





LAURA LOWE:
METAMORPHOSES
OF LIVING AND DYING
PAINTINGS



MASTER OF FINE ARTS:
PAINTING

ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

MFA THESIS
OCTOBER 2023

SUMMARY

My Masters degree work [The structural colour paintings] were showcased at the Academy of Fine Arts annual degree show: KUVAN KEVÄT '23. The work consisted of three large-scale paintings.

In this written part, I delve into how this body of work came to be, and my fascination with the iridescence produced by a petroleum oil slick upon water. This ethereal colour echos the environmental changes, as well as being entangled in other calamities of our moment in time.

I have been searching for a new language of painting that responds to our contemporary experience of a changing environment. I felt frustrated with landscape painting, and how maddeningly out of touch it feels considering our ecological realities. I want my paintings to embrace the real, the now. I am interested in the scientific process, and in using colour as a bioindicator revealing invisible changes.

My Master's studies enabled me to shift towards experimental materiality and a practice that combined chemistry with art. I detail the long nights spent in the laboratory and the challenges of transforming traditional painting mediums into these intensely orgasmic colours. Materiality expresses growth and decay of all matter in nature. It invites us to contemplate our own impermanence.

The structural colour paintings alter their appearance depending on their environment. Reacting to light, weather, time, space, gravity, and the reflections and movements of living beings to weave a kaleidoscope of colour and moving shadow forms across the canvas. They shimmer and morph like living entities. I have come to realise the importance of how we interact with these paintings – how the experience confronts the observer with their own presence and involvement in the environment. We see ourselves in these living and dying paintings. In this metamorphosis, we may come to grips with our own transience.



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EXHIBITION

MFA Degree Show: Kuvan Kevät
Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki
Kuva/Tila gallery
6.5-4.6.2023

MENTORS

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THE STRUCTURAL COLOUR PAINTINGS



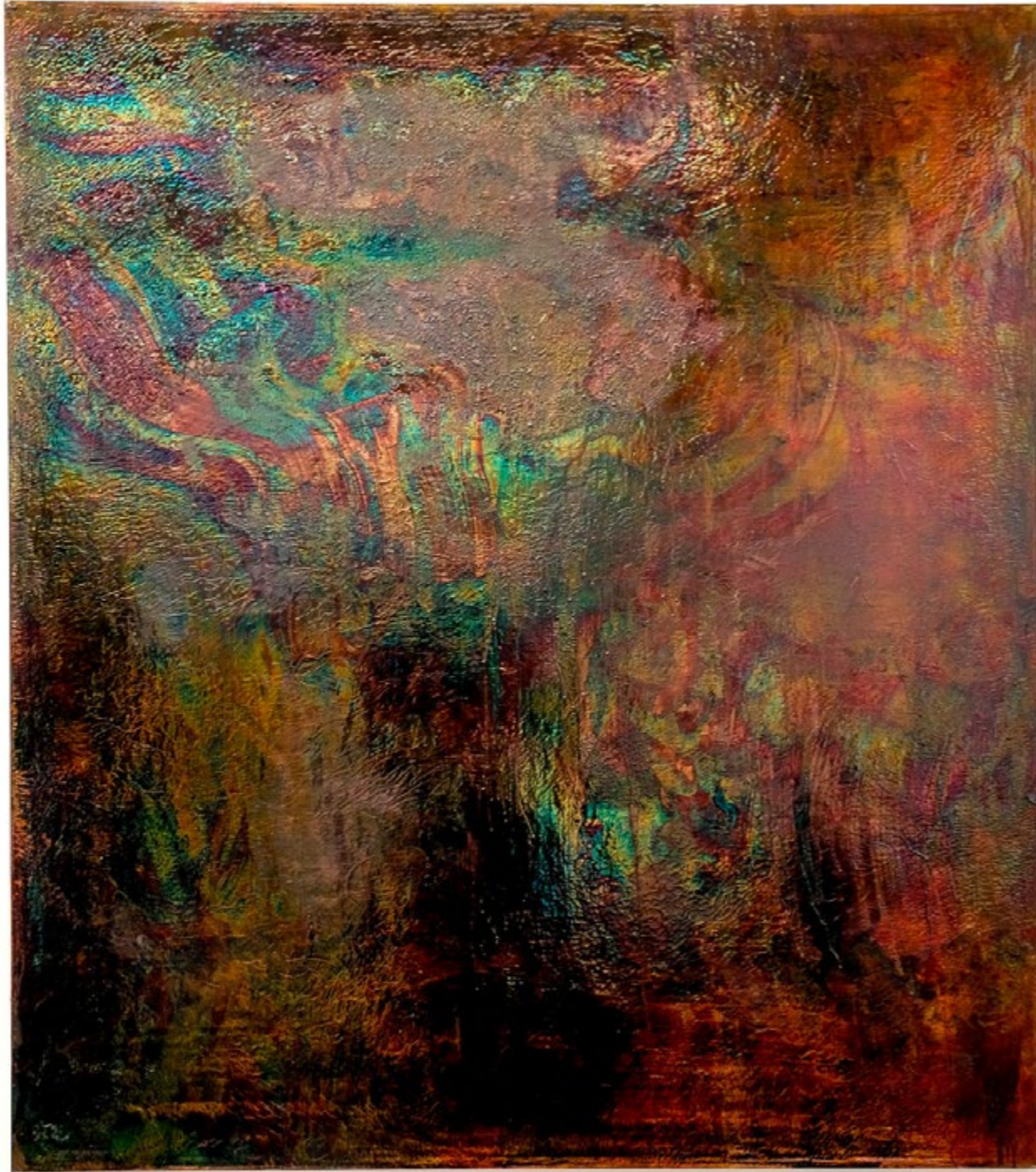
ORPHEUS
2023. POLYURETHANE, CELLULOSE IMPASTO, INK,
ACRYLIC, ALKYD, NITROCELLULOSE, OIL, PIGMENT,
LACQUER, AND ASH ON CANVAS. TRIPTYCH 400 X 225





AT THE MOUNTAINS OF MADNESS
2023. INK, ALKYD, GLASS, OIL, PIGMENT, AND LAC-
QUER ON CANVAS. 200 X 180





COLOUR OUT OF SPACE
2023. INK, ALKYD, NITROCELLULOSE, OIL, PIGMENT,
AND LACQUER ON CANVAS. 200 X 180





**IT WAS THE MOMENT BEFORE SPRING, AND
I KNEW I HAD COME TO A DEAD END.
NOTHING FURTHER COULD COME OF THIS. I
GAVE UP MY EXISTING WAY OF PAINTING.
MY PAINT TUBES, MY BRUSHES, THE PA-
LETTE ABANDONED TO THE DUST. KILLING
MY DARLINGS.**

**I AM READYING MYSELF FOR THE JUMP.
TO DIVE INTO THE DEEP END, INTO
BLACK OIL-SLICKEN WATER WITH NO WAY
BACK UP. COME WHAT MAY - LET THE
LEECHES BITE AND BLEED ME. YOU CAN-
NOT SUCCEED, IF YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO
OFFER UP EVERYTHING AND RISK FAILURE.
MY GODS ARE GREAT. THEY DEMAND GREAT
SACRIFICE.**

SOLVE ET COAGULA

“WHAT INTERESTS ME IS THE TRANSFORMATION, NOT THE MONUMENT. I DON’T CONSTRUCT RUINS, BUT I FEEL RUINS ARE MOMENTS WHEN THINGS SHOW THEMSELVES. A RUIN IS NOT A CATASTROPHE. IT IS THE MOMENT WHEN THINGS CAN START AGAIN.”

—ANSELM KIEFER^[001]

[001] Kiefer 2021.

THE POTENTIAL FOR METAMORPHOSIS demands sacrifice. Space for new things to emerge. Alchemists refer to this as *solve et coagula* ‘dissolve and coagulate’, in other words, things must be broken down before they can be reformed. This is the cycle of all matter in the universe. This is the reason for life and for death.

In nature, we witness the body of a caterpillar undergo such visceral transformation within the chrysalis. Leaving behind its earthbound form, its tissues and organs literally dissolve into biological soup. Its very being is ripped apart and reordered, in order for a new form to unfold. All the necessary parts have been there all along, hidden inside the caterpillar’s bulbous fatty tissue. One just needs to find the right order of things.

This new body of work is my rearrangement.





**I LOVE THESE PAINTERS, AND YET ...
HOW CAN WE STILL BE DOING THIS? THE
THOUGHT OF PAINTING ROMANTICISED
VIEWS OF NATURE IN THIS POST-INDUST-
RIAL AGE DOMINATED BY ANXIETIES OVER
CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL COL-
LAPSE FEELS, FRANKLY, MAD. HOT POTA-
TO, ...MORE LIKE HOT COALS DARLING.**

**THE HANASAARI COAL PLANT SITS QUIETLY
ACROSS THE WINDOW OF MY NEW STUDIO.**

TERRAFORMING LANDSCAPE

“BUT NOSTALGIA WILL NOT SAVE US.”

—THOMAS FEUERSTEIN^[001]

^[001] Feuerstein 2022, 39.

LANDSCAPE PAINTING IS SO UNREPENTANT. I am frustrated by it. Landscapes are intricately connected with the environment, yet the genre peddles a view of nature as man’s paradise. It’s a minefield deeply rooted in biblical frameworks, where nature is God’s gift to *man*. Presenting nature as ours to master, use, and alter – to toy with as we please.

This isn’t a historical description, this is how we still paint. This is how I painted, before I hit a wall. Look at **David Hockney**’s pastoral idylls, **Peter Doig**’s exotic jungles, the romantic landscapes of **Mamma Andersson**, or the great untouched wilderness of **Petri Ala-Maunus**. Our view of the natural world is shaped by escapism and historical fallacies. Fantasies of vast areas of uncorrupted nature existing somewhere out there. A capricious promise that Arcadia will endure plagues much of contemporary painting.^[001] Nostalgia based on something that never was.^[002] Landscape painting is

increasingly also escaping into the fantastical, dystopian, or alien – utterly disconnected from reality and the problems we face in the Anthropocene.^[003]

Landscape painting also dissects humans from nature.^[004] A relationship in schism, we see ourselves as separate, operating in our own system, detached from natural ecosystems.^[005] *We wash our hands innocent from the blood of this earth.* Nothing could be further from the truth. As Fuchs puts it, “the idea of nature as an idyll remote from civilizations, as an inviolate counterworld to our own industrial and technological society, arises from a historically determined form

^[003] Schwarbsky 2019, 93–139.

