying 'not in its origins [its maker], but in its destination'. This ongoing lifetime of the artwork is epitomised by the reactive metallic surfaces of my gilded drawings.

I have thought much about moments of change and transition within my practice, especially where the 'becoming' state is most in evidence. Davin Heckman's interpretation of becoming, as a 'function of influences rather than resemblances' (2002) is not about copying or mimicking what something looks like, but about how something makes you feel or think, and what it makes you question. The notion of assimilation and transformation is particularly pertinent in terms of my cross-cultural explorations. In *Thought Beyond Representation* Simon O'Sullivan describes the difference between an object of recognition and an object of encounter. The former, an object of recognition, confirms our knowledge and values; we recognise what we are looking at and our 'habitual way of being (...) in the world is reaffirmed' (O'Sullivan, 2006:1). This 'non-encounter' reinforces what we already know and provides a position from which the viewer is not encouraged to question. An object of encounter, on the other hand, challenges the viewer's typical way of being in the world. In O'Sullivan's terms, an object of encounter causes a disruption that provokes us into noticing and questioning. For example, it was my cross-cultural experiences that initially exposed the limitations of the under/over paradigm. Such encounters operate as a 'rupture in our habitual mode of being...' producing a cut or a crack; what I call an entry point that allows transformation or learning to take place.

Painting, drawing, sanding, polishing—the care and preparation of surface—are operations that bring one surface into contact with another. But rather than crossing a physical threshold between interior and exterior, this intimacy establishes relations between the different faces. By embodying new methods ‘in-action’, I experienced the fragility of metal leaf as it flutters away in the slightest breeze or disintegrates into gold dust between the fingertips. The sound of ‘activating’ mordants with moist breath, the rhythm of *kōlam* drawing and the need for a still body for detailed precision work are embodied experiences that arose through practice. However, a haptic understanding of surface is not in opposition to the centrality of the visual experience. On the contrary, together, the haptic and visual expand the maker’s and viewer’s encounter with surface as a complex multifaceted relationship that takes place both within and outside the viewing body. Bowman (2017) states, ‘[s]urface-ness allows an intersubjective relation between artwork and beholder’. I found that this interrelationship between viewer and material surface creates a shared interface that is read as surface.

(iii) Surface is... processual, polyvocal and multi-dimensional.

‘What is greatest about human beings’, state Mayer-Schonberger and Cukier in *Big Data*, ‘is precisely what the algorithms and silicon chips don’t reveal, what they can’t reveal because it can’t be captured in data. It is not the “what is”, but the “what is not”: the empty space, the cracks in the sidewalk, the unspoken and the not-yet-thought’ (2013:196-197). Writing about surface and points of entry I explored the interval, the interruption and the pause, all of which arguably thwart the process of looking for the viewer. From the maker’s perspective, rhythm is disrupted when the irregular begins to pervade the expected and is the point at which we become conscious of surface. From the viewer’s perspective, entry points are crucial: they are where the activity of looking is allowed to pause (physically and metaphorically) and the mind to deliberate.

The worn away or tarnished sections of an image, areas with irregularities or those that reflect into the space of the viewer are sites in which viewing and touching merge, opening

up the possibility of a new dimension. Writing about her experience of poetry, May Swenson says it is:

based in a craving to get through the curtain of things as they *appear*, to things as they are, and then into the larger, wilder space of things as they are *becoming*.
(Poetry Foundation, no date)

Swenson's words resonate with my exploration of depth and the (im)materiality of surface; an epigraph for the zones of surface that my practice-based research has revealed. Yeseung Lee described the experience I wish to share with the viewer, observing that '[w]hile human labour is usually invested in bringing out the reflective shine of silver, Halliwell's labour is invested to interrupt the shine in her conscious effort to float between seeing and touching, the virtual and the actual' (2020:13). The ability to move seamlessly between things as they *appear* and as they are *becoming*, my spatial interruptions, reflective surfaces and temporal pauses 'hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable (Brown, 2004:5). I found depth in a shadow and observed how the uncertain zone that we call surface reveals a voluminous site, the depth of which moves beyond the two and three-dimensional plane to one that incorporates time and space.

(iv) *Surface is... about relationships; a series of fluid zones that overlap and intermingle.*

Some of these properties are so much part of the surface that they cannot be removed or parted from it without the surface being changed. Others are ones which may present themselves to the eye in such a way that the surface appears to the beholder to have altered, when in fact the form of the surface remains unchanged.
(Alberti, 1972:38)

Even in 1545, Alberti alluded to the immateriality of surface. Through shine and reflectivity, I explored the place where surface and image reside. Using Wollheim's notion of twofoldness, I argued that the viewer could discern both the materiality of the marked surface as well as seeing something under, on or above the surface—further noting that such aboveness and belowness remains in flux (Gaiger, 2007:53). My research showed ways in which different

surface encounters coexist as aspects of a single experience. In a heterotopic sense, the viewer can experience multiple depths of surface within a single painting. In this scenario, there is an oscillation between seeing-in and seeing-as that involves two aspects (or folds) of visual awareness experienced simultaneously.

The term metamodern is useful here to expand on the notion of twofoldness. It was first used by Vermeulen and Akker (2010) to identify art made after postmodernism, describing artworks that embody multiple spatial and temporal modalities. Rather than referring to a particular style of work or medium, they applied it to artworks that demonstrate a movement *between* contrasting positions. For example, this could be between ‘a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony’ (Vermeulen and Akker, 2010). In their definition, Vermeulen and Akker include things such as ‘hope and melancholy, (...) naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity’; qualities that are the antithesis of each other and seem incompatible. Vermeulen and Akker are not describing a third place—as in a half-way point between these apparent binary positions—but a continuous oscillation between the two. My research has shown how the viewing body has the potential to encounter both an external, expansive space at the same time as deep interiority: a metamodern experience that resonates with Wollheim’s notion of twofoldness. My argument is that apparent binary positions—aboveness and belowness, exteriority and interiority, materiality and immateriality, surface and structure—are fluid zones that are intimately connected and are experienced simultaneously within the same artwork.

(v) *Surface is... like a piece of silk, with frayed edges that you can get tangled up in.*

While thinking of surface as a two-dimensional column (we go up, and we come down) simplifies surface into a manageable concept, it is a metaphor, argues Tim Ingold (KFI conference, 2018), that has been derailing academics for some time. My research has shown how an archaeological approach of layering does not help the viewer to grasp the complexity of surface and the interrelationships involved. Yet, I have found it challenging to write about surface without reverting to the language of layered depth. While the terms outer and inner, above and below, offer an organisational framework through which some of the complexities

can be discussed, ultimately, they are flawed concepts and dichotomies that prove unsustainable. The 'layers' are not separate entities that can be peeled off, one by one, in an archaeological fashion, but fluid zones with unstable boundaries that overlap and intermingle. It is the interactivity that is important. Thus, I have refigured 'above-ness' and 'below-ness'—unstable zones where reversals are not uncommon—within the context of a new model.

Surface is a place where meaning, value and materiality are not fixed but in a continuous state of (re)negotiation. There is a complex interchange between the inward and outward components of an artwork. Thus, surface is about relationships rather than permanent layering and about zones of interaction that shift and move. Its depths merge without boundaries, within zones that interact with each other in a fluid manner. There are points where inside and outside come together and interact; thresholds of light that shift the view, destabilising above-ness and below-ness; entry points that allow us to glimpse through; shiny surfaces that hover, deflect or absorb our gaze; moments when surface ruptures, breaks down or dissolves. No layer is ever wholly isolated – it is about relationships. These relationships extend beyond the artwork to include light and reflectivity, conditions of display and viewing experiences.

7. Conclusion

7.1 The research journey

My interest in surface arose from a long-standing preoccupation with pattern, in particular with the relationship between supporting structural strategies and the reading of the surface. These structures are often understood to be 'underlying', and hence this study began within this under/over paradigm. During the early stages of research, I explored surface through different drawing systems, notably aspects of Islamic, Celtic, Indian and medieval practice. These cross-cultural explorations of graphic traditions exposed the limitations of a below/above conceptualisation. Not only did this instigate changes in my practice, but also the trajectory of the research. Further, observations of the physical surface emphasised the ambiguity of divisions between layers. The glow of burnt sienna beneath metal leaf, indentations that throw adjacent profiles into relief, and inherent chemicals that give rise to discolouration indicated that what is 'underneath' is not separate from what is 'on top'.

The research culminated in an exploration of the depth of surface that incorporated both the material and immaterial surface. This expanded understanding of depth included ways in which geometric form provided a foundation that is not under the surface because it is essential to the cultural meaning of artworks. For example, the circle and square, as fundamental symbolic forms, revealed the paradox of the material allied with the spiritual, cutting across and uniting different cultures, histories and art forms. By abandoning the linear time of my past work, and particularly its relationship to productive time, the multiple temporalities of surface came to the fore in an Alice in Wonderland world where everything is in flux (Deleuze, 1997:21). This 'topsy-turvy' topography enabled transgressions of scale and distance, where underground was over-ground. Like Alice, I encountered multivalent surfaces that seamlessly slide from two dimensions to three. Equally, my experience of surface was laden with references to the past, present and future and my artworks showed how the surface held different temporal modalities in place for the viewer to orchestrate.

I developed the concept of 'entry' to describe the thresholds, intervals, interruptions and pauses that expand the depth of surface. These spatial entry points and temporal pauses

provide moments of stillness, insert an element of uncertainty into the constructed system or force the viewer to deal with multiple planes simultaneously. Qualities that interfere with or modulate the reception of surface, such as reflection and shine, further volumize depth by revealing the immaterial presence of surface. Additionally, a surface encounter also entails the viewer's embodied and physical interaction with the thing itself. A more-than-visual approach that broadens the viewing register to include proxemics, haptic effects, and changing ocular sensations was found necessary to experience the depth of surface.

The history of painting is a continual field of investigation, and my artworks link back to these inheritances. The tradition of linear perspective as a dominant ideology provided a central point of reference and touchstone to the research. I showed how painting's history informs the contemporary experience of surface; a legacy that continues to impact my studio practice. In many ways, the research project as a whole has been a process of 'working through' those traditions.

7.2 Reflection on practice and practice-based methods

This doctoral enquiry is grounded in practice, and it was the making that revealed different aspects of surface, expressed in the thesis through five main themes: structural strategies, time, entry, shine and the viewing body. Exhibitions and arts residencies, as a regular feature of the enquiry, proved particularly successful methods for testing, developing and exploring surface, and thus solidifying practice-based working. The benefit of part-time doctoral study was that it provided time to process ideas, and for skills to embed, such that they could re-emerge at a later point. For example, the use of 'raised ornamentation', a gilding technique learnt during the medieval illumination course (2015), was used four years later in the painting *Sleeping Giants* (2019). However, research within a practice allied to process-based working is complicated. The nature of process, argues Yeseung Lee, is that it is 'endless, iterative and self-generating' (2012:195). So, while I have uncovered different complexities of how surface is viewed, these have provoked further questions, so studio explorations will continue to evolve long after this doctoral study.

