

Co-evolutionary interconnection in deep time:

using expanded fields of drawing
to journey from a small kitchen
into the planetary sublime

TC Overson, BFA

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Abstract

Within the expanded field of drawing, my Master of Fine Art project explores this life-ridden planet's journey through time and space by investigating the role played by cataclysm and renewal in planetary deep time. Instead of binaries, this exegesis asks, can destruction and creation be seen as a single evolutionary force and, if so, how does an artist interpret such a force?

Using Earth's evolutionary development as its foundation, my project aims to suggest a visual story of the interconnectedness of matter through deep time, viewing a brief but impactful human presence in perspective amidst an unfolding epic. To reinforce this aim my practice materially apposes the domestic and the numinous.

Answers and inspiration are sought within three main research platforms: art history and practice, the natural sciences, and posthuman critical theory.

Incomprehensible reaches of deep time and the interconnectedness of matter within the cosmos, as revealed by recent science, inspire ineffable awe, a fundamental principle of the sublime. This is where I trace my art practice's field and history.

Produced in tandem with research, my artwork features domestic materials, directed chance and recycled elements using, as the Earth does, products from earlier experiments in revised ways.

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Life, though brief, is precious. Thank you Kaye and Carl for exemplifying this.

Thank you MrO, forever and ever missed.

Life goes on, moment to moment, and needs attention. Thank you KrS, lifehog.

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree at the National Art School or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the exegesis.

I also declare that the intellectual content and visual record of studio work of this exegesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

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Table of contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Declaration of Originality.....	iii
Table of contents	iv
List of Illustrations	v
Personal Prologue.....	1
Chapter 1: Deep Time, the Historical Sublime & Natural Science.....	5
Deep Time	5
The Historical Sublime.....	8
The Natural Sciences:.....	11
Not Broken	15
Fractals.....	15
Co-evolution	18
Chapter 2 – Posthumanism and the Contemporary Sublime.....	21
Interconnection	21
Change of Mind.....	24
Change of Heart.....	25
Change of Focus	26
The Contemporary Sublime.....	28
Chapter 3 – Chance and Process.....	34
Random Mutations	34
The Human Hand and the Microbe	36
Art in Process – Historical and Contemporary	37
Chapter 4 - Materiality and Matter.....	44
Materials	44
Tea, Eggs, Paper, Plaster	45
The Matter of Art.....	51
Still Not Broken.....	54
Conclusion.....	55
Epilogue.....	57
Bibliography	58

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: TC Overson, *apple seed (for krs)*, 2020, gesso, oil pastel on paper, 106x87cm.

Figure 2: Harlequin Theatre, 1973, *The Day of Orion*, by Martin Overson.

Figure 3: Eggshell, dust and tealeaves. Centre image: Shao, L. Mineralogical characteristics of airborne particles, *Earth Science*, 50, 953-959, 2007. First and last image: TC Overson.

Figure 4: TC Overson, *vita in morte*, 2019-2020, eggshell, fabric, pva, tea, acrylic on tissue paper, 75x60x55cm.

Figure 5: Katie Paterson, 2013, *Fossil Necklace*, 170 ancient fossils in 1 cm spheres on string.

Figure 6: TC Overson, *not broken triptych*, 2021, tea, eggshell, charcoal on rice paper, 93x63cm (x3).

Figure 7: Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809, oil on canvas, 110x171.5cm,

Figure 8: TC Overson, *dust*, 2020, tea, gesso, clay, pva, eggshell on plaster, 36x34 cm.

Figure 9: TC Overson, *extinction events*, 2020, paper, fabric, charcoal, tea, eggshell, gesso on plaster.

Figure 10: Hierarchy of the Sciences,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Scientific_Universe.png#/media/File:The_Scientific_Universe.png.

Figure 11: TC Overson, *givingbacktakingback 5 (detail)*, 2020, tea, gesso, ink on paper.

Figure 12: TC Overson, 2020, *untitled*, tea, gesso and oil pastel on paper, 106x87cm.

Figure 13: TC Overson, *mantle*, 2021, tea, eggshell, gesso, clay, plaster on rice paper, 93x63cm.

Figure 14: TC Overson, *oxygen 3*, tea, acrylic, clay on plaster, 25x19 cm.

Figure 15: Fractal bio-expansion into rock. 1. Katie Paterson, 2013, *Fossil Necklace*, ancient fossil, 1cm orb. 2. Grosch, Eugene and Robert Hazen. "Microbes, Mineral Evolution, and the Rise of Microcontinents." *Astrobiology*. 15. 2015. DOI:10.1089/ast.2015.1302.