^[004] Haasjoki 2019, 211–257. Haasjoki’s *Himmeä sininen piste* (2019) is really rather brilliant for anyone wishing to explore the tangles of humans, nature, art and technology.

^[005] Halkes 2006, 4.

^[001] Halkes 2006, 4–9, 24–27.

^[002] a dream of returning to man in Paradise, before ‘our fall from grace’.

of the suppression of history”.

“THE OLDEST AND STRONGEST EMOTION OF MANKIND IS FEAR, AND THE OLDEST AND STRONGEST KIND OF FEAR IS FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN.”

—H.P. LOVECRAFT^[006]

PAINTINGS CAPTURE FLEETING MOMENTS of life. *A still life of a vase of rare tulips.* Yet is not the act of preserving the animate thing into an inanimate painting also a form of dying? For a long time, I was obsessed with collecting, dissecting and making taxidermy, which fed into my paintings. The way natural history museums display nature as if it were alive. Even here the act seems less concerned with preserving specimens, and more about upholding its illusion. Isn’t it strange that such trickery is attached to the scientific gaze? Taxidermy in habitat displays, trays of shimmering butterflies pinned into neat rows, glass jars with wet specimens in alcohol and formaldehyde. *Suspended animation.* What holds our fascination is the feeling they evoke; the flash in the eye of a deer, as if it were staring back at you. I am interested in that little spark of light and colour that holds up the whole damn illusion.

Nature morte. A sense of timeless deadness pervades all painting, but it feels most violent when applied to living nature. I find this contradiction delectable. Yet captur-

^[006] Lovecraft 2008. From the short story *At the Mountains of Madness*.

ing nature onto canvas easily becomes only a cold imitation of the form: “Bodies become sculptures of marble and bronze, green landscapes become mineral and often toxic surfaces.”^[007] What troubled my waters, was that the more I tried to depict a landscape, the more I killed the experience – *sucking out the lifeblood of the subject onto canvas.*^[008] Forcing the living and moving world into the stillness of a painting is an act of killing.

I can’t paint like this anymore. I want to be rooted in the real. I need my paintings to feel alive. Connected through my experience to this world. In the words of Haraway, I am “staying with the trouble” and want to learn “response-ability”.^[009]

TO FIND A NEW LANGUAGE OF LANDSCAPE, I went back to what is real. I started playing around with incorporating collage-like plant and animal materials into my landscapes. Also working with impasto mass made from cellulose and clay. I’m interested in biology, chemistry, and physics. I want to depict nature in its own right, as subject not object, and “bring out the processes, material grounding and energy – that are common to nature, the human body, and to the material of paint.”^[010] Things which disclose the changing states of matter of the earth itself. Painting an illusory view against the honesty of real organic matter feels somehow unjust. I think I’m at a stage in my working, where I’m really questioning whether a figurative image is necessary, and what its purpose is when it is imposed upon the real.

Anselm Kiefer’s work resonates with a lot

^[007] Feuerstein 2022, 37.

^[008] Poe 2018. From the short story *Life in Death*.

^[009] Haraway, 2016, 1–11.

^[010] Halkes 2006, 7.

of these painterly struggles. A tensioning between painted image, materiality, and collaged objects. Though, Kiefer's work isn't really interested in portraying nature; rather they are history paintings. Landscape as an allegorical reminder of Europe's recent terrors.^[011] Yet as a child of the third millennium, I recognise in them an invocation of the environmental crisis. This is nature being felt. There is this idea of the landscape as a mirror for human emotion. Landscape responding to humans, as well as, humans responding to landscape, which I feel like this contains a deep grain of truth to it. Kiefer's work also imbues the anxiety, which inevitably floats up, when I consider landscape. Our relationship with this planet. Kiefer stays with the feeling.

I derive a lot from literature, and have found echo for my thoughts in the disturbed landscapes of gothic horror: **H.P. Lovecraft**, **Mary Shelley**, **Bram Stoker**, **T.S. Eliot**, **Daphne du Maurier** and their ilk. *Don't these forests make the hairs on the back of your neck rise, and the wind crawl under your skin?* The gothic mutates feelings into palpable, navigable terrain. A sense of un-specific, yet convincingly imminent threat. Fear of the unknown. I think Feuerstein makes an important point, reminding us that "modern horror literature grew out of the chills, but also out of a new relationship among man, art, technology, and nature."^[012] Gothic horror has a fascination with the real, is in conversation with present realities, and it merges nature with man into hybrid landscapes.

You may ask, why bother with painting at all? Why not something less atrophied? Installation, sculpture, land art feel more tangibly connected to the materiality and reality of the landscape. In a way it doesn't matter what form my work takes, but on the other hand painting is the realm of light

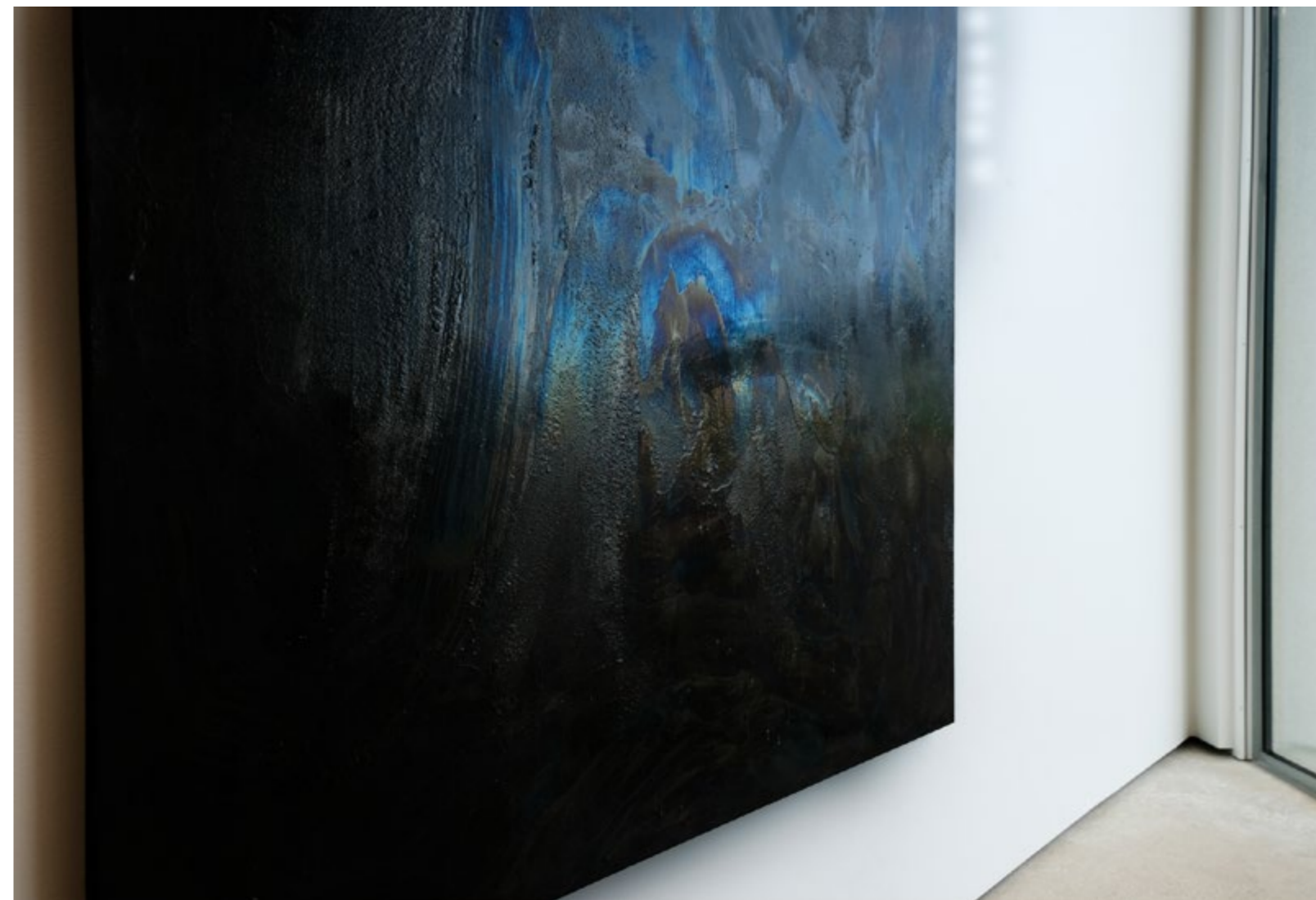
and therefore the realm of colour. Colour is really at the core of experiencing change.

“WHAT STRUCK ME, AS I WALKED UP AND DOWN THE HISTORY OF PAINTING, WAS HOW MUCH IT WAS ABOUT FADING LIGHT, AND THAT THE HISTORY OF PAINTING IS ALSO THE HISTORY OF THE LOSS OF LIGHT. FOR SLOWLY BUT SURELY...THE LIGHT IS SQUEEZED OUT OF PAINTING TO BECOME FINALLY A MERE CANDLE-FLICKER. A WORLD ONCE FULL OF LIGHT BECOMES A WORLD OF SHADOWS.”

—IAN MCKEEVER^[013]

^[013] TATE 2008.

^[011] Anselm Kiefer, Royal Academy exhibition 2014. For exhibition catalogue see Davey 2015.
^[012] Feuerstein 2022, 38.





THE VIEW FROM MY STUDIO WAS DOMINATED BY A TOWERING MOUNTAIN OF COAL. THERE YOU WERE MY DARLING NARCISSUS - YOUR BLACK PEAKS HUNCHED LIKE MOURNFUL SHOULDERS. GAZING INTO THE MURKY WATERS OF HANASAARI BAY, WHERE A PETROLEUM OIL SLICK WAS FORMING IN THE WAKE OF THE LAST COAL TANKER. MOTTLED DABS OF RESTLESS COLOUR FLOATING IN THE POOL LIKE A NYMPHÉAS PAINTING. A LURKING SENSE OF CHANGE IN THE STILL WATERS. DOESN'T THIS LANDSCAPE ENCAPSULATE SOMETHING OF OUR MOMENT IN TIME?