A broader purpose of entering into the research project was to breathe new life into my established drawing practice and to re-integrate painting back into that practice. Where the

practice changed significantly as a result of the research was in the shift of emphasis. There was a gradual move away from a preoccupation with the decorative surface to one that considered patterning within broader strategies and meanings. Beginning with an established drawing practice that centred around the spirograph as a mark-making tool, I introduced different materials and techniques. I undertook a more experimental exploration of the concept of surface as played out by pattern, (sub)structures, formalities and surface ‘finish’, as laid out in my original research proposal (2015). By testing different graphic traditions, from performative drawing to video and collaborative filmmaking, I gleaned intimate understandings of surface through haptic encounters. In turn, this led to a tacit experience of rhythm and bodily gesture; themes that were tested through making (Indian *kōlam* drawings and *Drawing Breath*) and supported by theoretical and critical understandings.

The titling of my artworks is also indicative of changes within the practice. The titles of early spirograph drawings, for example, *Large Red Circle, 2054 Minutes*, were an aid to identification (a brief visual description) with a focus on process (productive time). In contrast, the titles of artworks created during the doctoral study offered a literary and poetic dimension that seeks to conduct the viewing body. *Still Point of the Turning World*,⁸⁰ for example, evokes an element of surface by referencing astronomy and time, thus guiding the process of looking. By gently keeping the viewer ‘on track’, without closing the image down, the title offers the viewer an alternative ‘entry point’.

By removing the concept of the ‘finite’ surface, I created opportunities to explore the components that hold the idea of ‘surface’ together. Thus, thinking about surface in a more un-surface way opened up the possibility for ‘becoming’ that transformed my established practice in unexpected and profound ways that could not have been envisaged at the beginning of the doctoral study.

⁸⁰ The title, *Still Point of the Turning World*, was taken from T. S. Eliot’s ode, *Burnt Norton* (1953), on the nature of time and transformation: ‘At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance’ (Howard, 2013).

7.3 Contribution to new knowledge

When I started the doctoral research in 2014, the notion of 'surface' as a legitimate field of enquiry felt marginalised and unexamined. Matthew Bowman argues that the social and theoretical implications of surface remain a pressing issue for judging contemporary art practices. Indeed, surface is, he states, 'an inescapable limit of painting, whether it is consciously dealt with or not' (Bowman, 2017). In an age of virtuality, Giuliana Bruno's monograph (2014) firmly planted 'surface' within the contemporary consciousness. Since then, there were further publications, conferences and journal papers that re-visited surface. Most recently, this included Mike Anusas and Cristián Simonetti's, *Surfaces: Transformations of Body, Materials and Earth* (2020) and Yeseung Lee's, *Surface and Apparition: The Immateriality of Modern Surface* (2020), confirmation of the imperative to improve the understanding of surface in the arts. *Re-visiting Surface*, a conference held in Oslo in 2015, also established some of the parameters for my initial enquiry, encouraging a (re)connection with surface. Allison Morehead suggested that re-visiting involves the act of engagement, estrangement and return. She observed how each conference presentation 'made strange' some earlier negotiated understanding of surface in order to think about it 'anew'. It is this act of re-visiting that has underpinned my approach to the exploration of surface(s). From re-visiting past artworks (*Portal*), techniques (spirographing) and traditions (gilding), to re-visiting the theoretical ideas and artworks of others, there has been an ongoing process of engagement, estrangement and return to reach new understandings.

My contribution to the field of surface studies has been threefold and has played out beyond the originality of the artworks themselves. Firstly, as the research matured, I saw that I was not only contributing my practice to the debate but also theoretical approaches to structure, pattern, time, entry, depth, reflectivity and light. By bringing together a synthesis of other people's ideas, I developed a new reading of surface. For example, by integrating Gell's concept of 'stickiness', Parikka's examination of micro and macro scales, Wollheim's twofoldness and Chevreul's ideas concerning light and reflection, I contested the boundaries of surface. This amalgamation of ideas opened up the debate about where the surface of an artwork resides and ultimately, how the viewer experiences it. This holistic approach not only helped to make sense of surface but made greater sense than such theories did apart.

I disseminated my expanded understanding of surface through exhibitions, public talks, conference papers and publications, thus contributing academically to the broader field. However, it is important to stress that these new understandings were reached through, and were intimately connected to, the practice. Visual art takes us to a 'different place', to one that couldn't be reached through the written word alone, states Sally Morgan (2019). And yet, '[i]t is not about knowing more, but knowing differently,' (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2015:429), and this is where, as a practitioner, my contribution to the field has been made most strongly.

Secondly, my research has shown that surface is not limited to thin skin or material layer. I have presented an argument against the polarisation of surface and structure, moving beyond the over/under paradigm. It is 'difficult to bridge interiority with the world around, when surfaces are considered as impermeable boundaries of enclosure,' state Anusas and Simonetti (2000), and surface as skin is a metaphor that holds back any real interrogation of surface. I have worked against this reductive position by 'making strange' common dualistic assumptions, to favour a position that acknowledges the complexity of surface. Using my creative practice to destabilise existing understandings, I challenged the notion of archaeological layers through erasure and the concept of entry. My approach enabled reformulation of the common associations between surface and superficiality and depth and meaning (Gibson, 1986; Adamson and Kelley, 2013), connotations that limit a more encompassing engagement with surface.

There are ways in which my research could be used by future researchers with potential encounters between different discourses, such as psychology and feminism. For example, my spatial and topological approach offers a potentially fruitful relationship with the spatial metaphors of psychology. As a practitioner, I am also driven by a sense of labour through which I challenge the compression of linear and productive time. Potential future scholars may utilise my exploration of time and surface, for example, from a feminist perspective (Kristeva, 1991; Baraitser, 2009). Having reflected on my practice over the course of the enquiry, I have seen ways in which my personal narrative has directly impacted on my

artworks and indeed, broader career. What autobiography means to artistic practice is something I may return to in the future.

I have also used and transformed different surfaces in my practice. Drawings evolving from ready-made ornamental stencils were photographed and transformed with 'kaleidoscopic' apps, generating new images which were, in turn, transferred into paintings; an unfolding process of re-surfacing which would benefit from further analysis. It is also important to acknowledge that surface is just one aspect of my practice. Pattern, textiles, decorative techniques and processes are other fundamental concerns that I will continue to pursue post-doctoral study.

My third contribution is that the research has shown how surface is opened up and volumized through an experiential encounter. From both the maker and the viewer's perspective, the depth of surface is experienced through cultural conditioning that includes perspective, modernism, and other scopical traditions. It is experienced visually but understood here as the active eye (Patterson, 2017). Surface is also experienced with the empathetic body that responds to intimacy and senses gesture and breath. Ultimately, surface is experienced in a way that enables multiple ways of seeing to be held and orchestrated simultaneously by the viewer.

To conclude, the doctoral research expands current thinking about the depth of surface from a holistic viewpoint. It includes the assimilation of ideas from other thinkers and practitioners, destabilises existing understandings of the over/under paradigm and focuses on the experiential dimension of surface as an embodied encounter. This is an approach that is not focused exclusively on the physical matter, or solely on the phenomenological experience but incorporates our cultural conditioning and inheritances. My research describes a surface that is redolent of time, a surface that can open up and be entered, and a surface that can have an over-ness and under-ness without any division between them. Surface is a term that holds this complexity in place as a site of continual becoming. Together, my visual arts practice and accompanying theoretical and contextual research contribute an original perspective to this current and (re)surfacing field of knowledge.

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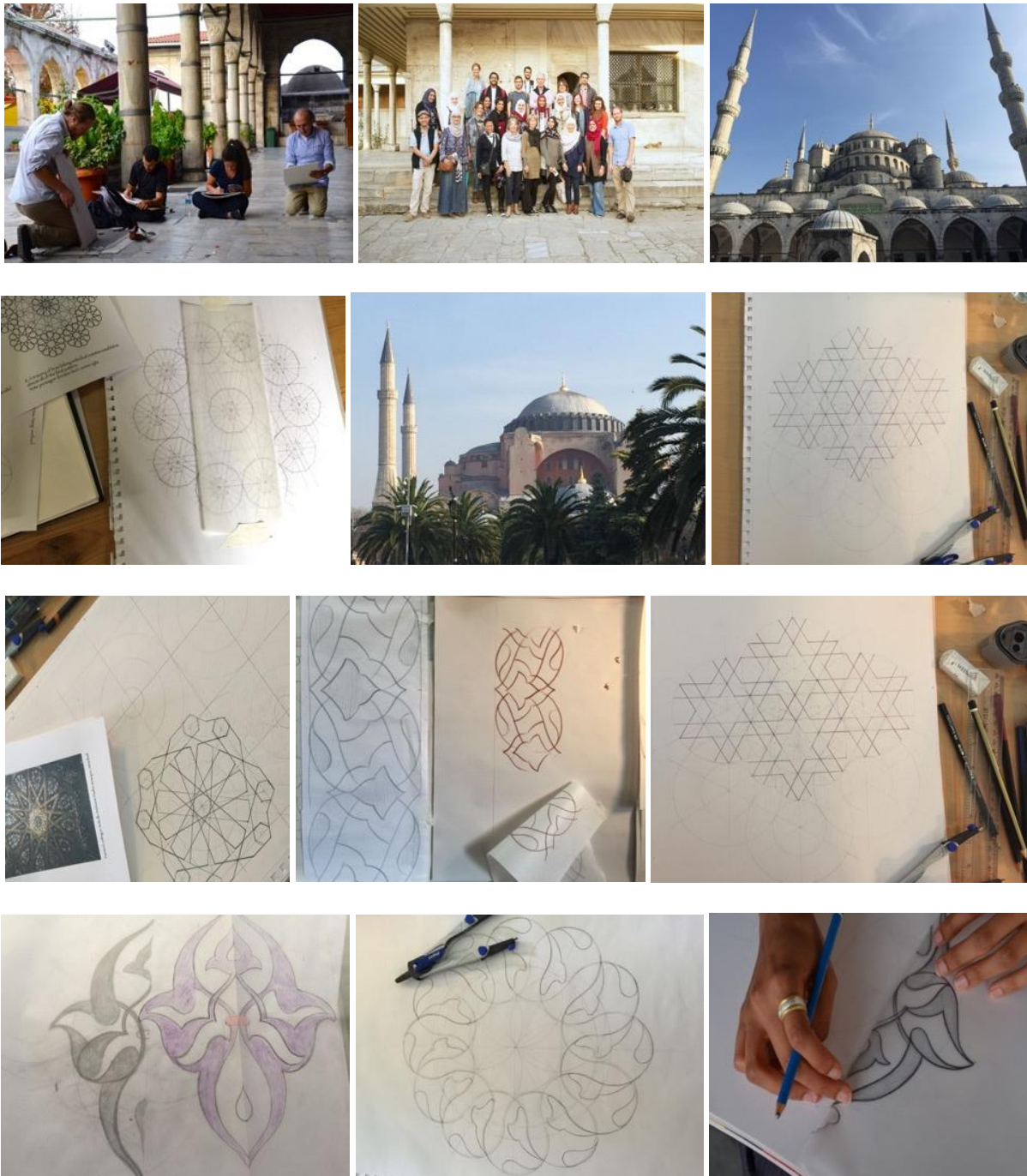
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Appendices (A – J)