Figure 16: TC Overson, *one*, 2021, tea, clay, gesso on plaster, 39x35cm.

Figure 17: TC Overson, *chatter*, 2021, gesso, tea on plaster, 37x35cm.

Figure 18: TC Overson, *drift*, 2020, paper, tea, charcoal, graphite on plaster, 55x45cm.

Figure 19: Robert Hazen and J Ferry, *Three Eras and Ten Stages of Earth's Mineral Evolution*, 2010, Mineral Evolution: Mineralogy in the Fourth Dimension, <https://doi.org/10.2113/gselements.6.1.9>.

Figure 20: TC Overson, *accretion*, 2021, tea, gesso, clay on plaster, 60x42.5 cm.

Figure 21: TC Overson, exploring installation ideas, 2021, 200x500cm.

Figure 22: TC Overson, *rise 1*, 2021, tea, eggshell, gesso, clay, paper on plaster, 42x28cm.

Figure 23: Richard Serra, *Out-of-Round X*, 1999, oilstick on paper, 201.9x200.7cm, MoMA, NY.

- Figure 24: TC Overson, 2020, *givingbacktakingback 9*, gesso, tea and ink on paper, 106x87cm.
- Figure 25: Xavier Cortada, *Astrid*, 2007, sea ice from Antarctica's Ross Sea, sediment from Antarctica's Dry Valleys and mixed media on paper, 22.8x30cm, <https://cortada.com/2007/ice-paintings/sea>.
- Figure 26: TC Overson, 2020, *makings 1 & 2*, plaster, resin, pigment, pva, clay on recycled plastic, 195x175cm & 175x170cm.
- Figure 27: TC Overson, 2020, *rockpool (detail)*, gesso, clay, plaster, watercolour, tea, rust, oil pastel, graphite on canvas, 180x140cm.
- Figure 28: TC Overson, 2021, photographed mould formed on tea stain over time, microbes on tea.
- Figure 29: TC Overson, *sfruttamento*, 2020, tea, gesso, clay on plaster, 51x44cm.
- Figure 30: Victor Hugo, *Silhouette de l'Ermitage*, 1855, stencil cut from creased paper and charcoal, 15x11cm, Bibliothetheque Nationale de France.
- Figure 31: Jean Arp, *According to the Laws of Chance*, 1933, sugar paper on plywood, 16x17.5cm, London: Tate Gallery.
- Figure 32: Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles (No 11)*, 1952, Enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas, 212.1x488.9cm, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia.
- Figure 33: Cameron Robbins, *Oenograf*, (detail) 2020-21, permanent marker on paper, 50x50cm, MCA.
- Figure 34: Cameron Robbins, *Oenograf*, 2020-21, fermenting grapes, demijohn, motors, bearings, stainless steel, aluminium, carbon fibre, plywood, paper, Nikko permanent marker pens, MCA.
- Figure 35: Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter*, 1991, Wood, metal, plastic, ceramic, paper, textile and wire, 400x500x500cm, London: Tate Gallery.
- Figure 36: TC Overson, horizontal art making Hoff Loft, July 2020.
- Figure 37: TC Overson, *theia*, (detail), 2021, Tea, gesso, clay on plaster, 43x41cm.
- Figure 38: TC Overson, 2021, *spore*, tea, eggshell, graphite on rice paper, 93x63cm.
- Figure 39: TC Overson, *air sac series*, 2021, tea, gesso, rice glue on eggshell.
- Figure 40: TC Overson, *progeny (for cq)*, 2021, tea, graphite, eggshell, clay, plaster on rice paper, 93x63cm.
- Figure 41: TC Overson, *metazoa*, 2021, tea and gesso on plaster, 60x30cm.
- Figure 42: Anselm Kiefer, *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe*, 1984-1986, emulsion, synthetic polymer paint, shellac, lead on photo document paper on linen canvas, 280x380x75cm. Sydney: AGNSW,
- Figure 43: Victor Hugo, *Taches*, 1875, ink wash and soot on paper, 44.3x55cm,
- Figure 44: TC Overson, *rise 3*, 2021, eggshell, tea, gesso on plaster, 38x34cm.
- Figure 45: Harlequin Theatre, 1982, *Doc Frail and the Lucky Lady*, showing the fourth wall, beyond the proscenium arch, wherein people breathed.
- Figure 46: TC Overson, *sparkie (for mro)*, 2020, gesso, tea on paper, 106x87cm.

“If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch,
you must first invent the universe.”

Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*, Episode 9



Figure 1: TC Overson, *apple seed (for krs)*, 2020, gesso, oil pastel on paper, 106x87cm.

Personal Prologue

*...a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam*¹

When I was eight my father raised our old Queenslander and built a theatre underneath, which he called *Harlequin*. The worlds that existed below the floorboards of my room were created from paper, masking tape, music and words, but were, for the duration of every play, as real as moonlight. The potential of illusion to give flight to the soul, I found, could not be overestimated.

My childhood was rich in stories of stars above and wonders of this small planet's body below. Mardi, my father, had a set of Time Life books in his library: *The Universe* was one, *The Earth* was another. They were full of pictures that a child could gaze into until sleep claimed further dreams. He bought a telescope when I was ten and, soon after, a microscope. Through one we'd look at the milky haze of Venus, through the other the hazy microbes in milk. The very big seemed not so different from the very small.

The Day of Orion, his script, was staged in 1973 at Harlequin Theatre. Of all life experiences this play had the deepest influence on me. Under my bedroom was a world where four survivors returned to the cave to learn to live again after planetary cataclysm.



Figure 2: Harlequin Theatre, 1973, *The Day of Orion*, by Martin Overson.

¹ Carl Sagan. *Pale Blue Dot*. New York: Random House, 1994.

Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* was televised at the same time. This series moved me profoundly. And still does. Its fusion of words, vision, science and music has never, I believe, been equalled in its genre.

Orion was restaged in 1984. For a year I played one of the four survivors. The set was still paper, the sand covering the stage had once been seashells, and the fourth wall, beyond the proscenium arch, was a blaze of light wherein people breathed.

Introduction

*One Voice in the Cosmic Fugue*²

This project evolved from an early affiliation with astronomy and geology into a concern for environmental issues and then into searching for ways to encapsulate a large amount of information into visions connecting art and natural science. Its overarching topic considers cycles of destruction and creation through deep time as expressions of a single evolutionary force.

My intention was to create a series of paper and plaster works whispering interconnection, suggesting Earth's development as it moves through space and time trailing, pro tempore, the small history of humanity with it. To do this I use diverse earth-friendly materials, random outcomes and a fractal line to integrate my hybrid works. Coming from a BFA in sculpture I incorporate the skills of a three dimensional discipline and the spontaneity of drawing within the space and scope of expanded fields.

Aiming to dissolve distinction between the numinous and the domestic, the microscopic and the macroscopic, I make scale indeterminate and use household, nonsynthetic and recycled materials. This is how it happened in the dark, emotive space of *Harlequin Theatre*, where realities were constructed only to be destroyed to create the next play. My goal is to identify scenes from an ongoing spectacle, allowing the audience a suspended pause within the chaos and order of unfolding time.

To describe this creative journey I address my research platform in the two chapters that follow and my creative platform, methods and materials, in chapters three and four. The foundational inspiration and breakfast materials this project is built around are explained in chapter one, which introduces deep time as a reality beyond emotional comprehension. It focuses on my research into the natural sciences, art/science interfaces, and the historical sublime as primary fields of enquiry and inspiration.

The deep impact that reading posthuman theory had on my way of thinking and my change of artistic focus is discussed in chapter two. I explain two words that science and posthumanism introduced me to, allowing me to express what I wanted to say: 'interconnection' and 'co-evolution'. Chapter two also follows the history of the

² *Cosmos: a personal voyage, Ultimate Edition DVD*, episode 2. Sagan, Carl, Ann Druyan, Steven Soter, et al. Studio City, CA: Cosmos Studios, 2000.

sublime into the current century and into the work of two influential contemporary artists.

The decision to incorporate chance and create processes limiting control of outcomes is the topic of chapter three. My resolve to circumscribe the human hand and incorporate random gifts and the assistance of various microbes is part of this chapter. As are the artists, historical and contemporary, who add validity to my choice.

Expanding on the traditional and non-traditional materials that became support, code and choir in this project, chapter four concludes my creative platform. Eggshell, plaster, tea and paper provide simplicity, limitation and a lighter aspect to the evolution of a weighty subject.

The potential of illusion to call forth heartfelt response is, for good and bad, a fathomless sublimity. This project is based solidly on research and truth yet, like moonlight, is purely reflective. How might an artist interpret a force that unites universal binaries?