ALCHEMICAL MARRIAGE

“IF YOU WILL STAY CLOSE TO NATURE, TO ITS SIMPLICITY, TO THE SMALL THINGS HARDLY NOTICEABLE, THOSE THINGS CAN UNEXPECTEDLY BECOME GREAT AND IMMEASURABLE.”

—RAINER MARIA RILKE^[001]

^[001] Rilke 1945, 20–21.

COLOUR AS AN INDICATION OF CHANGE helped me tap into ecological realities. A workshop on soil chromatography held at the Bioart Society, opened me to a meaningful process of image-making that connected me with the landscape.^[002] The beautifully named chromatography ‘to write with colour’, is a photographic exposure technique used in organic soil and plant chemistry. Chromatographies self-grow into colourful ring-like images, from which the chemical composition of the sample can be analysed. Exploring the natural world through transformations of material and colour.

I am interested in the role of reactive colours in scientific imagery. Colour as reality. Such as **Auguste Strindberg**’s [*Celestographs*] – chemical plates he exposed at night in a nebulous attempt to capture the milky way. The resulting photographs are beautiful beyond words. Deep indigo with tiny white stars and areas of golden and

bronze haze resembling clusters of cosmic star dust. These images were dismissed by scientists, as they were not in fact exposures of the sky, but rather formed from the interplay of air contaminants and dust interacting with the developing fluid. Yet the nature of the result is revealing. I see the sky in them *despite* knowing the contradiction. An image of the macrocosmos reflected in the microcosmos. I want my work to contain this potency, to be rooted in human interactions with the cosmos.

I think this new body of work was really influenced by this idea of approaching the paintings like explorations, attempts, alchemy. Science as a form of magic. On the one hand, as chemistry, scientific process, experimentation, observing and recording, altering and changing the states of chemicals; and on the other, ruled by accidents, human whim, and cosmic unseen forces, which all allow for materials to transcend their

^[002] Johansson & Moberg 2021.

ordinary existence and meaning.

“FOR THIS PURPOSE WE USE REAGENTS, ... THE CHANGES WHICH THEY BRING ABOUT OR UNDERGO, SO TO SAY THE LANGUAGE THAT THEY SPEAK THEREBY INFORM THE RESEARCHER THAT THIS OR THAT SPECIFIC SUBSTANCE IS PRESENT...”

—F. F. RUNGE^[003]

ALCHEMY IS THE ART OF TRANSFORMING MATTER. A scientific endeavour concerned with the transmutation of material into something greater than the sum of its parts. I feel like my work as an artist, like that of the alchemist, is one of revealing. Images need to be more than what meets the eye.

Alchemy is where scientific and artistic endeavour really melt into one. Alchemy invented glaze chemistry, metal alloys, glass-making, pigments and oil paints, even the metal salts and chemical baths used in photography.^[004] Catalysts for the materiality of art-making. What I find intriguing is colour’s role in linking together these scientific and artistic processes. Alche-

my sees colours as “connecting-up with the order of the cosmos”.^[005] It allows us to understand and connect with the world.^[006] Colour encapsulates this deep need we have to reach beyond the veil of the known. It serves as an indicator of chemical changes. *Think of pH paper*. So we are able to feel the presence of invisible changes happening around us. See the unseen.

Contemporary art is really tapping into this. Kiefer’s use of sediment of electrolysis in [*Morgenthau plan*], **Andy Warhol**’s patinated [*Oxidation paintings*]; or my mentor **Toni R. Toivonen**’s [*The Last presence*] – onto which decomposing animal remains have left their mark. The colours of oxidation mark the speed of decay. These colours reflect on growth and decay, and as such can be read as a metaphor of human impermanence. I find it fascinating that as an indicator of change, colour invariably also becomes a visual language of time. I attended a series of lectures called *Physics for poets*^[007] by Syksy Räsänen, and I vividly remember him showing us an image of the cosmic background radiation – the moment of first light – when light and matter separated 14 billion years ago. Light radiation originating from the very birth of our universe. I felt it fulfilling some innate yearning in my curious nature.

For the modern painter, colour is not “the mere thing itself”, but rather “manifesting something other”.^[008] Yet for artists since the Dark Ages, colour held more than symbolic value. Colour not as representation, but sacred as *material itself*.^[009] Tyrian purple, a golden-yellow mucus, extracted from Murex sea snails, turns into magnificent purple and sanguine hues when exposed

^[005] Bucklow 2009, 41.

^[006] Bucklow 2009, 26,122–124.

^[007] Räsänen 2002.

^[008] Heidegger 2002, 4–19.

^[009] Bucklow 2009, 41.

^[003] Möckel & Roesky 1996. Citing F.F. Runge’s *Zur Farben-Chemie* [On Colour Chemistry] (1850).

^[004] Bucklow 2009. Brafman 2017. Elizabeth 2020, 71.



PLATE 3 9/30

to sunlight.^[010] A miracle of transformation in the presence of ‘heavenly light’. Nature performing the transubstantiation of wine into the blood of Christ.^[011] In later centuries, painting’s decaying materiality was seen as a short-coming, that placed it beneath the immaterial virtue of music and literature.^[012] For me, these material chains *are* what make painting so relevant to our age – connected – in a way that music and literature cannot conceive.

COLOUR BRINGS FORTH THE HIDDEN into the visible world. We have this innate ability to read our environment through colour rooted deep into our psyche and evolutionary biology. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke said that the sensation of ‘aliveness’ extends beyond the subject of the painting, into the materiality of paint itself. As if colours possess an “awareness” of their own and of each other – like **Oscar Wilde**’s uncanny [*The picture of Dorian Gray*].^[013] Nature’s use of colour as bioindicators of subtle changes – the freshness of red blood versus the decaying plums, violets, yellows of a bruise – sparked in me this desire to approach colour as ‘aliveness’.

I was experimenting with colours, and extracting pigments from plants, minerals, and metal oxides. I am particularly drawn to **Sigmar Polke**’s alchemical exploits. The pulsating bronzing and interference pigments of the [*Negative value*] and [*Raster paintings*] – quivering layers that feel to me as if they were alive.^[014] They drew me like a moth to the flame. It shifted my focus to pigments that react to temperature or light, moisture, and gravity – that unveil

worlds in imperceptible flux. Things that really change in front of the viewer’s eye.

My Frankensteinian moment, was stepping into a puddle my way to the Academy’s material studies laboratory. There it was, colour sparking into life beneath my feet. An iridescent oil slick on black asphalt. Technology, modernity, science, and environmental crisis all alchemically condensed in this one experience. I felt like this was what I had been looking for, what I had been trying to express all along.



[010] Tyrian was later used by Henri de Lacaze-Duthiers to develop light sensitive purple photography. See Edward Eigen’s *On Purple and the Genesis of Photography* – or the natural history of an exposure.

[011] Bucklow 2009, 206–8.

[012] Feuerstein 2022, 43.

[013] Rilke 2008, 50–52. Wilde 2009.

[014] Halbreich 2014, 128–142.



**YOUR DARK REFLECTION IN THE WATER
NARSICCUS. MOUNTAIN OF COAL AGA-
INST LIQUID OIL. HERE ARE TWINNED
DARKNESS AND THE RAINBOW SPECTRA OF
LIGHT. DARLING, I HESITATE TO ASK,
- DO YOU KNOW THE STORY OF HYLAS AND
THE NYMPHS? BECAUSE I THINK WE MIGH-
T BE IN THEIR POSITION. ON THE EDGE,
LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS. IS THIS OUR
MOMENT OF METAMORPHOSIS OR WILL THEY
PULL US IN TO DROWN?**

FIAT LUX

“NOTHING IS SO PAINFUL TO THE HUMAN MIND AS A GREAT AND SUDDEN CHANGE.”

**—MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY,
FRANKENSTEIN^[001]**

[001] Shelley 2003

LIKE A FLASH OF LIGHTNING, a sudden transformation is deeply shocking and wondrous, like how magic tricks and soap bubbles felt as a child. It momentarily transcends the boundaries of mundane life and reconnects us with the world. I set my sight on replicating this rapturous feeling.

The oil slick possesses the magic of living colour. Our eyes tell us it can't be real, yet it is. *Fiat lux*. Something appearing out of nothing feels truly like a miracle, does it not? In the sense that it's experience contains something inexplicable to our minds. I remember a conversation with my mentor **Pirkko Rantatorikka**, on the act of viewing a painting. How it unravels in the first fraction of a second. *When colour hits your eye*. Experience happens only if you are present. It can't be conveyed with words or photographs. It needs to be felt in order to be accepted as real. Your whole body focusing on the pleasure of colour euphoria.

There is also this Lovecraftian forebod-

ing present in iridescence. The oil slick simultaneously thrills and repels. This unsettling feeling that everything is not quite right. An alien presence or ghostly 'anima' clings to its surface. Non-pigment colour feels mysterious to us, because it seems abstract and intangible, detached from materiality. Like a form of witchcraft. Confrontation with this unfamiliar stimuli, that seems to defy mortal comprehension, triggers an alarm response. Rapidly altering complex patterns are epilepsy to the senses. A maddening flickering that makes the cone cells in our eyes convulse on/off, leading to sensory overstimulation. Add to this intensely saturated colours, which in nature, are intended as a warning of toxicity. *Its hypnotic and terrible*.

What really draws me to iridescence, is that the sublime dread extends beyond metaphor – for we know all too well that the threat is real. The deceptive beauty of an

oil slick in a puddle is a silent whisper of disastrous consequence. Patiently waiting for impending calamity, ...or rather it is the calamity – a *Deepwater Horizon in miniature*. This is contamination, pollution, and extractivism. Harm to our ecosystem. Finally a look of guilt in my reflection against the black sticky film. The fault lies with us. A colour confession of our sin, *like the yellow robes of Judas*.

“WORDS HAVE NO POWER TO IMPRESS THE MIND WITHOUT THE EXQUISITE HORROR OF THEIR REALITY.”

—EDGAR ALLAN POE^[002]

THE REALM OF LIGHT OPTICS is demonically complex and as deep as the seven circles of hell, but let us attempt to explore the intricacies of colour. Colour is born from wavelengths of light. Light is a form of electromagnetism that is everywhere around us. Made of the same essence are microwaves and radiowaves, infrared, x-rays, ultraviolet, and gamma radiation. Visible light – colour – is the tiniest sliver of this immense spectrum that is visible to our senses. In this way, colour reveals to us a vast invisible world intertwined with our fate. It connects us with our own existence. Without light there is no photosynthesis, no life; but it's alter ego is deadly radiation. Ion rain with which we are bombarded from space.