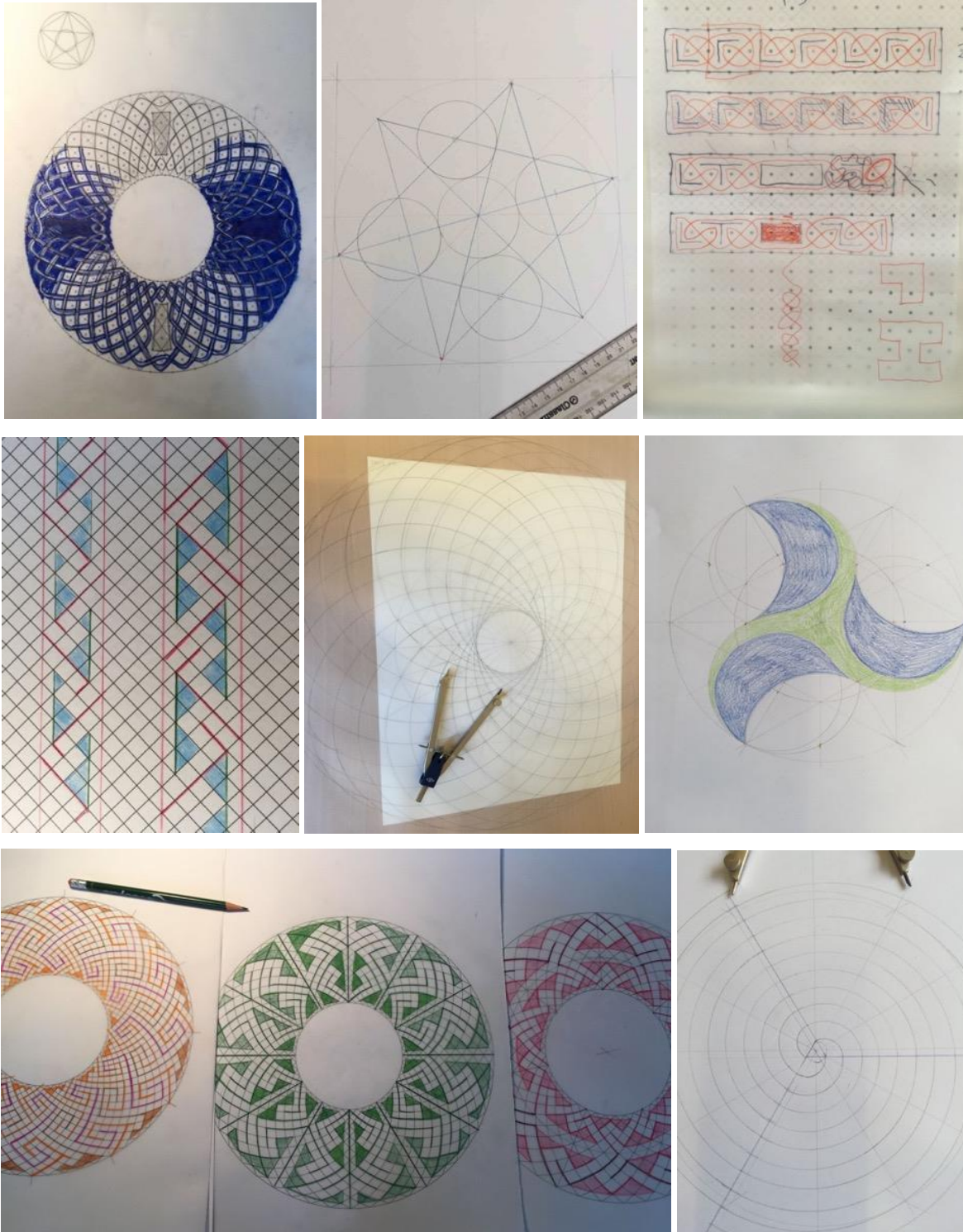
Appendix A: Islamic pattern

Documentary images from 'The art of Islamic pattern: A practical introduction'. A geometric and biomorphic drawing course at Istanbul Design Centre led by Richard Henry and Adam Williamson from The School of Islamic Pattern, London (2015).



Appendix B: Celtic art

Documentary images from 'Celtic art and the imagination'. A drawing course led by Adam Tetlow at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London (2016).



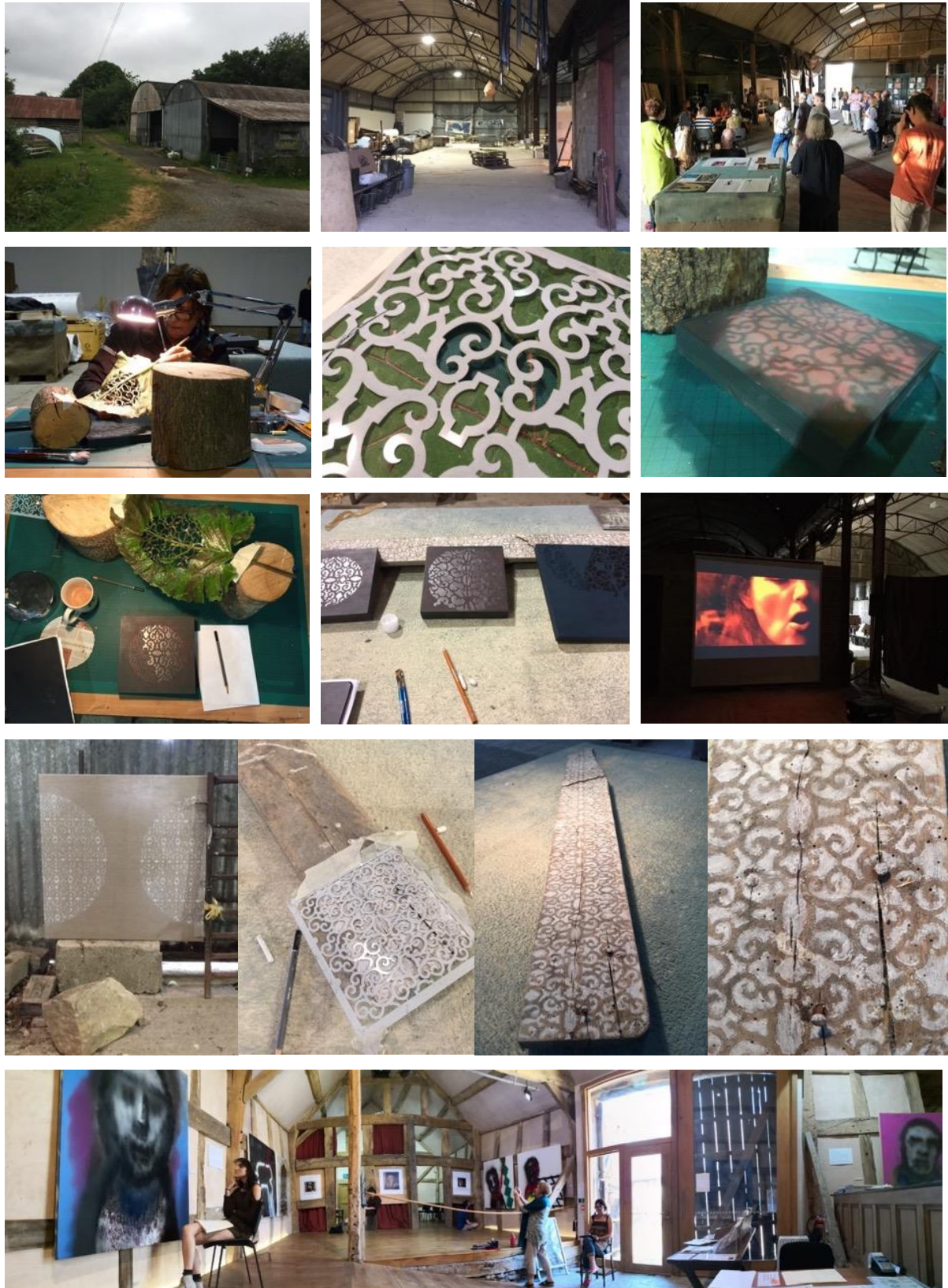
Appendix C: Illumination

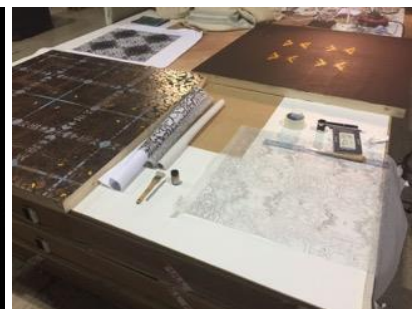
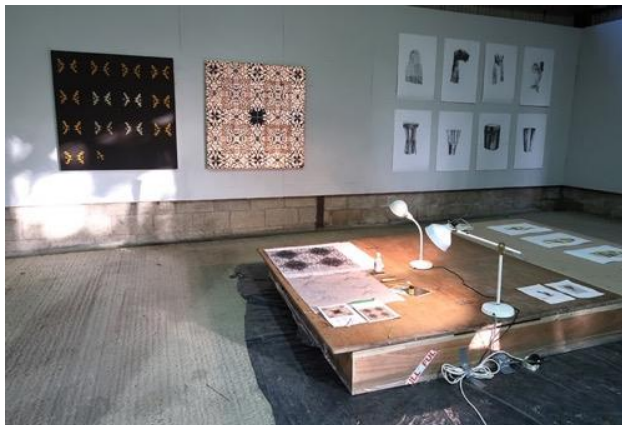
Documentary images from 'Medieval manuscript illumination'. A gilding course led by Helen White at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts (2016).



Appendix D: Sidney Nolan Trust

Documentary images from the Sidney Nolan Trust Artists' Camps, 'Practice and Research in Action', one week art residencies (2017, 2018 and 2019).