Chapter 1: Deep Time, the Historical Sublime & Natural Science

*The Edge of Forever*³

Is there justification to believe creation and destruction are iterations of a single force? When I began my MFA in 2020 I saw them as distinct binaries, traditionally accepting creation as ‘good’ and destruction as ‘bad’. Aesthetically interpreting the cycles of both within planetary timescale was to be the focus of my studio practice, so investigating massive scales of time became the first part of my research platform. This led to reading current theory in natural sciences such as physics, geology, astronomy and biology, to become conversant with the evolution of one small planet in the cosmos. As my work developed I realised that its roots lay in the field of the sublime. In this chapter I share the evolution of aspects of my research platform that investigate time, science and the sublime, and feature some artwork informed by them.

Deep Time

Until later in life I was not aware that immense time dimensions had a name: deep time, two words that vibrated like a cello in my imagination. The term was first coined by writer John McPhee in 1981 who felt human language was incapable of describing a vastness that annihilates the scale of our lives.⁴ McPhee likened deep planetary time to the old measure of a yard, nose to fingertip. One swipe of a nail-file grazing the middle finger would, he said, slough away dust equating to humanity’s time on this planet.

Dust—debris of existence re-entering microcosmic dimensions, what Joseph Amato calls ‘the becoming and dissolution of things’—is as fascinating to me as star-clusters dusting the universe.⁵ Electrostatic ‘dust bunnies’ dispersing from the first generation of exploding stars formed the carbonous rock that became Earth.⁶ Dust—a lowly, multitudinous piece of divisible matter that I wipe from the top of my refrigerator—is a combination of my skin and the beginnings of time, incomprehensible dimensions of the infinite and the infinitesimal marking a moment in deep time within my kitchen. I wanted my MFA project to incorporate this micro/macro aspect of deep time. So how do I transfer the prosaic normality and the awe of the concept into a body of art?

³ *Cosmos*, Sagan, episode 10.

⁴ Stephen Jay Gould. *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2.

⁵ Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*. (London Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery MIT Press, 2015), 189.

⁶ Robert Hazen, D Papineau, W Bleeker, RT Downs, F Ferry, et al. “Mineral evolution.” *American Mineralogist* 93 (2008):1694. <https://hazen.carnegiescience.edu/research/mineral-evolution>.

During COVID-19 lockdown in the first year of my master's degree I read a book by David Wood called *Deep Time, Dark Times*. As a professor of philosophy he examines time as it relates to philosophic, posthuman and anthropogenic concerns. Despondency impedes progress, he states, so the bleak subject is approached in affirmative ways that examine how terrestrial responsibility and deep time consciousness can promote positive action.⁷

The first chapter ventures to impart deep time's immensity:

“The primal fire that followed the Big Bang was a billion trillion times hotter than the sun, and a trillion trillion trillion trillion times denser than rock. This is the very same universe in which we sit down for breakfast and drink coffee...”⁸

As I looked up from the page, eternity hurtled out my dusty kitchen window, over Sydney Harbour, past the ends of the solar system, never coming to an end. Tea and eggs, breakfast that morning, have since been linked in my mind to that moment of domesticity on the brink of the numinous. I use these substances in my work to symbolise that moment's connection to deep time, while bringing a more light-hearted aspect to what had every chance of becoming an austere project.

When I studied dust under a microscope I was fascinated to note it resembled broken eggshell or tea leaves. The fractal-like shapes of the substances seem to interlink in their dissipation and coalescence, a material relationship I use in my praxis.

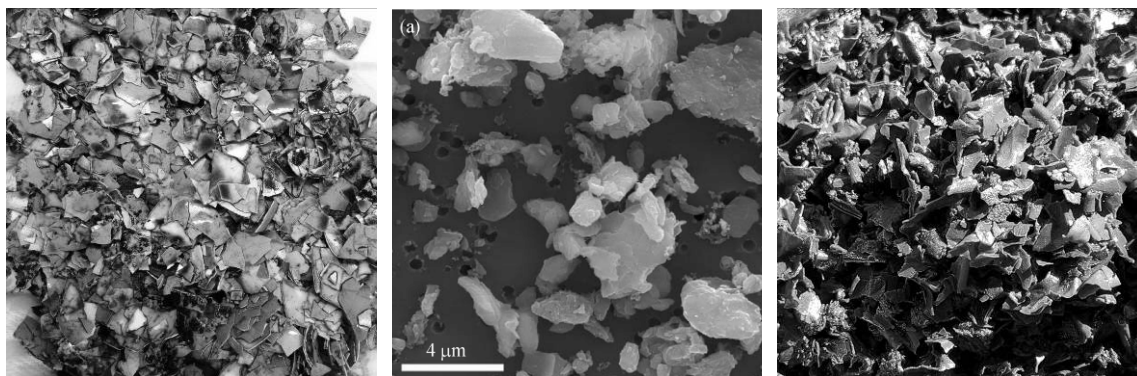


Figure 3: Eggshell, dust and tealeaves. Centre image: Shao, L. Mineralogical characteristics of airborne particles, *Earth Science*, 50, 953-959, 2007. First and last image: TC Overson.