Don't you think its so thrilling, that the nature and behaviour of light, which is

[002] Poe 2018. From the short story The Narrative of Arthur Gordyn Pym.

the primary subject all painters study, is still an unravelled mystery? Light behaves in a similar manner as water – moving as a unified entity in waves, yet formed of individual photons. We've only scratched the surface of this particle-wave duality. Light is the frontier of the scientific horizon, yet simultaneously synonymous with our age: artificial lighting, digital computers, and wireless internet. It gives us glimpses into the future of quantum mechanics, nanotechnology, and biomimetic metamaterials.

But how exactly does colour form you ask? A regular pigment-based colour forms through selective reflection and absorption. Ultramarine pigment, for example, has an atomic surface structure that reflects blue wavelengths and absorbs the other wavelengths of light. This determines the colour we see. Structural colour on the other hand, is a wild creature that refuses to behave in this ordered manner. It is formed by reflections of light rays that have been deeply disturbed by their impact with the material surface – unable to reflect or absorb uniformly against the surface – they alter form and undergo a transformation. Each wavelength of light chooses to follow it's own path. This is how structural colour phenomena, such as metallic lustre, pearlescence, and iridescence appear. For me, understanding that colour is the interaction of material and light – *the meeting of our material and immaterial world* – was somehow incredibly significant, and poetic.

**“SOMEDAY OUR PIECING
TOGETHER OF KNOWL-
EDGE WILL OPEN UP SUCH
TERRIFYING VISTAS WE
SHALL EITHER GO MAD OR
FLEE INTO THE SAFETY OF
A NEW DARK AGE.”**

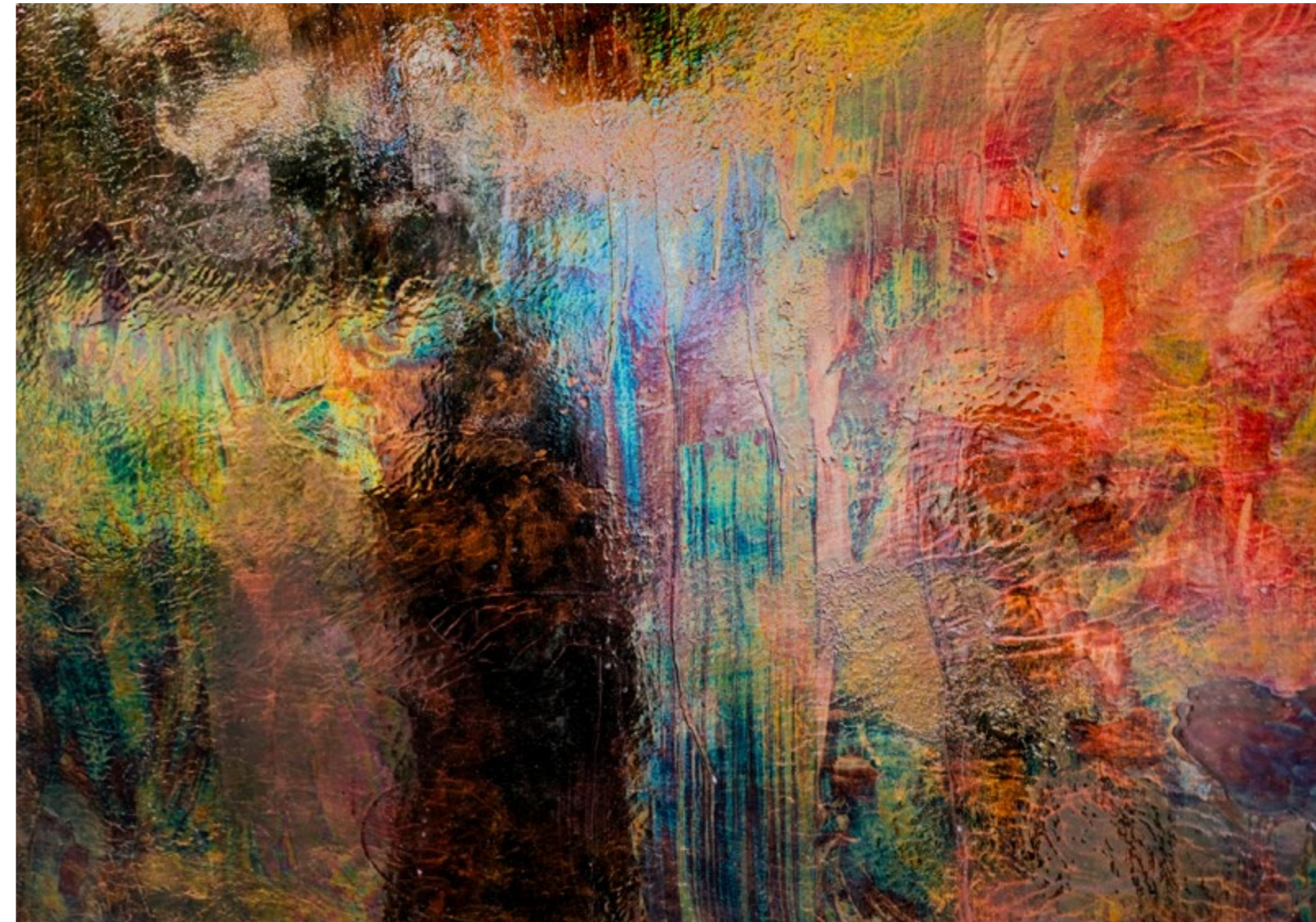
—H.P. LOVECRAFT^[003]

IRIDESCENCE IS THE METAMORPHOSIS OF LIGHT through wave diffraction or wave interference. Diffraction occurs when light collides with a surface that has a mesh or lattice-like nanostructure. As the wave is scattered through these tiny gaps, the very essence of light bends into curved ripples like water. This curving separates light into the seven colours of Newton’s prism.^[004] *The fabric of reality itself stretched thin.*

Wave interference is the true spectacle of ever-shifting colour that changes depending on their environment. Diffraction produces an unchanging, uniform palette, whereas interference offers a wider manipulation of colour for the painter. It’s a strange phenomenon, where light becomes both creator and destroyer. Oil slick colours emerge, when a thin veil of petrol is suspended upon the watery canvas. It stretches out only nanometers thick, an ephemeral interface where the tiniest of molecules conspire to paint the world in hues beyond imagination.

Oil molecules exhibit a unique tendency for self-assembly in horizontal patterns. Allowing some light to scatter at the surface, while the rest penetrates the film and is reflected at different angles by the translucent inner layers. The translucent material bends each wavelength of colour differently, resulting in a unique transformation under different lighting conditions.

All these chaotic beams of light moving at conflicting trajectories climax in a delightful kaleidoscopic embrace. As different lengths of lightwaves bounce back they are ensnared in the web of interference. Conflicting waves form constructive and destructive wave patterns manifest into swimmingly dizzying layers that feel alive. Wavelengths mix like ready paints from a tube, interference generates colour made of a mixture of wavelengths rather than the seven prism colours. Unveiling an arcane tapestry woven of ethereal hues such as bronze, gold, cyan, teal, brilliant ultramarine, purple, and magenta. Constructive interference patterns emerge when light waves align and merge to form a stronger wave. *Intense orgasmic colour.* Destructive interference patterns, in contrast, occur when these energies counteract, leading to diminished intensity and extinguishing certain wavelengths – *revealing rarer creatures.*



[003] Lovecraft 2008. From the short story Call of Chuthulu.

[004] Amusingly, Newton’s seven-colour distinction was heavily influenced by alchemy, seven being an alchemical number of universal significance, denoting the seven planets of the known cosmos.



YOU LOOK SO BEAUTIFUL MY LOVE, BLACK
RUBBLE COCOONED IN A SNOWY CAPPED
DRESS. WHITE IMPASTO LACE PAINTED
AGAINST VELVETY BLACK. ALPS OF HEL-
SINKI. MAN-MADE, HYBRID LANDSCAPE! A
LONELY MOUNTAIN CONSUMED BY A HUNGRY
CITY. HOW I SHALL MOURN YOU, WHEN YOU
ARE GONE.

WILL I EVER SEE MOUNTAINS FROM MY
WINDOW AGAIN?

LABORATORY

“AT FIRST YOU SEE NOTHING BUT A CHAOS OF COLOURS; THEN IT BEGINS TO LOOK LIKE SOMETHING, IT RESEMBLES – NO, IT DOES NOT LOOK LIKE ANYTHING. ALL OF A SUDDEN, A POINT DETACHES ITSELF; LIKE THE NUCLEUS OF A CELL, IT GROWS, THE COLOURS ARE CLUSTERED AROUND IT, HEAPED; RAYS DEVELOP, SHOOTING FORTH BRANCHES AND TWIGS LIKE ICE CRYSTALS ON THE WINDOW PANES... AND THE PICTURE REVEALS ITSELF TO THE VIEWER, WHO HAS ASSISTED AT THE BIRTH OF THE PAINTING.”

–AUGUSTE STRINDBERG, CELESTOGRAPHS ^[001]

[001] Strindberg 2001.

I SPENT MY NIGHTS IN THE LABORATORY testing traditional painting mediums and solvents under the fume hood. It was intoxicating. First learning to manipulate light and then to paint with this immaterial colour. I use oils, mediums, and varnishes, such as are found in any painter’s studio. It is only with the process that they turn from something base into something noble. I need to build up varying thicknesses of layers and manipulate how the nanostructure of the surface forms. Hundreds of tests resulted mostly in failure. The stack of test plates, each with around 50 samples, is piled high on the studio window.^[002] I think failures are kind of important for the artist, because technique informs the process. So you have to go through this endless repetition of Promethean torture. I derived a lot of comfort from colleagues, such as **Noora Yau** and **Tiina Pyykkinen**, who were finding their

[002] My plates have sat there for a year now being exposed to the sunlight to test their colourfastness under UV exposure.

own interesting ways to create iridescence, so I knew there were a lot of pathways into capturing this wild form of colour. *Desire only fuels the fire.*

I produced my first successful iridescent sample at the end of December, only four months before the degree show. I cannot describe the catharsis of that moment. It was thick and dull, yet undeniably iridescent. *A greenish-bronze hatchling with crackled serpentine skin.* I had made it using a water-soluble medium, and it took a month more of frustration, before I was able to transfer it to oil painting mediums. Colour is the crucial thing for me, so really needed to develop my own method, in order to control what colour is produced. January left very little time to make the works, but I felt like it didn’t matter, because I had failed enough times. So there was this confidence that I was doing my own thing.