Appendix E: Exhibitions

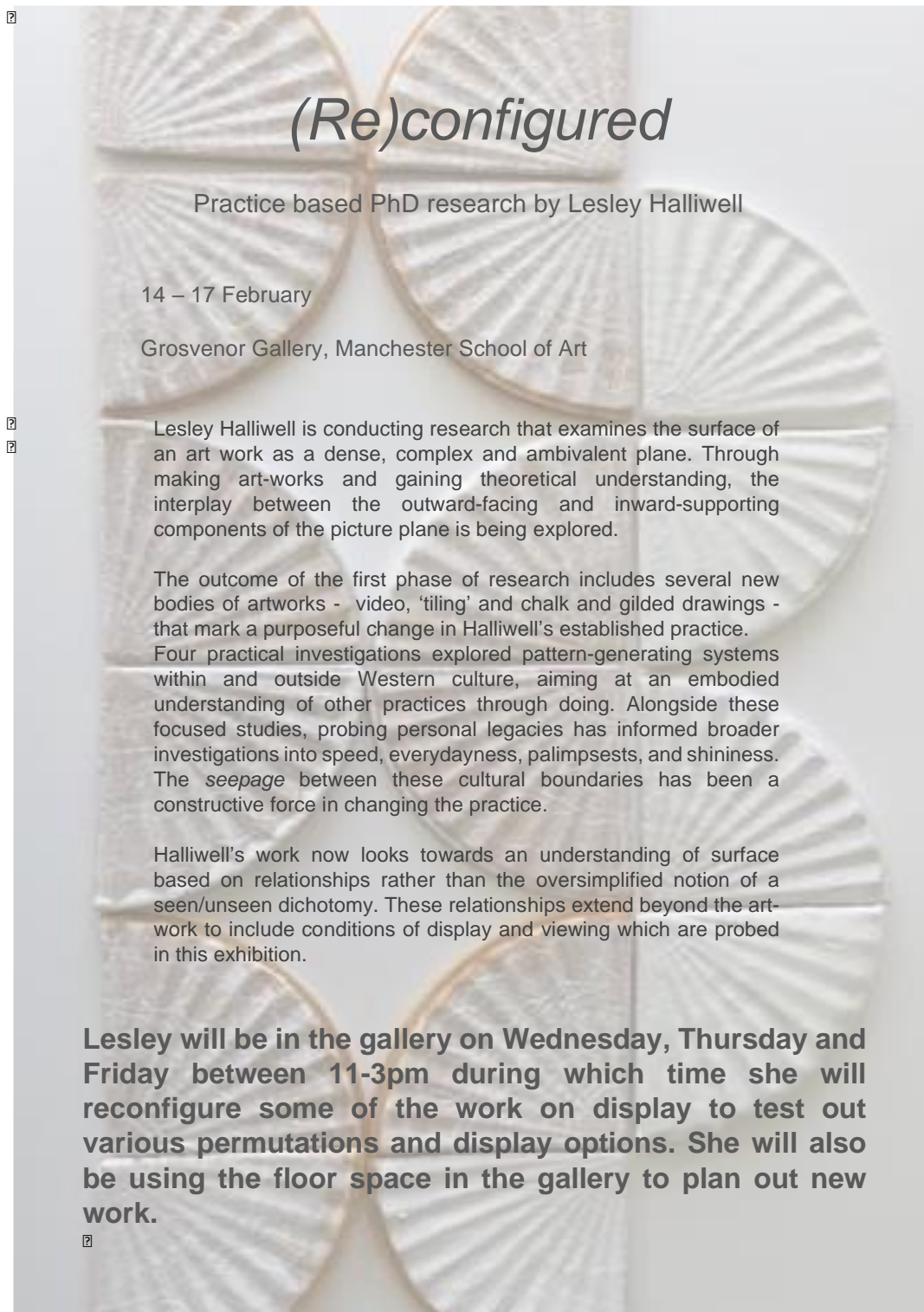
Details of exhibitions and arts residencies undertaken over the course of the PhD

- *Nice to See You*. CASC Gallery, Chester. Group exhibition of work by staff and alumni from the University of Chester, 24 January-12 March 2020.
- *British Contemporary Painting Prize 2019*: Long listed.
- *The British School at Rome*. Residential Research Programme, 4-9 November 2019.
- *Artists' Camp 2019*. Student-Led Group Residency: Developing Relationships and Supporting Practice, The Rodd, Sidney Nolan Trust, Powys, 24-29 June 2019.
- *GM Arts Prize*. Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, 6 June-5 July 2019.
- *In Praise of Shadows* (solo exhibition). Made in Wolves Gallery, University of Wolverhampton, 11 April-30 May 2019.
- *Portal* (public commission). The Burton Building, Garden Quarter, Manchester, 2019.
- *Sidney Nolan Trust Post Residency Event*. Oxford Road, Manchester, 26 November 2018.
- *Artists' Camp 2018*. Student-Led Group Residency: Practice and Research in Action II, The Rodd, Sidney Nolan Trust, Powys, 25-30 June 2018.
- *Harry Meadley: 'But what if we tried?'* (group show of artworks from Touchstones permanent art collection). Touchstones Gallery, Rochdale, 2 March-1 June 2019.
- *Enough is definitely enough*. General Practice, Lincoln, 30 March-13 April 2019; Oceans Apart, Salford, 7 March-3 April 2020. Curated by Andrew Bracey.
- *Tilted Plane*. Alexandria Library bookshop, Manchester, 2 February-21 April 2018. Curated by Elizabeth Kwant.
- *Bankley Open 2017*. Bankley Studios, Manchester, 6-28 October 2017.
- *BBC One Show*, with Marty Jopson and Greevz Fisher, BBC1 Friday 16 February 2018.
- *Artists' Camp 2017*. Student-Led Group Residency: Practice and Research in Action I, The Rodd, Sidney Nolan Trust, Powys, 26-30 June 2017.
- *Carbon meets Silicon*. Oriel Sycharth Gallery, Glyndwr University, 8-11 September 2015
- *Dot to Dot*. Live drawing event: NWCDTP Post-graduate conference, Keele Hall, Keele University, 12-13 October 2015.

- *Compression Culture*. Vertical Gallery, Benzie Building, Manchester School of Art, 26 November 2015–15 January 2016.
- *Istanbul Study Trip*, MIRIAD Display Cabinets, Manchester School of Art, January–March 2016.
- *Slippage: The Unstable Nature of Difference*. Contemporary Art Space, The University of Chester, 9–27 March 2015. Curated by Lesley Halliwell and Jo Thorpe with a one-day symposium to accompany the show.
- *(detail)*. H-Project Space, Bangkok, 5 June–6 July 2014; Transition Gallery, London, 20 September–12 October 2014; Usher Gallery, Lincoln, 19 December 2014–19 April 2015.
- *Wanderlust; To Pernik With Love*, Water Tower Arts Fest, Bulgaria, June 2015.

Appendix F: Exhibition poster, *(Re)configured*

Poster for the exhibition *(Re)configured*, Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester School of Art, 14-17 February 2015.



(Re)configured

Practice based PhD research by Lesley Halliwell

14 – 17 February

Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester School of Art

Lesley Halliwell is conducting research that examines the surface of an art work as a dense, complex and ambivalent plane. Through making art-works and gaining theoretical understanding, the interplay between the outward-facing and inward-supporting components of the picture plane is being explored.

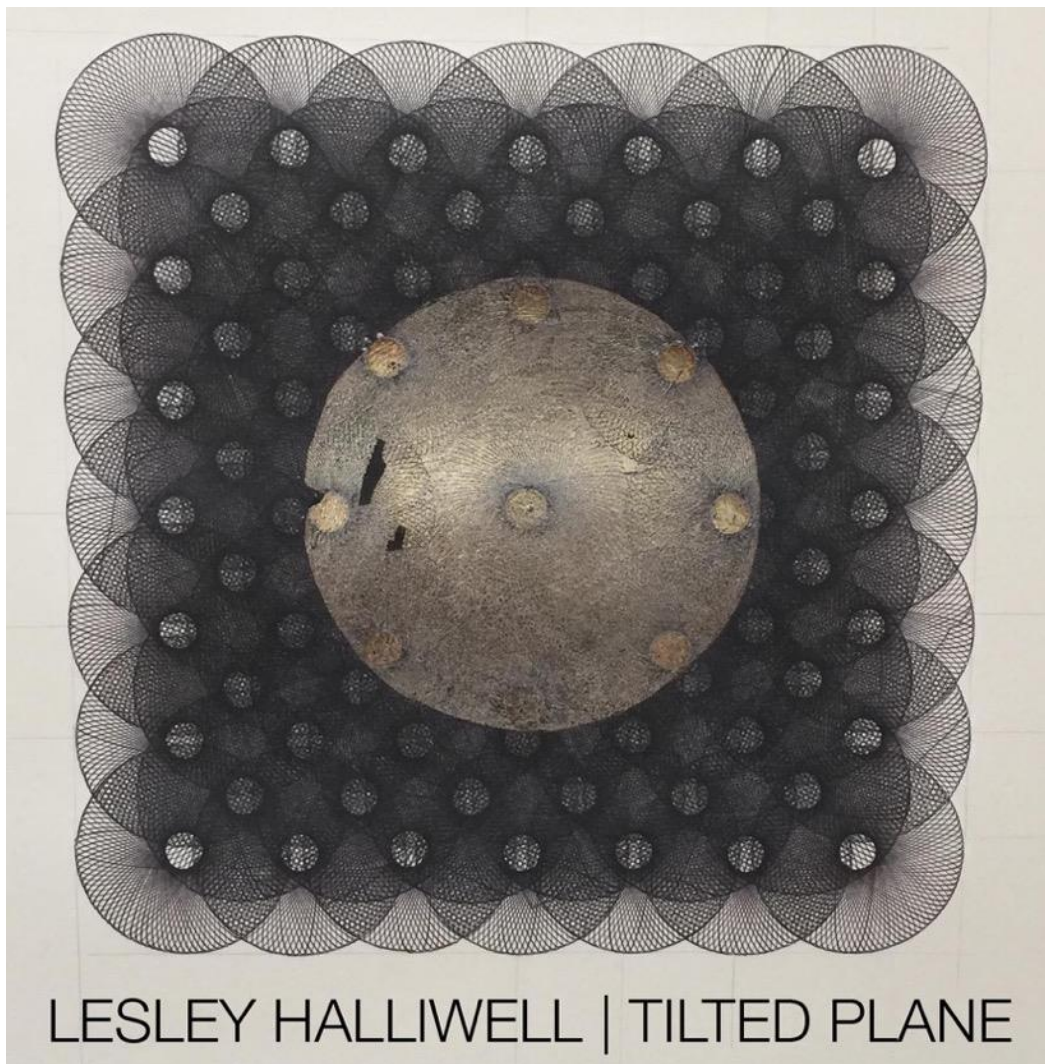
The outcome of the first phase of research includes several new bodies of artworks - video, 'tiling' and chalk and gilded drawings - that mark a purposeful change in Halliwell's established practice. Four practical investigations explored pattern-generating systems within and outside Western culture, aiming at an embodied understanding of other practices through doing. Alongside these focused studies, probing personal legacies has informed broader investigations into speed, everydayness, palimpsests, and shininess. The *seepage* between these cultural boundaries has been a constructive force in changing the practice.

Halliwell's work now looks towards an understanding of surface based on relationships rather than the oversimplified notion of a seen/unseen dichotomy. These relationships extend beyond the art-work to include conditions of display and viewing which are probed in this exhibition.