It was only earlier this year that I realised why linking the domestic to deep time was personally significant to me. This is how it was in the impressionable years of my

⁷ David Wood, *Deep Time, Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 78.

⁸ Wood, 15.

childhood when all that separated household chores from the worlds that existed in the spotlights of the theatre below was a flight of stairs. During *The Day of Orion* the distance from kitchen to cosmos was, quite literally, sixteen steps. Life unfolded between two simultaneous realities that, in my family, connected the sublime and the ridiculous.



Figure 4: TC Overson, *vita in morte*, 2019-2020, eggshell, fabric, pva, tea, acrylic on tissue paper, 75x60x55cm.

Vita in Morte (Fig 4) is an early example of the sublime co-mingling with the ridiculous in my praxis. A tissue and muslin globe I made was gradually hand-moulded into a form suggesting a planet with a gravid bludge extending from its depths. The structural materiality of eggshell and pva with which I coated the globe gave the shape integrity and strength and indicated, symbolically, an object remade out of broken materials. The shell and muslin look alternately accumulative or topographical.

Artist Katie Paterson also explores a mundane/eternal apposition. Her piece, *Fossil Necklace*, directly corresponds to my project. Alluding to the evolution of life by stringing 3.7 billion years of mineral fossils together, it is a simply-strung rosary of deep time that interprets the co-development of Earth's biology and geology. It feeds into my topic and informs my work visually. My practice is richer for its inspiration.



Figure 5: Katie Paterson, 2013, *Fossil Necklace*, 170 ancient fossils in 1 cm spheres on string.

Paterson's work falls distinctly into the artistic field of the sublime, in which my work also finds its lineage. Oxford Reference describes the sublime as an "aesthetic category associated with ideas of awe, intensity, terror, and vastness emphasizing Man's relative insignificance in the face of Nature".⁹ "A controlled encounter with power that is beyond our control," is artist Julian Bell's definition.¹⁰

The Historical Sublime

The sublime has a history that precedes its name and description. Longinus wrote a manuscript in the first century CE defining sublime rhetoric wherein he mentions powerful emotions like terror or wonder that can 'allow one to stand outside oneself'.¹¹

⁹ Oxford Reference, London: Oxford University Press, 2021.

¹⁰ Julian Bell, "Contemporary Art and the Sublime" *Tate Research Publication* (January 2013): para 9.

¹¹ Philip Shaw. *The Sublime*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 26.

Closer to the idea of interconnectedness are the philosophies of Lucretius from 100 years BCE. Modern in concept, he presented a vast atomic universe and spoke about ‘the void beneath our feet’.¹²

Responding to Humanist and Enlightenment thought in the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant wrote major works describing the transcendental quality and emotional rupture of a sublime wherein the key motif is nature, but the ultimate aim was the aggrandisement of ‘man’s’ intellect.¹³ Though foundational to my understanding of the sublime these works arise from a hierarchical perspective of humanity, which I am trying to move beyond as I continue to read posthuman critical theory. Historically, philosopher Friedrich Schelling is more influential to my work with his monistic concept that nature is interlinked, arising from a single force that makes mind and matter, the organic and inorganic, inseparable.¹⁴



Figure 6: TC Overson, *not broken triptych*, 2021, tea, eggshell, charcoal on rice paper, 93x63cm (x3).

Schelling’s philosophy plus George Lemaitre’s concept of a cosmic egg exploding at the moment of creation—pejoratively nick-named ‘the big bang’—inspired my *not broken triptych*.¹⁵ Using no synthetic materials I hoped to give the impression of something as profound as the beginning of time and something as prosaic as boiled eggs with their discarded shells. The phenomenal structure and scope of the egg and its shell

¹² Shaw, 27.

¹³ Christopher Hitt, “Toward an Ecological Sublime,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (1999): 609.

¹⁴ Lynn Gamwell. *Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science, and the Spiritual*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002) 14, 15, 19.