I think it’s important that a good alchemist never reveals their secrets, and jealously guards the occult knowledge of their art. The ‘how’ does not matter so much, upholding the magic of the feeling is the important thing. So I will say no more.

“WHILE HE DESIRES TO QUENCH HIS THIRST, A DIFFERENT THIRST IS CREATED. WHILE HE DRINKS HE IS SEIZED BY THE VISION OF HIS REFLECTED FORM. HE LOVES A BODILESS DREAM”

–OVID, METAMORPHOSES^[003]

LEARNING TO PAINT WITH LIGHT at the practical level, is fundamentally different from how chemistry, material science, and physics approach making structural colours. Light is my paint and nanostructures are my brushstrokes. The experience of colour is revealed to the observer specifically in each brushmark and gesture I make.

I construct the paintings in several layers similar to traditional Renaissance paintings, mimicking the structure of the oil slick upon a pool of water. I begin with a dark-toned ground painted in ink or oil. My work has been excited by the underlying dark brown or black melanin pigmentation in birds and butterflies – realising that nature se-

[003] Ovid 2014, III:412–436.

lects the very same base palette to enhance structural colour. Old Master painters likewise preferred muted earth tones: VanDyke brown, ochre, raw/burnt umber and sienna, and carbon black. I next define lights and shadows, by adding deeper washes and wiping back the paint to open up lighter horizons. Moving toward the surface, I increase transparency into glass-like layers that tint or shroud the underpainting. Dotted amongst this inky darkness is star dust – embedded reflective materials that act like the final touches of impasto and highlight. The depth of the final glazing layer awakens the slumbering colour and determines which hues are resurrected.

When it came to painting, I think the most difficult thing was replicating and scaling up the process from a few centimetre samples to two-metre paintings. If you make a mistake the whole bloody layering process might need to be begun from scratch. So you need to be present in the moment, paint in a swift calligraphic stroke. Any hesitation will show. Nanostructures are really unruly and mischievous, and creating colour out of them is the work of summoning spirits – *you never quite know who you’ll get* – whether reproducing the sample will result in the same colours. The chemicals being highly toxic and volatile, I spent much of my time in a solvent mask flying around like an oxygen-depleted bat. Invisible fumes seemed to pull me back in time to the dangers of the pandemic, and more fearful thoughts of the current troubles. But there was also comfort and a sense of certainty in these moments of madness.

I thought much on the image of the [*Cosmic background radiation*], when making the paintings. That first light bursting into life. A spark appearing and expanding. I was after the most elusive bronze, ultramarine, and cyan. *Bright blue like the gas flame of a bunsen burner.* These colours are infuriatingly challenging, almost impossible to

achieve as they not only occur with destructive interference, but also occur at the thinnest depths of a film. In a soap bubble, these spectral colours are formed at 150–300 nanometres. *Thin as a whisper*. A single strand of human hair in comparison is 100,000 nanometres thick. I was exploring the very edge of the world of colour. Recordings of Lovecraft’s books kept me comforted during my nocturnal descent down the spiral staircases interdimensional colour. The painting became tangled up in the arctic landscape of [*At the mountains of madness*]. A millennia of planetary warming and cooling. This landscape at the edge of worlds felt in tune with these colours.

NIGHTMARES ABOUT COLOUR THEORY became a recurring companion to my late nights at the lab. I was curious about the possibilities of combining iridescence with pigment colour. Yet, colour mixing of pigments and structural colour do not work in the same manner. Pigments form colour based on subtractive mixing, structural colour through additive mixing. I was perplexed at what happens when both are at play, as were my professors. I have enjoyed bemoanings over the technical horrors of iridescence with Noora Yau^[004]. As Yau puts it, there is an abysmal gap in colour theory that needs filling.

When painting [*At the mountains of madness*], I had the oil slick in the back of my mind, so a black base felt natural. *Black oil, black asphalt under a rain puddle*. Black provides a strong contrast; and also absorbs any backscattering. Structural colours occur from light bouncing through the upper layers, which “contributes to an increase in the intensity and purity of the reflection/

[004] Yau’s research at Aalto University into microcrystalline nanocellulose iridescent thin films has been an incredible resource. Yau has shared her knowledge and expertise concerning structural colour, and I am much indebted to her insight.

interference colour”^[005]. Narcissus insisted on carbon black. Made from burning fossil fuels – coal/natural gas (PBk 6) or crude oil (PBk 7). Connecting colour with material reality. *The world was on fire*. We were only just beginning to take the plague masks off, when the war began. So an unfolding energy crisis, sabotaged gas pipes, occupation of nuclear power plants, and burst dams seeped into the background of the work.

Alchemy (al-kīmiyā) is believed to stem from the word Khēmīa, ‘the black earth’^[006]. A literal reading of the meaning of alchemy is therefore ‘the art of the black earth’. How apt for a body of work making colour from carbon and resulting in iridescent oil slicks that echo the ecological and other crises of our planet.

For the second painting [*Colour out of space*], I was attracted to elements of time and decay. Sanguine reds – oxidising sepia and iron – *rusting beds upon which the reflections of the lake sleep*. It is still unclear to me how the pigment and structural colours hybridise. Sometimes it seems to interact with the structural colour like a glaze. (Blood-)staining the top colours. More often the visual effect was a simultaneous contrast. Due to the quantity of the colour as underlined by Itten and Albers’ interaction of colour and colour contrast theories. Morphing the blues and yellows closer toward the green, and the red and orange fade into obscurity. I am looking forward to trying violets and blues, as these wavelengths are bent the most by defraction.

[005] Schenk 2013, 5–9.

[006] An ancient name for Egypt.

“SHE REALIZED FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT AVERSION AND ATTRACTION RAN SIDE BY SIDE; THAT THE BOUNDARY-LINE WAS THIN BETWEEN THEM.”

–DAPHNE DU MAURIER, JAMAICA INN^[007]

UNDULATING SURFACES OF COLOUR. With the final piece [*Orpheus*], I wanted to return to my explorations of what a material surface could bring to colour. Three-dimensional morphologies always form deep shadows and brilliant highlights in response to a space and lighting. I felt that impasto would offer a dynamic intermingling of light and surface, which creates a mesmerising tapestry, where iridescent colours shimmer and morph like living entities. This idea too was inspired by biomimicry. Consider how the movement of light is aided by the undulating surface and concave curvature of an abalone seashell [*Haliotis iris*] or along the rounded carapace of the jewel beetle [*Chrysochroa fulgidissima*]. In the soft transitions of light in these curved shapes, the entire spectrum of the colour change can be revealed. Colour lives in the highlights and shadows of the surface.

Merging living colour with a living material surface wasn’t going to be easy. The two smaller paintings achieved fragile broken textures with glass powder and scarring by over-tensioning the canvas to create stretch marks respectively. According to Yau, producing structural colour on three-dimen-

[007] Du Maurier 2012.

sional surfaces is diabolically difficult as it interferences with film formation. My first taste of success [*Saturnine*] ended up as the Kuvan Kevät catalogue image. *Delicious like oily sludge or interstellar nebulae*. Attempting iridescence on impasto surfaces easily results in pale or patchy colour. The surface disruptions prevented patterning from forming and weren’t shiny enough to reflect light. I had to build special ‘spinning’ brushes and burnishing pads from corduroy velvet for applying the layers.

For much of the history of painting, artists have tried to hide away this material surface, in favour of the illusion of the image. Yet from the very birth of painting in the darkness of the prehistoric caves, material surface has been intimately tied to image-making. The three-dimensional surface reacts to the light and brings life to the image. The flickering of the primal fire awakens the hunting scene and its animals. Light stages the event, the happening. *It illuminates, enlightens*.



HANASAARI'S CHIMNEY PIPES ARE BIL-
LOWING THEIR LAST. SEA WATER FROM THE
TURNING INTO VAPOUR. I SEE THE CLOUDS
ALL THE WAY FROM MY BALCONY. DON'T
YOU FEEL THAT WE LACK AN UNDERS-
TANDING OF OURSELVES AND OUR PLACE
IN THE CYCLE? IT MANIFESTS AS THIS
HYPOCHONDRIAC FEAR OF DYING, AND PA-
RALYSIS. OUR FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE
IS STUCK ON FREEZE...

WELL, NOT FOR LONG AT THE RATE YOU'RE
BURNING THAT COAL. APRIL FOOLS IS CO-
MING.

CYCLES OF MATTER

“RUBBLE IS LIKE A PLANT’S BLOSSOMS; IT IS THE RADIANT HIGHPOINT OF AN INCESSANT METABOLISM, THE BEGINNING OF A REBIRTH.”

—ANSELM KIEFER^[001]

[001] Kiefer 2023.

PAINTING AS AN ACT OF COLLABORATION between artist and nature holds a potency of expression that feels extremely relevant to our moment in time. Thinking of the [*Celestographs*] and [*Soil chromatographies*] as images in which both artist and nature participated together. Images produced in dialogue with the environment. This imagery feels to me to be in conversation with nature, embedded into nature, not merely depicting it.

It was really in the deepening of my relationship with the materiality of the natural world that opened up painting for me with new significance. I found that collaboration with nature connected me with a landscape that is both undeniably human and intensely wild. A form of painting that is in tune with posthumanism. Lovelock’s influential idea of the Gaia hypothesis, as well as extensions into this idea by Latour, Coccia, and Haraway. Lovelock describes our relationship as tangled together in a complex web of interdependencies and coexistence.

Altering scales and materials in painting creates instability, which emphasises this entanglement and mutual influence between us and the planetary ecosystem.^[002] I wanted my work to acknowledge that in the cycles of matter and evolution we have come to shape each other – a hybrid nature.^[003]

THIS RETURN TO MATERIAL is perhaps the most earth-shattering attitude change in modern painting. All the more so in a high materialistic age. A seismic shift back to the acknowledgement of material and the act of painting. I feel that we’ve actually regained a spirituality, akin to the idea of the material presence of colour being sacred, for example in **Wolfgang Laib**’s work. Truly interested in what and how we paint, and ravenously feasting on the

[002] Halkes 2006, 5.