Lesley will be in the gallery on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday between 11-3pm during which time she will reconfigure some of the work on display to test out various permutations and display options. She will also be using the floor space in the gallery to plan out new work.

Appendix G: Exhibition invite, *Tilted Plane*

Private view invite to accompany the exhibition *Tilted Plane* at Alexandria Library,
Manchester 2018



PREVIEW FRIDAY 2ND FEBRUARY 6-8 PM

exhibition continues until 21st April 2018

opening hours | mon- sat 12-8 pm | closed sunday

The Alexandria Library |
247 Wilmslow Road | M14 5LW



ZELLIJ
ARTS

Tilted Plane brings together a series of paintings and drawings inspired by pattern making from a range of cultural traditions and techniques. Ranging through Southern Indian kolams, Islamic geometry, Celtic design, manuscript illumination and even the 1970s children's toy, the Spirograph, Halliwell finds underlying similarities and cross-overs. Her work returns to the simple and universal constructions based on the circle and the square but with fine line and delicate nuance of surface. These are works that reward close viewing. And the intimate space of the Alexandria Library bookshop allows viewers to get near to fully experience the work. In this series, patterning gets confounded by the reflectivity of the gilded surface of the drawings. And the viewer is drawn into the work as different viewpoints alter what can be seen. Drawings angled like pages of a book encourage "conversations" between images, and pose the question of how art should be viewed. What is our relationship to the page, the book?

Lesley will be drawing in the bookshop on (date TBC) between 1 – 3pm. Please call in to chat informally with the artist about her work and get an insight into her working processes.

Biography

Based in the North West, Lesley Halliwell is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD at Manchester School of Art. Trained as painter at Nottingham Trent University (BA (Hons) 1989), she went on to study 20th century Art History (Goldsmith's College, MA 1995) and Fine Art (Manchester Metropolitan University, MA 2001). Lesley is Director of Suite Studio Group, Salford, an artist group, and a part-time Lecturer in Fine Art at the University of Chester. Lesley Halliwell has exhibited her work throughout the UK in numerous exhibitions including: Beauty is the First Test, Pumphouse Gallery, London; The Drawing Show, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester; Jerwood Drawing Prize; Superabundant, Turner Contemporary, Margate; and New Contemporaries.

www.lesleyhalliwell.com

#tiltedplane

@ZellijArts

Appendix H: Exhibition invite, *In Praise of Shadows*

Leaflet to accompany *In Praise of Shadows*, Made in Wolves Gallery, University of Wolverhampton



In Praise of Shadows

Lesley Halliwell
11 April - 30 May

In Praise of Shadows brings together paintings, drawings, artists' books and video works by artist Lesley Halliwell, that mutually explore pattern, surface finishes, reflectivity and lighting effects.

The exhibition title is taken from a book of the same name by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki. Tanizaki explains how the West, in its striving for progress, searches for light and clarity, while oriental art and literature seek subdued forms that encourage an appreciation of shadow and subtlety. The works in this exhibition look for the effects of light within a world laden with shade.

Based in the North West, Lesley Halliwell is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD (AHRC) at Manchester Metropolitan University. She has exhibited her work in numerous exhibitions including: *Beauty is the First Test*, Pumphouse Gallery, London; *The Drawing Show*, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester; *Jerwood Drawing Prize*; *Superabundant*, Turner Contemporary, Margate; *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*.

EXHIBITION OPENING

Thursday 11 April 10am
Morning opening with refreshments.

IN CONVERSATION

Thursday 16 May
An informal tour and talk with artist Lesley Halliwell.

MADE IN WOLVES GALLERY

Millenium City Building
University of Wolverhampton.
Mon - Fri, 9am - 5pm.

FEATURED DRAWING

LESLEY HALLIWELL

Manchester Metropolitan University

Pattern: Entry and reflection

Engagement with pattern, as a means of coalescing a surface through sequence and repetition, remains a foundational pursuit in my artistic practice. An all-over pattern focuses the viewer's eye on the surface, but the flattening effect of the pattern is such that it hinders entry. Physical processes, such as wearing away, eroding under, cutting into and peeling down, are actions that break through the surface of the picture plane: devices that let the viewer in. They create an 'entry point', not only allowing the gaze to penetrate, literally, the surface but for the mind to understand its geography in a new way. Process-derived inconsistencies can also reveal and problematize depth; a momentary loss of hand control, slippages, mistakes and the natural degradation or oxidization of materials, for example, disrupt the surface and provide ways in which it can be entered.

Within the western pictorial tradition, a representational image with its horizon line, foreground, mid-ground and background provides a 'window on the world'. It is an illusion that leads the viewer to ignore the surface of the painting. The surface is the part that we see through, to get at subject matter, narration and figuration, and, with an image that contains static objects, we are invited to

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Figure 1: Lesley Halliwell, *Portal* (2000 and 2017). *Biro and silver leaf on paper*, 60 x 70 cms.

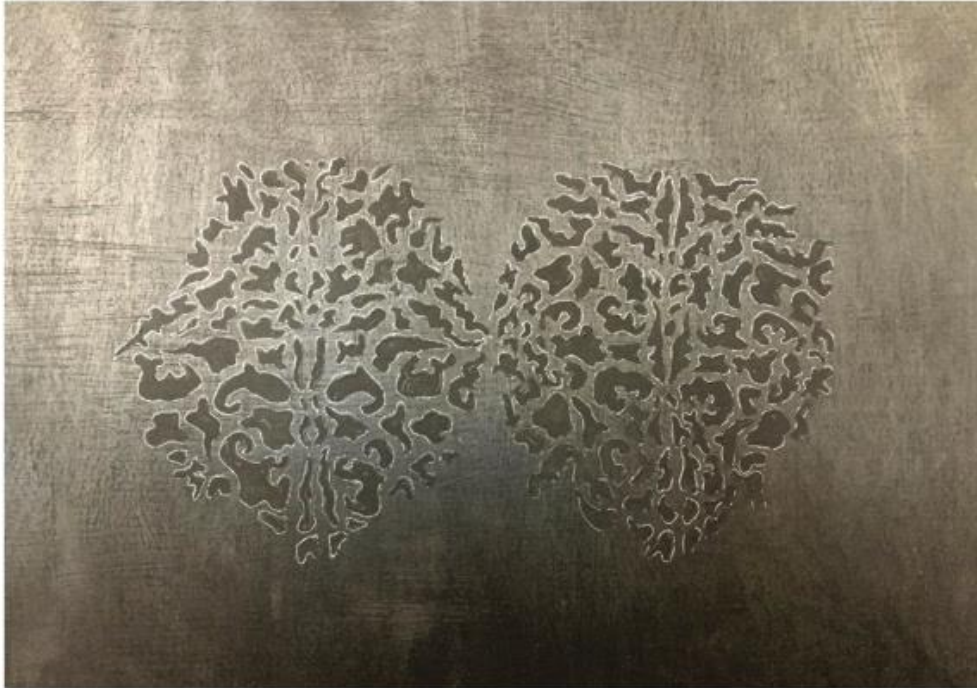


Figure 2: Lesley Halliwell, *Shape Shifter (detail)* (2018). Graphite pencil, lacquer and acryc paint on board. 122 × 122 cms.

approach them successively, neatly stacking up the past, present and future. By contrast, when linear perspective is not present, we perceive the artwork as offering only a continuous present, a flattened surface that can be difficult to penetrate. But traces of the artist's hesitation, an unintended mark or a tool that abrades (Figure 1) are consequences that create a gap in the picture plane (the entry point referred to above), a gap that Henri Bergson describes as 'a void [...] into which memories flow' (2004: 73); the moment when the past pours in. But a gap also offers a moment of potential, of multiple possible futures, the momentary stillness before action. These spaces therefore are not passive but spring from the viewer's engagement with the materiality of the image.

Pattern theorist Amy Goldin found the defining characteristic of pattern not one of repetition, but rather the 'constancy of interval' (1975: 50) – a series of pauses or spaces within a composition that are distributed by a set of rules. However, the pattern's uniformity can be unsettled by what Paul Virilio calls an interruption: 'a break that inserts uncertainty into a constructed system' (Lotringer and Virilio 2005: 109). This break is what I refer to as an 'entry point', a pause in the pattern that operates on what might be called the *intra* level, on or across the surface, offering an opening into the sub-surface.

Failures and misunderstandings associated with modern modes of communication were the focus of the exhibition *Break in Transmission* curated by Patrizia Constantin at the Holden Gallery, Manchester School of Art (2018). The show exposed the pauses, gaps and breaks that occur during transmission or translation. An important question, stated the exhibition text, is what might be lost in these interruptions. But a question that I am prompted to ask is, what might be gained? Within music, the pause is vital for the continuation of play. It is the point at which the musician or singer inhales and takes a breath: a resting place. The pause also contributes towards the rhythm of the music so that when a musician sees a rest in the score, that rest is still part of the composition and is an integral part of the overall work. Here, the gap does not equate to something absent or missing. On the contrary, the pause is a positive space that is fully integrated into the body of the music.

Interventions that allow entry can be contrasted with qualities that appear to mask the penetrability of surface. Through shine and reflectivity, qualities that confound pattern, my practice questions the place where surface and image reside. Reflections allow the viewer to play with the image, but seem to keep the interaction somewhere on or even 'above' the surface. Richard Wollheim's notion of 'twofoldness' is useful here to help understand that 'strange duality – of seeing the marked surface, and of seeing something in [on or above] the surface' (Gaiger 2007: 53, emphasis added). Unlike Gombrich who, in *Art and Illusion* (1962: 209–17), argues that we either see the content of a picture or its paint marks, Wollheim stresses the fact that they are 'two aspects of a single experience [...] distinguishable but also inseparable' (Wollheim 1987: 46). In other words, you can be visually aware of the surface that you are looking at but, at the same time, conscious of something standing out in front of or receding behind it.

Reflecting surfaces, however, are only one side of the 'perceptual partnership' as without light there would be no effects of shine. Materials such as gold and silver leaf, graphite pencils, lacquers and varnishes reflect and absorb light in different ways. Light interferes with form, drawing attention to some edges, diminishing others (Figure 2). It disrupts the picture plane and allows either progression or recession. Shine is seductive. It draws us in and then prevents us from adopting only one viewpoint, confounding our attempt to see the pattern as a singular image.

The worn away or tarnished sections of an image, areas with irregularities or those that reflect back into the space of the viewer are sites in which viewing and touching merge, opening up the possibility of a new dimension. They create thresholds that are neither in nor out, entry points that allow us to glimpse beneath, or shimmering mirages that absorb our gaze creating moments when the regularity of pattern breaks down, ruptures, hovers or dissolves.