¹⁵ Rupert Sheldrake, *Morphic Resonance: the Nature of Formative Causation* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 2009), xii.

is discussed in chapter four, but what a resilient and versatile material it can be as a drawing device and sculptural tool. It can create strength, line, texture and surface depending on its application. Layering it within rice paper strata allowed me to make the substrate part of the drawing, losing and finding the line between shards, making marks from shell clusters and forming fractals between undulating peaks and troughs. The ovoid shape was too dominant, however, and so I paused to rethink iconography.

Influenced by both rational Enlightenment and speculative Idealism, Romanticism revealed the sublime in dramatic panoramas of nature. Finding the sublime and spiritual in nature reassured a society unsettled by Napoleonic wars and nascent sciences.¹⁶ Lynn Gamwell calls Romanticism ‘the first creed of a secular age’ because it was an artistic movement affected by escalating industrialisation, reverence of nature and educated individualism in a transition from religious faith to empirical modernity.¹⁷



Figure 7: Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809, oil on canvas, 110x171.5cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

The vision of eternity contrasted with a fragile wisp of humanity in Caspar David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* is an image I return to often, not only to recapture the near proximity of the immeasurable but to appreciate the influence of science in its atmosphere. Meteorology, the same science that gave the world Chaos Theory in the 1970s, was just emerging in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ In 1802 the nature of clouds was studied and classified, establishing weather as a science. Clouds, under Friedrich’s brush, a few years later, left the picturesque and entered the sublime.

¹⁶ Ian Greig, “Quantum Romanticism”, in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Iain Boyd Whyte (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 109.

¹⁷ Gamwell, 10.

¹⁸ Gamwell, 17.

The Natural Sciences:

Passion for the wonders of planet Earth has been part of me since an early age when the magic of theatre and the journey through deep time into deep earth via Sagan's *Spaceship of the Imagination* combined to make art and science twin wings of my creative flights.¹⁹

In the 1970s when *Cosmos* was released it was a timely warning about climate change and the dangers inherent in technological society. Today I find it hard to watch without grief. The time has passed to stop environmental devastation. Rewinding is necessary and to do that humans need reassessed value systems.²⁰ In my case this new mindset arises from my awareness of science, culture and philosophy. Though no scientist, I feel the need to artistically engage with natural science and theories calling for rethinking who 'we' are and the impact 'we' can have on the immediate future of this deep time planetary organism. In the following section I focus on the scientific concerns underpinning my project.

The evolution of this planet was revealed to me in four highly influential books. Astrophysicist Carl Sagan's aforementioned *Cosmos*, was an early inspiration.²¹ Sagan interweaves the universe and planetary development with the evolution of human intelligence. Ahead of his time, he perceived the natural sciences as interconnected.

The second book was geologist Iain Stewart's *Earth: the Power of the Planet* in which he discusses Earth's initial formation due to its location in the solar system, its hunger for absorbing planetesimals into its bulk, its hot core pouring volcanic minerals onto a needy crust, and the resulting formation of atmosphere, water and ice.²² That one sentence spans billions of years.

Robert Macfarlane's *Underland* introduced me to the cavernous lower world of absolute darkness and the strata of time past. Macfarlane abseils, cave-dives and squeezes into antediluvian and industrial tunnels describing how deep time feels on the skin and registers in the mind.²³

¹⁹ Sagan, *Cosmos*, episode 1.

²⁰ Rosi Braidotti. *Posthuman Knowledge*. (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019), 135.

²¹ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980).

²² Iain Stewart and John Lynch, *Earth: The Power of the Planet* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2007) 31-218.

²³ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland*. (UK: Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Random House, 2019) 11-425.

Palaeontologist Peter Ward's *Under a Green Sky* also informed my work, especially in first year Masters, by describing mass extinction events and how science verified their causes, timescales and effects.²⁴ The plaster room became the site of evoking chaos when I decided to theme my fragments on the cataclysmic ends of geologic periods, each of them also linking to my kitchen, with tea and eggshell as material components.