[003] Latour & Weibel 2020, 178–179.

carnal pleasure that each splatter, dash, and smear of paint evokes. Reminding us that painting is a synesthetic and multi-sensory experience of haptic surface, gestural movement, and emotive colour. The mind cannot be separated from the physical. As Merleau-Ponty affirms colour does not exist independently, colour is light bouncing of solidity and materiality^[004].

Of the post-war painters, the material experiments of **Alberto Burri** most resonate with my ideas of alchemical transmutation. Burri’s [*Cretti*] are abstract crackling landscapes responding to the physical laws of our world. Turning cracks into ravines. Burri erupts into full-scale landscape with [*Il grande cretto*] – land art erected in memoriam to the Mediaeval city of Gibellina after its destruction in a cataclysmic earthquake. A recognition of the reality of painting as well as landscape. My mentor Toni really helped me, by saying that paintings don’t have to represent anything. Rather they are the thing itself.^[005] The transformation is my work. It freed me from the need to force an image onto canvas.

I feel that the current paintings emerge intuitively and without struggle or indecision. Having set upon a collaborative route to painting, my materials have begun to speak to me. Intelligence emerges from the unknowing, inane, the non-living becomes sentient, carries forth forgotten, non-verbal, knowledge. *Silent clay speaks to us with volume as it cracks*. Materials have their own agency and conditions they impose both upon the artist. I am learning to listen to and be guided by their nature: polyurethane wishes to foam and expand, oil to spread in quiet pools and drip thick like honey. Gestures have become a part of the language of materiality; revealing the physical forces of nature that determine all our lives. Each brushstroke is guided by something invisible, yet palpably tangible and real.

[004] Merleau-Ponty 2013, 120.

[005] Toivonen 2016, 7, 34.

It is also a delightfully serendipitous form of image-making. The abstract expressionists emphasised that accidents lead to unexpected discoveries and freedom. Allowing new possibilities to emerge. Evolution works on the same principle of genetic accidents. This has certainly been true for my practice. Often abstract mark-making is meaningless, the interest in accidentalism has been about misbehaviour. Rebellious against old patterns. Yet, my collaborative accidents with nature, feel more rather than less meaningful. Think of **Cy Twombly**’s calligraphic scrawls in [*Untitled I (Bacchus)*]. Nothing mischievous about paint wanting to drip. Quite the opposite, it is most natural.

“OH, I SEE YOUR SCARS, I KNOW WHERE THEY’RE FROM, SO SENSUALLY CARVED AND BLEEDING UNTIL YOU’RE DEAD AND GONE I’VE SEEN IT ALL BEFORE, BEAUTY AND SPLENDOUR TORN IT’S WHEN HEAVEN TURNS TO BLACK AND HELL TO WHITE, RIGHT TO WRONG AND WRONG TO RIGHT.”

—HIM, BEYOND REDEMPTION^[006]

[006] Valo 2003.



I CHOSE TO WORK WITH POLYURETHANE for I needed to reconnect the oil slick colours with its material, subterranean world. I was also attracted to its self-forming and self-shaping quality. Polyurethane is like geology in fast-formation. It naturally desires to form the soft undulating wave surface I was looking for. But its appearance also reminded me viscerally of the corporeal, intestines or the fat plump body of the caterpillar cocooned in metamorphosis.

AS PAINTING TAKES ON CORPOREAL FORM it moves closer to installation and sculpture. It has discarded flatness, depth illusions, and even the dimensions of the canvas. Evolved to operate in time and space; breaking the barriers of traditional painting. I see this as a defiance of the illusion of a window. Alternative universes that feel unattached to our existence. I worked with material surfaces to approach the landscape in a bodily manner. Experiencing it up close not as a window to a view, rather as material.

My impasto works unnervingly ooze and crawl out of the canvas. Like the child, who crawls out a tv screen in the cult horror film [*Ring*]^[007]. The paintings take place in the observer's space and dimension. Affecting the observer and their world. Deleuze remarks that new thinking arises from violent encounters. Materiality evokes great unease in a painting, as it destroys the safety of what we thought to be only an illusion. The phobic feeling standing under **Louise Bourgeois'** [*Maman*] spider. According to Freud, this 'uncanniness' draws from our uncertainty – we cannot tell whether the object is dead or alive.^[008]

[007] Director Hideo Nakata's film *Ring* (1998), based on a novel of the same name (1991) by Koji Suzuki.

[008] Kelley 2003, 70–99. Kelley refers to Lucian Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (1919).

“LET THE FLESH IN- STRUCT THE MIND.”

– ANNE RICE, INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE^[009]

THE DECAY INTO MATERIAL is a tangible reminder of human mortality. Isn't it strange how [*Maman*] can possess an uncanny semblance of life, yet in reality it is an inanimate lump of metal? This an alchemical transmutation of material. *Pygmalion's sculpture coming into flesh.*^[010] It is magical and frightening. A dichotomy of the living and dying in a single body. The idea reverberates with our own bodies. It mirrors the moment of our own life and death.

The physical and material unavoidably remind us that our bodies as well are made of such growing and decaying matter. Colour is captivating due to its life-like quality; yet it is always coupled with decaying material. All living beings are made of this same fundamental amalgamate: a body and a 'soul'. I wonder, if this is why fossils fascinate us? A fossil is a remaining trace image in stone – an imprint of the mere shell that once contained this anima. We recognize ourselves in that which was once a living being. Even the iridescent oil slick's 'material side' – petroleum oil – is made of such eldritch creatures fossilised over millions of years under immense geological pressures. A kind of vanitas subject, where we see our own short humanity ground in between the cosmic millstones. I think this is what I'm trying to convey through the paintings.

The materiality of iridescence discloses to us this cyclical nature of the universe,

[009] Rice 2008.

[010] Ovid 2014, X: 243–297.

but it also consoles us with a fundamental truth of nature. That all material in the universe is recycled. At the end of the cycle comes some form of death – decaying, rotting, or decomposing. Yet, nothing is wasted. The law of conservation [$E = mc^2$] means that nothing in this world is ever truly lost, it only changes form. Undergoes metamorphosis. Perhaps the fossil comforts us in the knowledge that a trace of us will live on in some form, even after millenia, or perhaps by the certainty with which we still feel its presence and existence? *Dead now, but certainly once alive.* Iridescence as a promise of rebirth.

“TO SEE A WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND AND A HEAVEN IN A WILD FLOW- ER, HOLD INFINITY IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND AND ETERNITY IN AN HOUR.”

–WILLIAM BLAKE, AUGU- RIES OF INNOCENCE^[011]

A BLURRING OF COSMIC SCALES was also born from the materiality of iridescence. Most structural colour effects in nature are a result of interference created through surface structures or thin films. These structures, funnily enough, remind me of landscapes: a forest of miniature fir trees, tiny grass savannahs, and microscopic ridges like mountain ranges. It allows me to dive into a confusion of the macrocosmic and the microcosmic, into the worlds of space

[011] Blake 1996.

exploration and of the coronavirus. I am interested in how posthumanist thought is influencing fellow painters, like **Alma Heikkilä** and **Hanna Kanto**, to give up the human scale and human-centric approach to seeing our environment. Exploring nanostructures really made me understand how to translate scale in my own paintings. According to Kelley, the loss of scale plays an important role in evoking experience.^[012] Enlarged scales allow the viewer become immersed, lost in the paintings.

Material also invites us to reframe our notions in scales of time. The most powerful painterly experience I have of time comes from two destroyed **Claude Monet** paintings. [*Water lilies (1916)*] – burnt in a fire – and [*Reflections of the weeping willow on the water-lily pond (1916)*] – which I saw last summer in Tokyo, where it was on show for the first time after a century forgotten in storage. Decay rewinds the act of painting like a video tape. Tracing its life cycle from beginning to end. A painting's surface is sedimentary, the accumulation of time, material, and the events of change. Material painting as such is a record of time.

There is something heartbreaking and profound in their silent surfaces – more so than any intact painting. Blackened and crispy as a marshmallow, bubbling paint, little plasterers of conservationist's tape; scarred and wrinkled, half the canvas peeling off like shedding skin. There is something strongly prophetic in decay as an act of painting. It sends out tendrils that connect the paintings up to the cycle of matter – extending it's now into the deep time of geological and cosmic evolution. Burning, corroding, cracking, salinating, bleaching, trampling, ploughing, scratching. Geology is imagery of layers and traces. A constant erosion and expansion. The involvement of elemental and physical phenomena transforms the passive nature of landscape painting.

[012] Kelley 2003, 75–78.



**DARLING, I WONDER IF YOU CAN SEE MY
PAINTINGS FROM OVER THERE? THE GAL-
LERY WINDOWS OPEN TOWARD THE BAY, BUT
YOU ARE NOT AS YOU USED TO BE. THE
EARTHMOVING CATERPILLARS HAVE BEEN
BUSY EATING AWAY AT YOU. ONLY A SMALL
MOUND REMAINS.**

**I THOUGHT WE'D HAVE MORE TIME. LITTLE
DID I THINK THAT YOUR BODY WOULD BE
GIVEN TO YOUR SISTERS IN SALMISAARI
AND VUOSAARI. THE LAST DAYS OF THIS
TRINITY, AND THE LAST DAYS OF APRIL.
WHAT A RARE THING TO SEE AURORA DANCE
IN THE SKY ABOVE HELSINKI. TOGETHER
WE GAZE AT CELESTIAL COLOUR.**

TRINITY

**“THERE IS SHADOW UNDER THIS RED ROCK
(COME IN UNDER THE SHADOW OF THIS RED ROCK)
AND I WILL SHOW YOU SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM EITHER
YOUR SHADOW AT MORNING STRIDING BEHIND YOU
OR YOUR SHADOW AT EVENING RISING TO MEET YOU
I WILL SHOW YOU FEAR IN A HANDFUL OF DUST.”**

—T.S. ELIOT, THE WASTE LAND^[001]

[001] Eliot 1981

THE STRUCTURAL COLOUR PAINTINGS were exhibited at **KUVAN KEVÄT** – the Academy of Fine Arts’ annual MFA degree show during May–June 2023. The works were exhibited in the Kuva/Tila main gallery, at the far end of the space, which forms a secluded alcove in the shape of an isosceles triangle. This triangular space was a lovely secret note to the alchemical themes at play. The display wall withdraws toward a sharply tightening corner at the end of which, on the adjacent wall is a full-height window.