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Contributor details

Lesley Halliwell is an artist currently undertaking a practice-based Ph.D. (NWCDTP Award holder 2014–20) at Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University. She has an MA in fine art from Manchester Metropolitan University (2001), an MA in twentieth-century art history,

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Goldsmith's College, University of London (1995) and a BA(hons) from Nottingham Trent University (1989). Lesley's research is about the depth of surface. It is through her practice-based enquiry that she aims to more fully understand the interplay between the outward-facing and the inward supporting components of the picture plane. Exhibitions include *New Contemporaries: The Jerwood Drawing Prize: Superabundant*, Turner Contemporary, Margate; *Pattern Recognition*, Leicester City Art Gallery; *The Drawing Show*, Castlefield Gallery, Manchester; *Beauty is the First Test*, Pamphouse Gallery, London (touring).

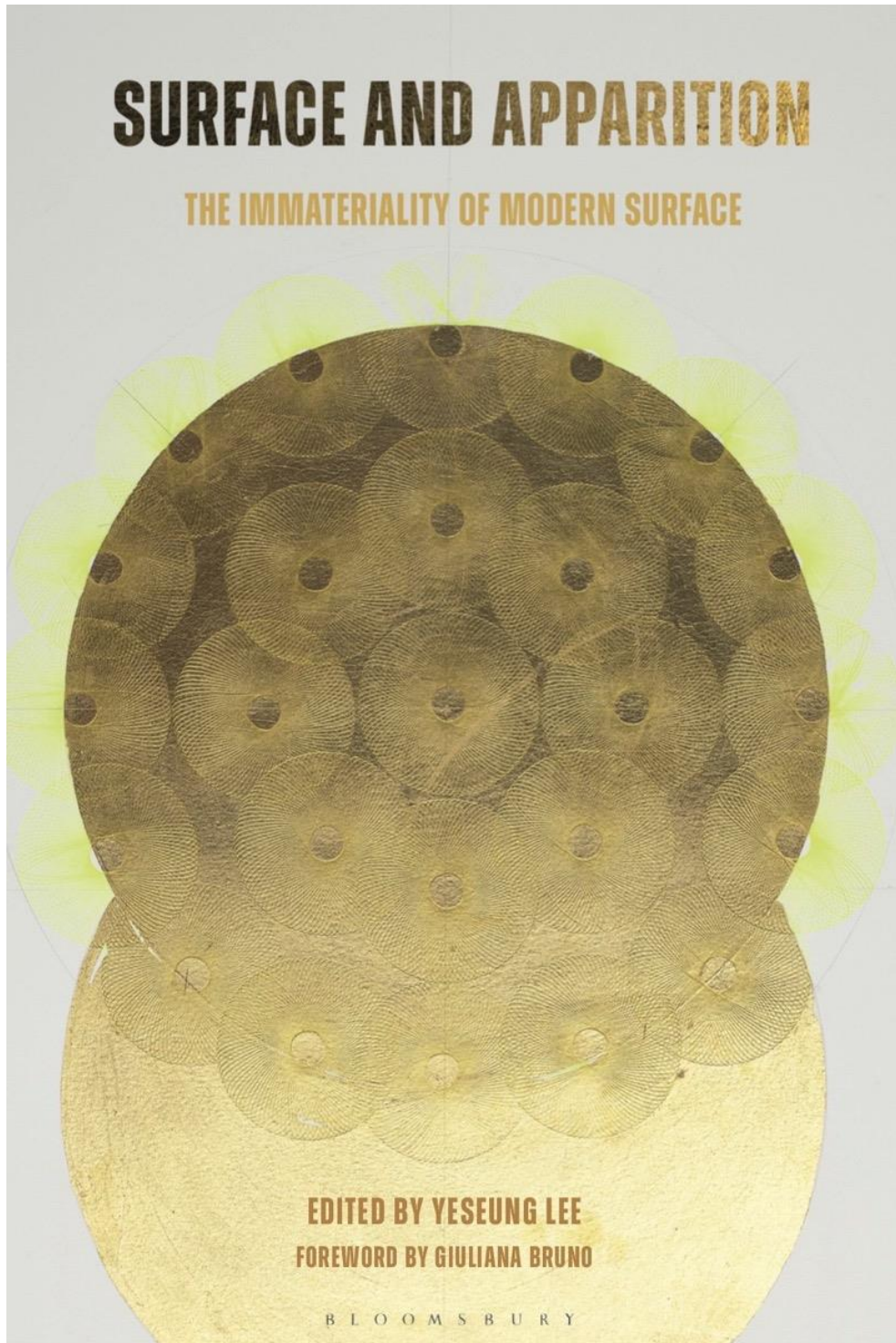
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E-mail: lesley@lesleyhalliwell.co.uk

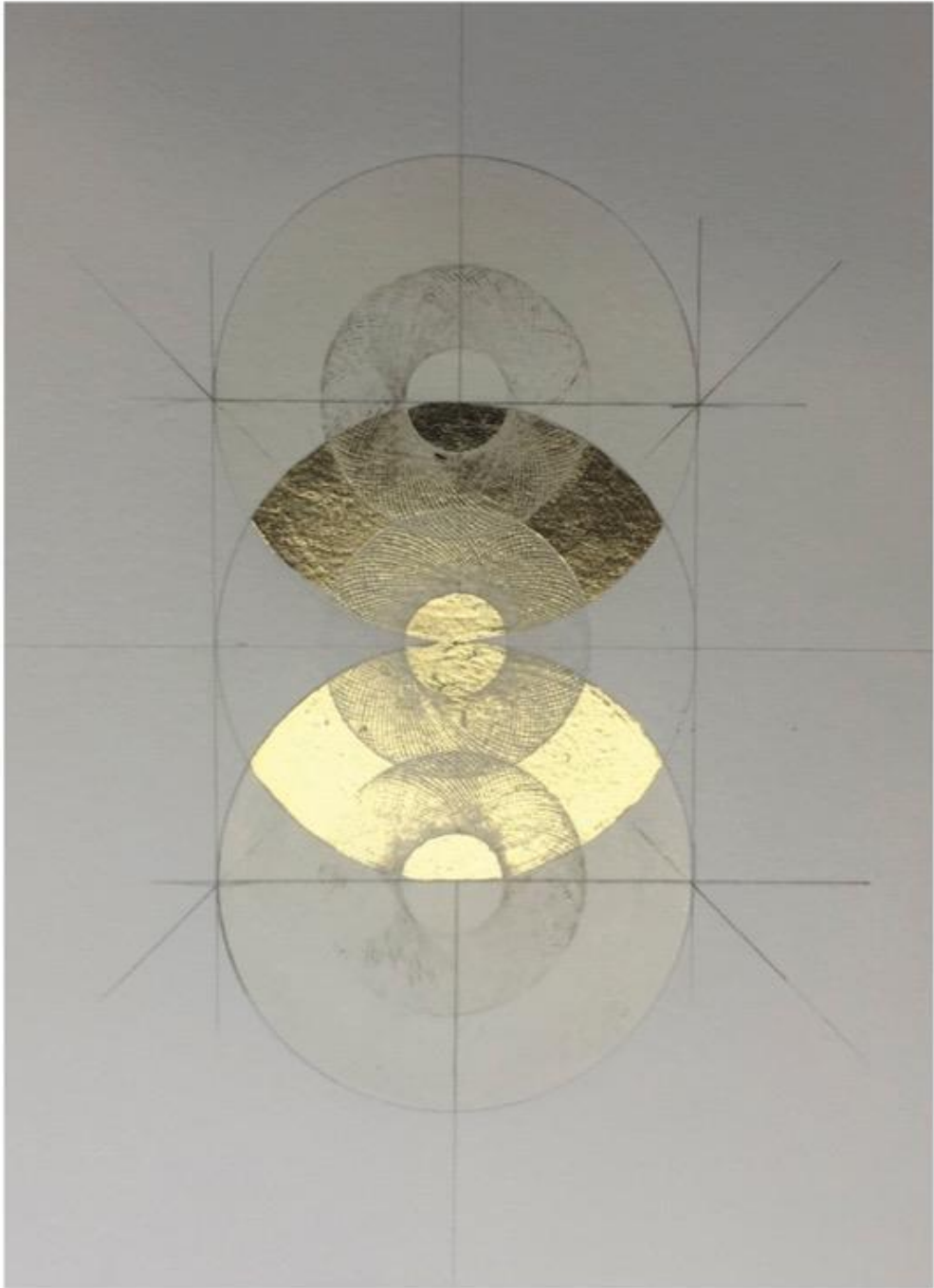
● <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5097-1046>

Lesley Halliwell has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

Appendix J: Publication 2

Halliwell, L. (2020) 'The Depth of Surface.' In Lee, Y. (ed.) *Surface and Apparition: The Immateriality of Modern Surface*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 62-76. [Proof copy]