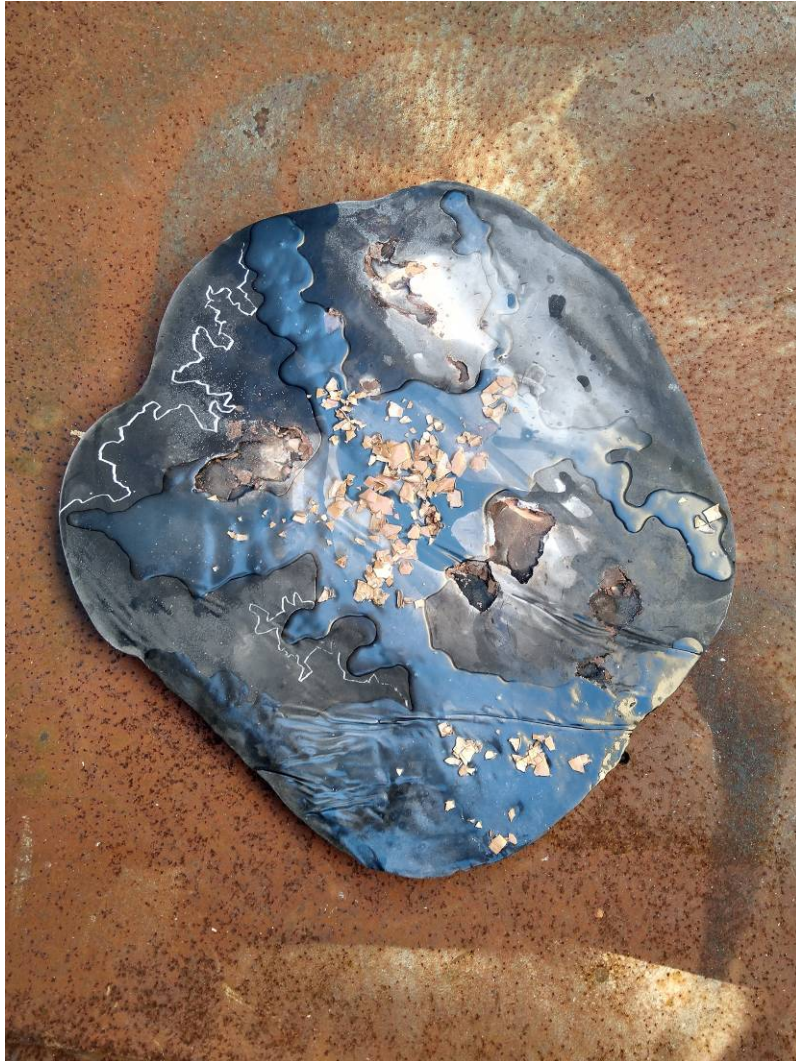


Figure 8: TC Overson, *dust*, 2020, tea, gesso, clay, pva, eggshell on plaster, 36x34 cm.

Extinction is as inevitable as emergence.²⁵ There have been five scientifically acknowledged mass events, each extinguishing more than 75% of life on earth.²⁶ The

²⁴ Peter D. Ward, *Under a Green Sky* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2007), 1-204.

²⁵ Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova. *Posthuman Glossary* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 150.

²⁶ Kevin Padian, "Measuring and Comparing Extinction Events: Reconsidering Diversity Crises and Concepts." *Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology*, 58, no 6 (2018): 1193. Initially there was also an event extinguishing 99% of life. This era—caused by photosynthesised oxygen build-up—is not acknowledged however because only microscopic anaerobic bacteria died. The five 'official' events, consecutively, were induced by glaciation, three massive volcanic episodes, with accompanying gasses, dust, global warming and continental drift, and finally—ending dinosaur domination—asteroid impact.

current era, generated by human exploitation, is gaining a place as the sixth acknowledged event.²⁷ This story of destruction and creation was the focus of my research and studio output in MFA1.



Figure 9: TC Overson, *extinction events*, 2020, paper, fabric, charcoal, tea, eggshell, gesso on plaster.

As I progressed with this work I continued to investigate research concerning the interconnectedness of the natural sciences of physics, chemistry, biology, geology and astronomy. Figure ten illustrates the *Hierarchy of the Sciences*. The concept behind the diagram, proposed by Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century, is revised as the fields evolve. The current iteration contrasts dimensions relating to natural sciences from the quantum to the astronomical. It is within this micro/macro range that my project locates interconnecting visual references.

²⁷ Ursula K. Heise, "Extinction," in *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, eds. Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow. (NYU Press, 2016), 119.