The minimal ‘white cube’ setting built a complementary tension that added potency to the heavy, dark, shiny, and restlessly changing surfaces. The space reflected added light and increased the effect of colour, and I thought much about how the Impressionists advocated for white frames to increase the amount of light bouncing into their paintings. I am looking forward to the chance to compare this setting with my upcoming show in a black box setting at Galleria Rajatila. I am curious to explore how these works

adapt to a dark gallery space and dramatic chiaroscuro lighting.

The space was chosen with light as a primary motive. The paintings aim to evoke a sense of change in the landscape, therefore changes in natural light facilitated by weather and time of day played a central part in their display. The large window provided a dramatic lateral lumination, which emphasised three-dimensional textural surfaces and brought to life the structural colour better than I had anticipated. The window also provided a view into the gallery from the street – allowing for stolen glimpses from a far. The paintings cast an eerie shadow-image onto the floor of the gallery, which created a strange sensation as if the paintings were afloat and about to come out from their glassy cages. I am keen to try out a polished floor in the future, to intensify this watery mirror image.

**“NATURE IN ONE OF HER
BENEFICIENT MOODS HAS
ORDAINED THAT EVEN
DEATH HAS SOME ANTI-
DOTE TO ITS OWN TER-
RORS.”**

**—BRAM STOKER, DRACU-
LA^[002]**

I HAD INTENDED A COMPLEMENTARY PAIR OF PAINTINGS – creating a narrative between a dying and a living landscape. Building tension between the corpulent and gigantic 4-metre [*Orpheus*] and a miniature companion. Rotting black decay versus the birth of a spark of light. Yet, the spirit and energy, which erupted in painting [*Orpheus*], did not lend itself to a calm and reflective mood conducive to working on a more intimate scale. I ended up with a pair of two-metre canvases instead. Yet these works seemed to intensely encapsulate my vision. I considered hanging only one, but somehow the paintings felt bereft without each other.

The identical size invited me to hang these gemini paintings together as a cohesive unit. This separated the work into two distinct worlds. It brought a poetic kinship to the works, – Alpha and Omega, Adam and Eve, et cetera. “The alchemy of good curating amounts to this: Sometimes, placing one work of art near another makes one plus one equal three. Two artworks arranged alchemically leave each intact, transform both, and create a third thing.” as Jerry Saltz once concluded^[003]. This pairing brought an

[002] Stoker 2012.

[003] Saltz 2007.

attractive sense of wholeness, and intensified the experience of colours. I was concerned that the imposing scale of [*Orpheus*] felt weakened in direct comparison with such large companions; but the strong internal contrast between the twinned pair left the viewer comparing them together; which freed Orpheus from the diminishing scale comparison with relative success.

The hanging aimed to emphasise the scale and drama of the pieces. Conveying an experience of gravity and dread in [*Orpheus*]. The lower half of the painting was lit with spotlights, while the top was left in heavy shadow. Limitations in wall height meant that there was little room to manoeuvre in the hanging of the four-metre painting. I had intended to hang the piece 50 cm off the floor, to add to the sense of towering height and menacing weight. However various distracting pipes and architectural elements above the hanging space resulted in a lower positioning. [*Orpheus*] was placed so as to be partially hidden from view by a concrete pillar when looking into the space from the other end of the gallery. There was a sense of drama of turning around the corner and the immense size and monstrous mass coming into view.

[*Colour out of space*] and [*At the mountains of madness*] were hung so as to allow the viewer to dive into and immerse themselves in the landscape of the painting. They were hung at MOMA height, where the centre of the painting is at 150–155 cm. This placed them distinctly higher off the floor than the sagging [*Orpheus*], which leant an ethereal floating feel to the pair. Beyond this simple hanging, I felt that there was much potential for future displaying of such paintings. Ways to emphasise the drama of the light hitting the surface, such as hanging the pair in inclined angles, one leaning slightly forward from the top edge of the canvas, the other bulging from the bottom.







**I PLUNGE INTO THE WATER FROM THE LIT-
TLE PIER ERECTED FOR CARPET WASHING.
I'M SWIMMING INTO YOUR SHADOW NARCIS-
SUS. RIPPLES VIBRACE ACROSS YOUR
REFLECTION; HOPING YOU DON'T MIND MY
DISTURBANCE. IT'S A NICE BREAK FROM
PAINTING, TO WALK ACROSS THE STREET
AND SWIM IN THE SECLUDED BAY. AND TO
FEEL CLOSE TO YOU ONE FINAL TIME.**

**YOUR MUTILATED CORPSE IS BEING LOADED
BY CRANES. I WONDER IF YOU ARE SAI-
LING AWAY WITH M/S ARKADIA?**

LIVING & DYING PAINTINGS

“ONE OF OUR MOST POWERFUL YEARNINGS: THE CRAVING TO FIND IN NATURE A CONSOLATION FOR OUR MORTALITY.”

—SIMON SCHAMA^[001]

[001] Schama 1995, 15.

I SAT QUIETLY IN THE GALLERY for many days observing the structural colour paintings in their new environment. I was greatly delighted seeing how they responded to surrounding movement and reflections from the window. The gallery is located on a busy street – the cars, bicycles, and pedestrians all contributed to a kaleidoscope of colour and moving shadow forms across the canvas. Morning and evening light cast the strongest shadow of the cityscape. When viewed from an angle, the thick glassy surfaces became completely dominated by reflected road, overpass bridge and avenue of linden trees.

I feel that the paintings are quite temperamental. They morph into different creatures in tune with the weather. In bright morning sunlight, they awakened colourful reflections of sky and trees that mixed with the dancing colours. On diffused overcast days, the paintings were most demure, structural colour was subdued and the underlying pigment layers had a chance to emerge. The deepening evening rays highlighted the pol-

ished texture areas, giving them warm glow in gunmetal, gold, and silver. The shine and colours peaked against the darkening surface. Akin to an installation, the temporality makes them feel important, needing more attention from the viewer than a painting that is constantly the same. Observers told me that they felt a need to visit them again to really grasp at their nature. Most fickle and sensitive to changes in the outside world. Sometimes the dramatic lateral light would only reach the black painting. *Reanimating one, whilst leaving the other lifeless.*

THIS LAZARUS MOMENT holds something profoundly hopeful. A spark of light that rises out of deepest blackness. *De profundis.* In these moments of the painting living and dying, we may come to grips with our own transience. We recognize that not just life, but also its death is another transition or a gateway to another form of

existence. The living and dying painting is a poetic metaphor, yet extends beyond metaphor. “Systems of matter, energy, and information link the sphere of metaphors with the real spheres of life.”^[002] We witness a real metamorphosis – of light and matter changing into living colour. As Simone Weil puts it, beauty is “the experiential proof

that reincarnation is possible.”^[003] Iridescence that carries with it the hope of resurrection.

I had a long conversation with Toni, trying to put into words the paintings. On what it was to feel the presence of life and death. How we need to experience this. How it is meaningful. A sense of reconnecting, something lost and found again. It assures me that we are part of the cycle. Haraway says “we are compost”^[004] and something will grow out of that. I like to think even further into the past and future. We are born of stardust, and will one day return to this state of matter. *Dust to dust, ashes to ashes.* Faced with our inevitable mortality brings forth a genuine moment of ekstasis. A moment of total immersion in being alive.

“THE HEART OF DARKNESS IS HOPE OF FINDING YOU THERE.”

—HIM, LOVE’S REQUIEM^[005]

JEKYLL AND HYDE IN THE NATURE of their play, the paintings hid away from a direct vantage point, sinking back into the vitreous surface. From alternative per-

[002] Feuerstein 2022, 46.

[003] Weil 2013.

[004] Haraway 2016, 97.

[005] HIM 2003.

spectives they revealed their true selves – the hitherto unassuming canvas suddenly bursting into colour. These works are an introspection on how viewpoints change the world we see. Making the viewer aware of their gaze. Like a sphinx, the paintings tease, test, and question. Challenging our expectations. Attempt to approach the enamel surface and your shadow disturbs the view. *As the moon eclipses the sun.* The viewer must battle impatience to gain the pleasure of discovery.

Having spent time observing the paintings in the real world, I have begun to notice the importance of how we interact with them. How it brings^[006] us deeper into the world of the painting. Admittedly, I am not terribly keen on analysing the act of viewing. I find it a little distractive, distancing from the essential experiencing of feeling them. Heidegger’s phenomenological theory sees this ‘happening’ is the essence of an artwork; that art is the event of ‘unconcealment of being’. Where the viewer can experience something, which goes beyond our normal and routine experience of the world.^[007]

The structural colour paintings are a reactive agent in the environment; but also force the observer into action. They demand and also deny. They impishly sneered at attempts to capture their essence. Viewers were wisting their camera phones into odd angles, running back and forth taking video, and blinded by the backlash of the reflective surface throwing the camera flash back in their face. They fit in with the shiny peacocketry of the digital age. Yet, in this age where experience has been diluted down to easily accessible – yet mindless scrolling – online, they radically demand the viewer’s full physical presence and attention.

[006]

[007] Heidegger 2002, 4–19.

BINARY STAR =

A SYSTEM OF TWO STARS THAT ARE GRAVITATIONALLY BOUND TO AND IN ORBIT AROUND EACH OTHER. BINARY STARS IN THE NIGHT SKY THAT ARE SEEN AS A SINGLE OBJECT TO THE NAKED EYE . IF A BINARY STAR HAPPENS TO ORBIT IN A PLANE ALONG OUR LINE OF SIGHT, ITS COMPONENTS WILL ECLIPSE AND TRANSIT EACH OTHER; THESE PAIRS ARE CALLED ECLIPSING BINARIES. [008]

THE PAINTINGS HAD A GRAVITATIONAL PULL of sorts. They force a response from the observer. The paintings aroused the spectators to wander, move around the paintings, as well as traverse within the image. It was delightful to see how actively they approached the surface, withdrew back, paced back and forth past the paintings, and peered into the dark void inside. They moved in large elliptical arcs, like moons orbiting around a glowing celestial body. With all these thoughts on space and light, I couldn't help thinking of this as the re-enacting of a cosmic landscape, the dance of Kepler-16b around a pair of binary stars.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect are the

[008] Excerpts from Wikipedia 2023.

areas of highly reflective surface. When you finally think you have found the painting, it presents you with an image of yourself. "Whenever I extend my lips to the clear liquid, he tries to raise his lips to me"^[009]. The viewers' reflections can be glimpsed in these mirrored areas of canvas. Your image becomes warped by the mountains. *The landscape shaping us*. It is the way we look that allows us to feel a sense of involvement, agency, and accountability for the landscape. A strange psychological experience, where the viewer sees themselves in the landscape and their body merging into one with the colours and the scene. Isn't it frightening to be consumed by an entity like this? *Drowning in water*. The unsuspecting observer is sucked into the process of metamorphosis and becomes an integral part of the painting. Thus faced with our own complicity in the environment – we are forced to project onto the subject of painting.