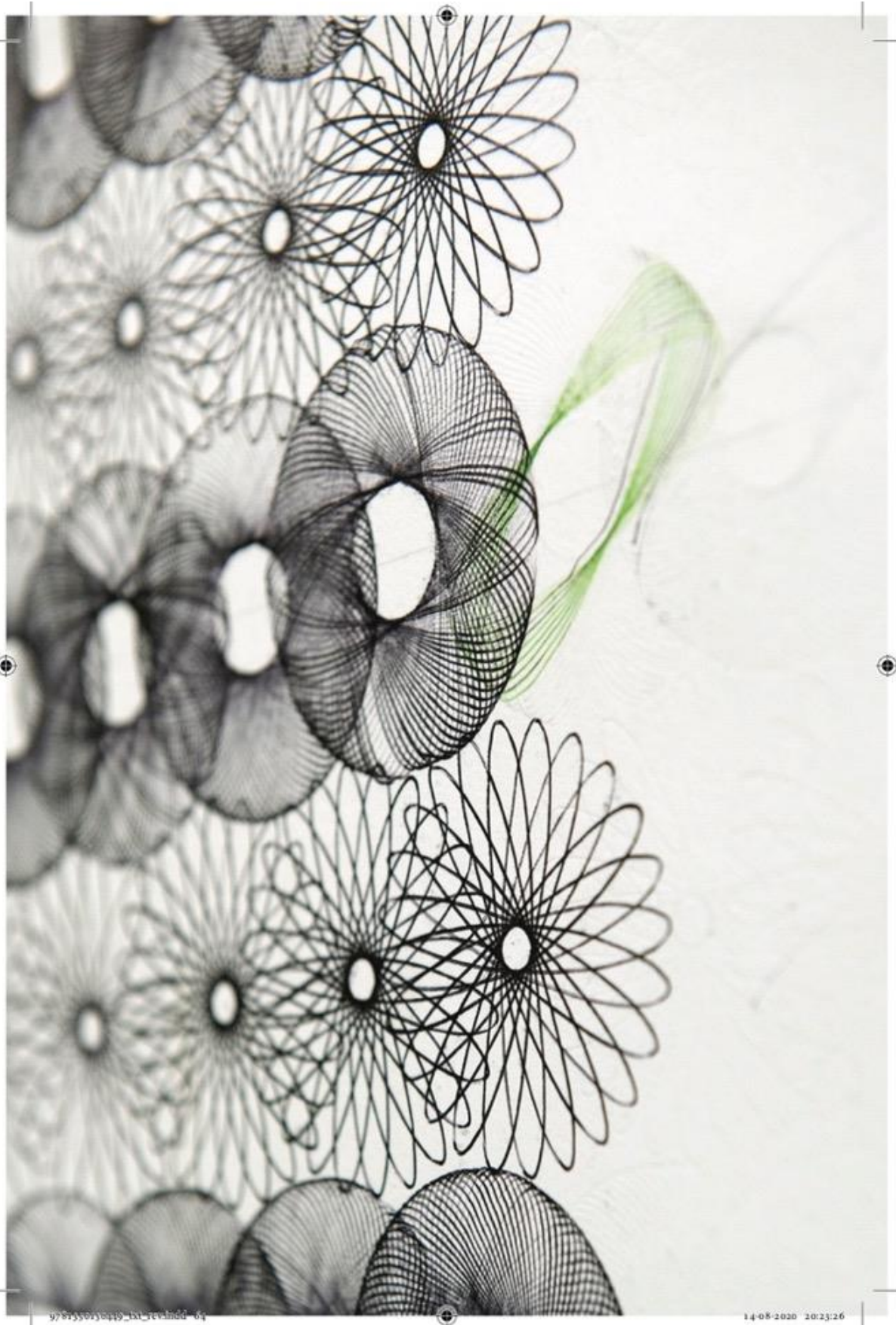
Chapter 4

The Depth of Surface

Lesley Halliwell

My visual art practice explores interrelationships between surface, pattern, distance and time. Using my creative practice as a process of investigation, here I probe where the surface of an artwork resides. As I consider the interplay between the outward and inward components of the picture plane, I am moved towards an understanding of surface beyond the dichotomies of seen–unseen or inner–outer. Through a series of reflections in response to specific artworks – forgoing the conventional essay form – this chapter offers multiple ways of thinking about surface and its complexities.

Figure 4.1 *Tilted Plane*, c. 2015. Pencil, lacquer and silver leaf on paper, 25 × 35 cm. © Lesley Halliwell. What is the interplay between the outward-facing components of the picture plane – what we can see, feel and touch – and the inward elements that support or modify what we see – such as a preparatory design, traces of working process, or a generating framework? My interest in surface arose from a sustained preoccupation with the relationship between pattern and structure, which remains a foundational pursuit within my artistic practice. Surface – described by Christa Robbins (2002) as ‘a vacillating plane, receding and materializing throughout the history of art, often at the centre of some of its most ideological and teleological concerns’ – is a pivotal feature in fine art practice. The varied aspects of pictorial surface are epitomized in, for example, Renaissance perspective, *trompe l’œil* realism, colour field painting or unvarnished canvases. Still, it is common to conceptualize surface as a superficial coating on the outside of the picture plane. But it is more like a skin that can both conceal and reveal things that take place beneath. Moreover, there is the area between that multivalent skin and the viewer, where effects of light and reflection can radically alter what is perceived. In line with anthropologist Tim Ingold’s (2017: 100) challenge to the cultural assumption that ‘truth can never be on the surface but [lies] somewhere deeper down’, my practice explores the depth of surface to reveal that relations of above–below or outer–inner are fluid, so we might better think of zones of *interactivity*.



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Figure 4.2 *Fanatic, 4500 Minutes (detail)*, c. 2011. Ballpoint pen on paper. © Lesley Halliwell. A child's plastic drawing tool, the Spirograph, is used to repeat the same motif, step by step, incrementally building the image during an extended period of time. These drawings are titled by the total of the segments of time they took to make, referencing the clocking-on and clocking-off of the workplace, while the ballpoint pen leaves its trail of ink across huge planes of white paper. On closer inspection, the 'handmadeness' of the drawing is as apparent as the mechanical: concentration wavers, hands slip, pens run dry, paper wears out. These imperfections – the remnants of actions that counteract the mechanistic aspects of the process – remain visible on the paper, thus revealing the surface structure and its fragility.



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Figure 4.3 *G(u)ilty* (detail), c. 2016. Gold leaf, lacquer and pencil on paper. © Lesley Halliwell (see pages 66–67). Reflecting on my practice, I noticed how actions that eat into the surface, such as indenting, eroding or burrowing in, recur irrespective of the media being used. In *G(u)ilty*, a series of intimately scaled drawings, the metal nib of the ballpoint pen indents the gilded surface, playing with the outwardness and inwardness of the pictorial plane. The drawing process involves adding a layer of gilded surface onto the existing surface and acting upon those layers, rather than constructing the drawn surface from ink alone. While pattern focuses the eye on the surface, flattening the plane in such a way that it hinders entry, actions that interfere with the pattern create an ‘entry point’ for the viewer. In this case, the line that scores the layers stirs up the surface and confirms its materiality. This allows the gaze to discern, and the mind to understand, the complexity of the surface in a new way.

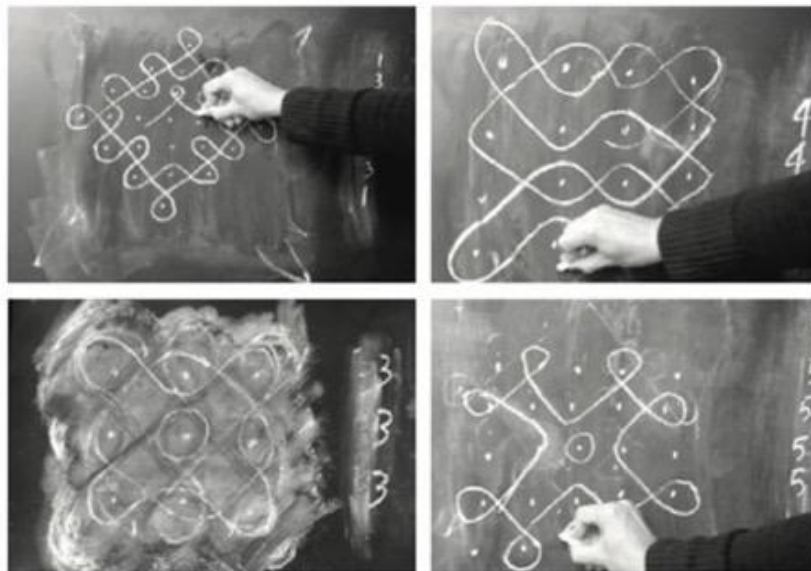


Figure 4.4 *Additive Trace* (film stills), c. 2015. © Lesley Halliwell (see page 68). *Kōlams* act as threshold signs of the home or temple, protecting those within from malevolent forces (Mall 2007). Practiced by Hindu women of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, they are traditionally made by trickling a line of rice flour or chalk dust through the fingers. Drawn on or around a grid of pre-planned dots, a *kōlam* usually appears to be a single continuous line. As the day wears on, it is rubbed out by the passage of feet, to be renewed the following morning with a fresh pattern (Gell 1998: 85). Initially I had wanted to understand how these complex patterns were constructed without relying on the ruler or compass, and the film *Additive Trace* exposes both my drawing process and my learning process. Drawn on a blackboard with chalk, each completed image was wiped away before the next could begin, to assimilate the process with that of *kōlam*-drawing. A layering effect begins to occur as patterns are repeatedly rubbed out and worked over: an apparition-like palimpsest of my movement. There were moments when I felt 'at one' with the drawing process, a glimpse of how it might be for the women of Tamil Nadu with their free-flowing lines and loops. The anthropologist Alfred Gell compares such rhythms of movement to dancing, with the drawn image 'a kind of frozen residue left by this manual ballet' (1998: 95) – in both cases, a series of gestures embeds itself within the body over time, requiring less and less conscious thought. Eventually, the internalized rhythm surfaces. However, more importantly, *Additive Trace* also exposes my mistakes and hesitations as the chalk squeaks, scrapes, snaps clumsily over the board. I stop and pause, thinking about where to position the chalk, in which direction to take the line and how to navigate the dots. This is what Paul Virilio refers to as an 'interruption': a break that inserts uncertainty into a constructed system (Lotringer and Virilio 2005). This break is what I consider an entry point, a pause in the pattern or the rhythm that allows the activity of looking to reach beyond the picture plane. Meanwhile, the palimpsest introduces artist Richard Galpin's (1998) idea of erasure as part of the layering process: erasure creates drawing, and drawing creates erasure. In these ways, sequence is eclipsed, time is thickened, and surface is volumized, creating multiple temporalities and spatialities.



Figure 4.5 *Drawing Breath* (film stills), c. 2017. © Lesley Halliwell and Pavel Prokopic. I had been thinking about using the condensation of the breath to create a temporary drawing surface on a sheet of glass. While I was taking part in a Sidney Nolan Trust residency in 2017, an opportunity arose to collaborate with filmmaker Pavel Prokopic. Rummaging in one of Nolan's barns filled with abandoned household objects from old prams to bicycles, we came across a wooden window frame with the glass caked in layers of dust. Using it as a base, we worked in the barn with shafts of light entering beneath doors and between broken roof tiles, birds flitting in and out from their nest in the rafters. ... I exhale ... long and slow ... an elongated moment. ... Condensation, mixed with the years of dirt, fills the pane, thwarting our ability to look *through* the glass. Instead, our gaze is arrested *at* the material surface (Brown 2001: 2). Like Giuliana Bruno's (2014: 231) description of the surface 'as a form of contact that enables intimacy', here is a surface that emerges with the stains of time and an intimate exchange of warm breath. In hindsight, I had initially overlooked the significance of the in-breath, that support mechanism and underlying structure: breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Inhale (prepare) – exhale (action). They support each other, as the inward and outward components of breath described by Peter Schwenger (2006: 81) do: 'I hear a rising, then a falling, in and out. A greatness, a lightness. I grow heavier, and then so inert that my body seems without life. Between breaths, I lose feeling. And then my chest fills, a resurrection.' Between the two movements of breathing, there is also a liminal space, a slight pause, an entry point.



Figure 4.6 *Stasis* (detail), c. 2015. Ballpoint pen and gold leaf on paper. © Lesley Halliwell. Interventions that allow entry can be contrasted with qualities that appear to mask the penetrability of surface, notably shine and reflectivity. In *Stasis*, gold leaf was used in the central area of the drawing. The gilding appears to 'hold' the eightfold rosette in place, preventing any sense of rotational movement. At the same time, the ability of the gold to reflect light disrupts the flatness of the surface by pushing it out towards the viewer. The metal leaf both reflects and absorbs light, allowing progression or recession. This perceptual experience led me to think about the space between the viewer and the physical surface of the work as a plane of activity. Perhaps it is this 'surfacedness' that allows the artwork and viewer to come together.

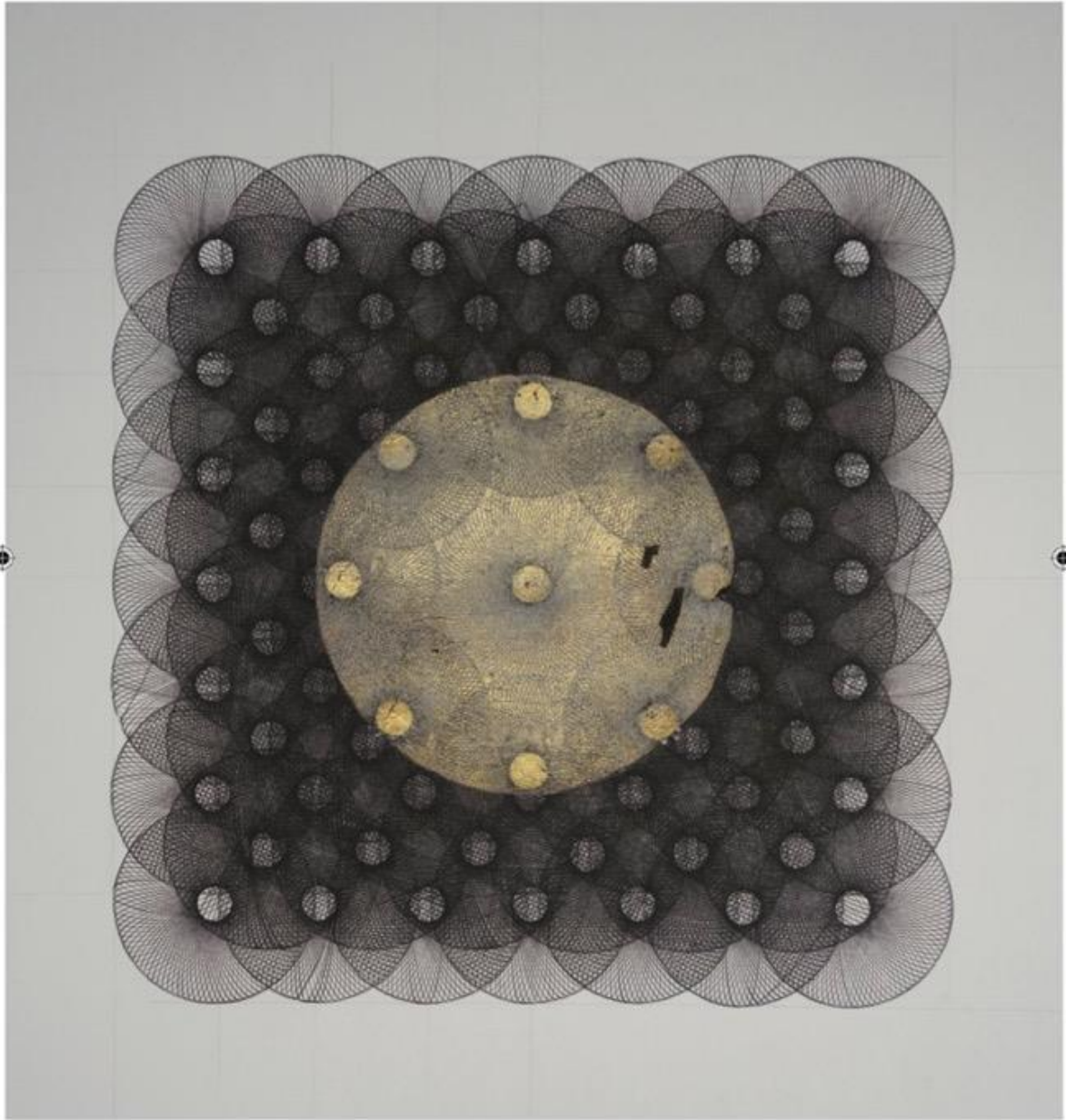


Figure 4.7 *Portal*, c. 2000 and 2017. Ballpoint pen and silver leaf on paper, 60 × 70 cm. © Lesley Halliwell. The black Spirograph square of the background in *Portal* was drawn in 2000. It existed as a work in its own right, until I revisited it over a decade later and 'made strange' a surface I thought I knew (Berman 2015). On top of this contained and bounded shape now sits a gilded porthole (or is it a mirror?) that opens up the present, past and future. But the tear in the metal leaf ruptures the picture plane, reminding us of the surface materiality. Nothing is stable here. Over time, ink will fade, and silver leaf will oxidize, tarnish and darken.

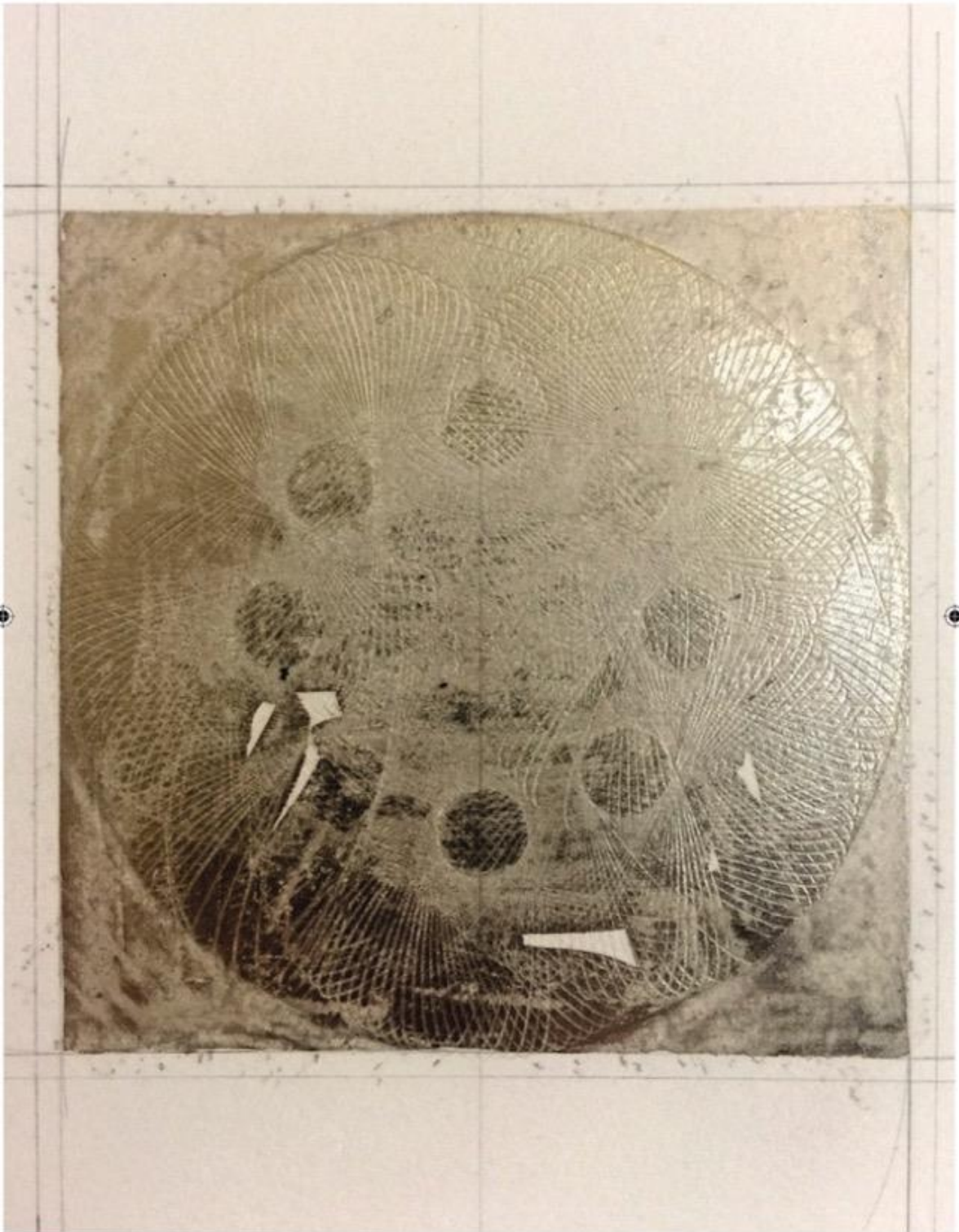


Figure 4.8 *Tangled Time*, c. 2015. Pencil, lacquer and silver leaf on paper, 25 × 35 cm. © Lesley Halliwell. *Tangled Time* began with a gilded surface. As I worked with the metal nib of a ballpoint pen and a burnishing tool, the surface was worn (away) to the point where it is uncertain whether the drawing is on top of the gilding or the gilding on top the drawing. The eternal return of marking, erasing and remarking creates a surface that can never be finished. While the outer–inner or above–below distinction offers us an organizational framework through which to discuss some of the complexities of surface, I am aware that such terms can suggest a series of strata. Surface is much more than a simple layer of coating; nor is it something that can be peeled off, as in an archaeological excavation. The depths of surface are complexified in relation to the position of the viewer, as a disjunction in the fourth dimension leaves a shadow in the surface.¹ And then there are also light and reflection, which destabilize the view, creating moments when the surface appears to hover or dissolve. The artworks discussed in this chapter operate in the realm of the expanded surface – as layered erasures, as layered time, as layered distances – that cannot be conflated into a determinate dimension.

Note

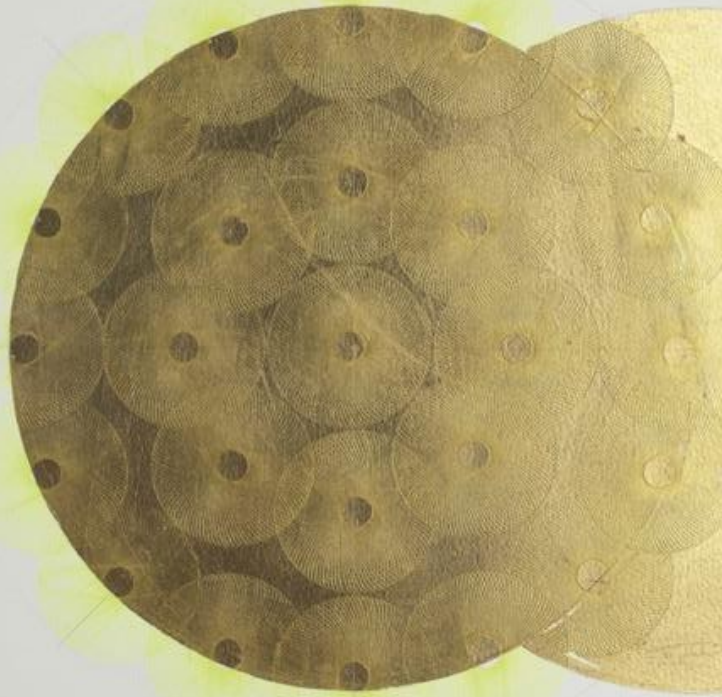
- 1 I thank the anonymous reviewer whose comments helped improve this chapter.

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SURFACE AND APPARITION

THE IMMATERIALITY OF MODERN SURFACE



EDITED BY YESEUNG LEE
FOREWORD BY GIULIANA BRUNO

BLOOMSBURY

SURFACE AND APPARITION

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