[*Orpheus*] sucks the observer into through a kind of gravitational field. The viewer is met with an experience of distorted scales and matter. Its scale and ascending vertical composition are similar to crucifixion paintings, with a threateningly top-heavy anatomy. Heavy three-dimensional mass about to topple on to the viewers below. There is this feeling of gravity you can't ignore. After the show, I received the most touching letter from poet Erkkä Filander, who wrote to me of the shuddering experience [*Orpheus*] evoked, which he likened to the Gates of Hell.

[009] Ovid 2014, III:412-436.

“HOW OFTEN HE GAVE HIS LIPS IN VAIN TO THE DECEPTIVE POOL, HOW OFTEN, TRYING TO EMBRACE THE NECK HE COULD SEE, HE PLUNGED HIS ARMS INTO THE WATER, BUT COULD NOT CATCH HIMSELF WITHIN THEM!”

—OVID, METAMORPHOSES^[010]

WE MERGE INTO THE LANDSCAPE THROUGH TOUCH. The surface of [*Orpheus*] resembles a cave with stalactitic and volcanic formations. The impasto grows out of the surface of the canvas in a thick mass, reaching beyond the borders imposed by the painting's four sides. The painting seems to misbehave. Ooze into the exhibition space out of the picture surface. Extending over 30 cm from the surface and resulting in a weight of over 60 kg. *Orpheus in the Underworld*. It responds to space dimensionally, which is easy to dismiss as an added sculptural quality. For me, it links up to cave paintings, the three-dimensional surface ties together landscape with image. A handprint on the cave wall. Landscape experienced haptically through imagined or literal touch.

There was a hesitancy to approach the dangerous painting, yet a keen attraction to touch it. The enigmatic surface of extruded intestines or molten lava demands investigation and promises the finger tips a 'high'. This

[010] Ovid 2014, III:412-436.

is power to incite miscreancy, and abandon the sacrosanct 'DO NOT TOUCH' rule of the museum space.

Reading Dessain, I came to understand that touch is never one-sided.^[011] Touch requires the observer to come close and participate. It cannot be done neutrally from a distance, like an observer with his gaze. For me it is a sure sign of the work speaking, when observers are unable to resist temptation. Touching art is a forbidden fruit, a guilty pleasure. Indeed there were many furtive glances and stolen caresses. Children approached it with the greatest abandon and unadulterated joy. Rushing in to molest and stroke the great beast. Heedless of the reprimand they knew this would evoke. It is these kinds of actions that reveal something awakening in our consciousness. We touch the work, but the work also touches us.

[011] Dessain 2017.



**MY POOR BLACK NARCISSUS CANNOT REACH
THE WATER'S EDGE TO SEE HIS REFLEC-
TION. WORN DOWN TO A LOW MOUND. WE
HAVE TO WAIT IN THE CAR FOR THE COAL
DUST TO SETTLE, BEFORE ITS SAFE TO
STEP OUT ONTO THIS CHTHONIC LANDSCA-
PE.**

**I HOLD IN MY HANDS A LUMP OF YOUR
SOUL. SURPRISINGLY LIGHT, AND WARM
FROM THE SUMMER SUNLIGHT. A GOLDEN
STREAK OF PYRITE RUNS ACROSS YOUR
GLOSSY BLACK CORE. WHEN ONE ROTATION
ENDS, A NEW CYCLE BEGINS. YOU NEED
TO LOSE SOMETHING IN ORDER TO GAIN
SOMETHING.**

AFTER OMEGA

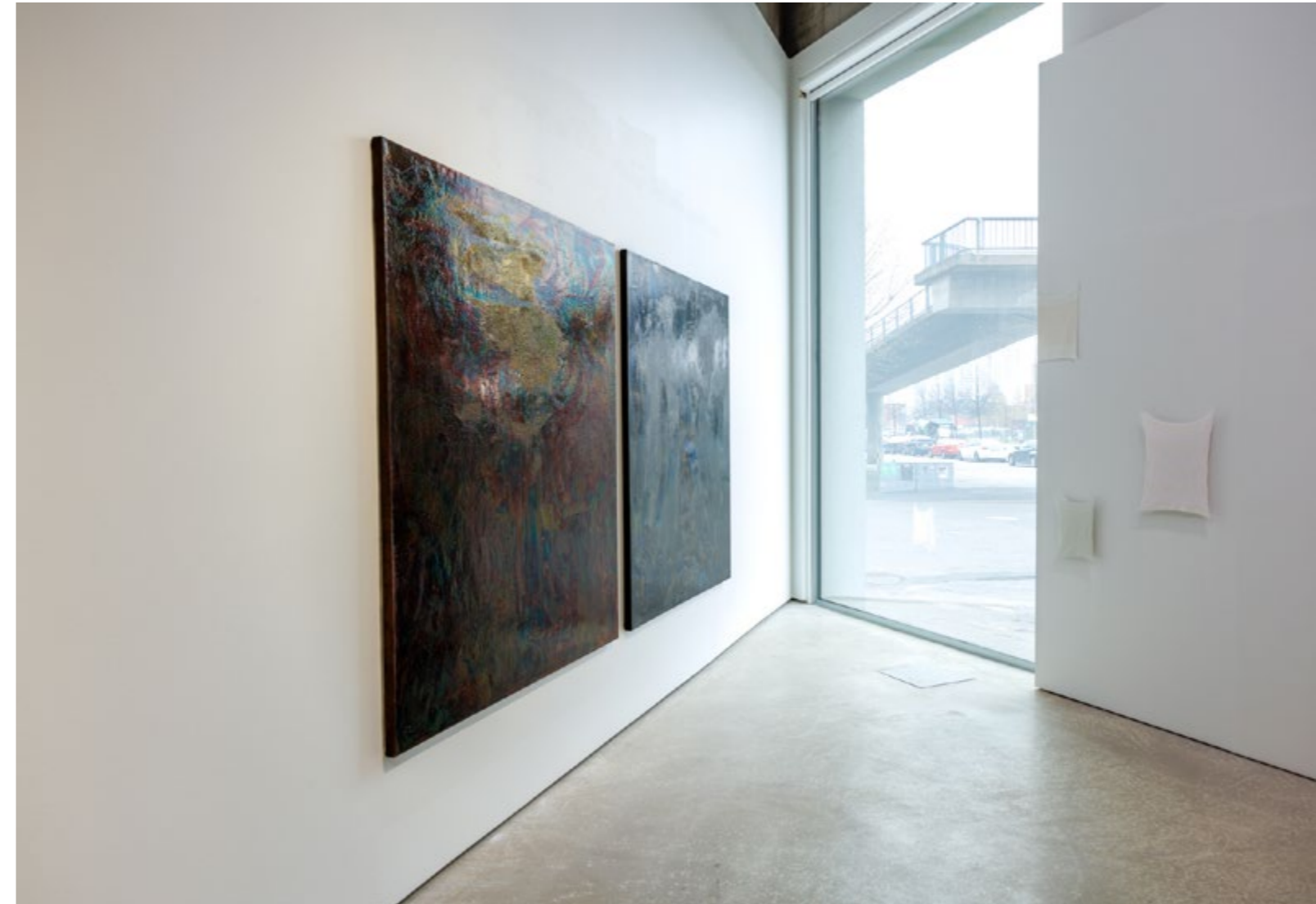
**“WHAT WE HAVE BEEN, OR NOW ARE,
WE SHALL NOT BE TOMORROW.”**

—OVID, METAMORPHOSES^[001]

[001] Ovid 2014.

UNDER THE LOOMING TOWERS of the now quiet Hanasaari power plant, I went to collect a bucket of the last coal. The city closed down the power plant in April. Its sister in Salmisaari, on the west side of town, will follow suit next year. The final coal power plants in Helsinki. These coals from across the street will be the beginning for my new body of work. I have begun grinding it up for pigment for the next structural colour paintings. I have found the metamorphosis I had been looking for, and now must learn to live in my new skin.

As a head off to the islands for a holiday, I wonder when and where we shall meet again – certain that the fossils aren't done whispering yet. From the windows of the summer cottage on Kaunissaari a view of the Baltic sea opens up. At night you can see a little gas flare shines atop Kilpilahti oil refinery.



A FEW FINAL WORDS

I wish to end with a few expressions of profound gratitude and adoration. Foremost toward my mentors Toni R. Toivonen and Pirkko Rantatorikka. There was chemistry and sparks in our conversations from the very first. I am deeply grateful that you were both so ready and willing to dive headlong into my madness and feed fuel to the flames. You saved me from pitfalls I didn't even know to look for, and in many uncertain moments of darkness before the dawn, the sharp clarity of your words was like ethanol to an arsonist. I know that long after this is all over, I will continue to find nourishment from these conversations. I owe you both a whisky sour, and more than I can put into words.

I owe much to the Painting department for moving whole courses into different rooms and freeing up space for Orpheus and I to cocoon. For the patience of students, evicted from ateliers I had poisoned with toxic fumes. Above all to Malla Tallgren and Jani Lempiäinen for letting a little pyromaniac into their material studies laboratory to pillage every bottle in the solvent cupboard. Few are lucky to find such kindred spirits in flames.

Thank you to the exhibition team at the Academy for working tirelessly to make the MFA Degree Show exhibition a burning success. To the Helen energy company for a pocketful of coal. My deepest thanks to the Anita Snellman Foundation for recognising these works with a grant. Your support feels incredibly significant and will help me to continue this work.

To Otto, no one can love you the way I do.

And finally to my fellow artist conspirators, thank you for burning the midnight oil with me. Fiat lux.



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IMAGES

Photography Otto and Laura Lowe . .