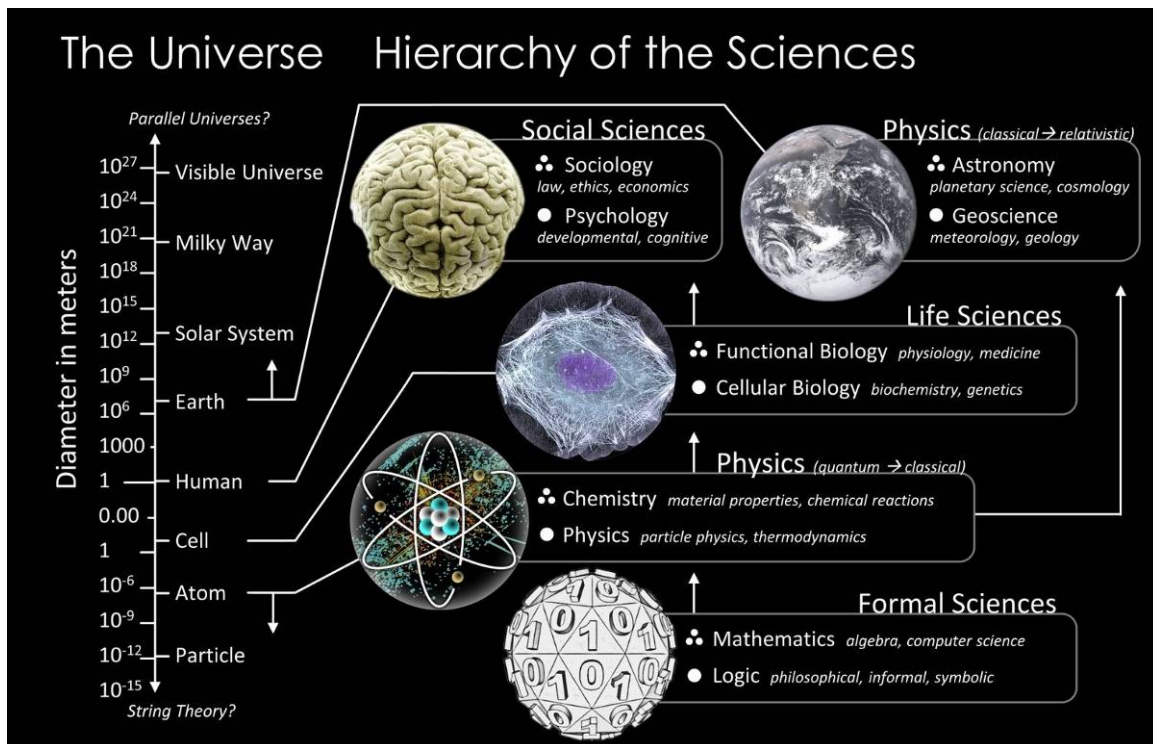


Figure 10: Hierarchy of the Sciences,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Scientific_Universe.png#/media/File:The_Scientific_Universe.png.

In choosing to appose the domestic with the numinous, scale became an issue. No matter how big a work, it is not big enough. And no matter how small, it will never be small enough. My ideas needed to be indicated through materiality, process and equivocal imagery to leave interpretation of the work open-ended. These aspects are investigated in chapters three and four.

Microcosm-macrocosm possibilities relating to the project became clearer as I related my research to my studio practice. Science is abandoning long-held assumptions that Laws of Nature are “eternal and immutable”, as Francis Bacon claimed in 1620.²⁸ Evidence of energy-matter bonds between micro/macro states continues to grow as astronomers delve into cosmic evolution, rethinking the process as a coaction of implicit energy, self-organisation and competitive creativity.²⁹ Microbiologists uncover mounting evidence of the omnipresent activity and sheer compound mass of the most minuscule lifeforms.³⁰ Quantum physicists study smaller scales again, particles making up matter, trying to define the multidimensional field-like fractal actions they display across time and space.³¹ And posthumanists, as discussed in chapter two, take a

²⁸ Sheldrake, xi.

²⁹ Sheldrake, 262.

³⁰ Myra J Hird, “Microontologies of Art, Design, and Architecture.” *Drain Magazine*, 2020. <http://drainmag.com/microontologies-of-art-design-and-architecture/>.

³¹ Greig, “Quantum Romanticism,” 110.

holarchic view, seeing human/non-human, micro/macro planes as expressions of a single unifying factor.³²

Not Broken

The concept of everything being ‘not broken’ has been the thematic foundation of my work for over a decade. It began when writing a novel about homelessness, the location of which was a café in Woolloomooloo. I was studying a visual arts diploma in ceramics at the same time so I decided to make a dinner set for a location where broken humans discover they are not broken, just in a place of transition where help and courage might change outcomes. On the base of the dinnerware I carved ‘not broken’. The idea has broadened in my thoughts since, becoming foundational in my work. My research set out to answer a question: can destruction and creation be seen as a single force/process? Investigations into time, physics, geo/biology and astronomy indicate that, in evolutionary terms, this is exactly what creation and destruction are: a single self-propelling force wherein nothing is broken, merely in a state of ongoing transition.

Fractals

Watercolour was not part of my practice until last year. I discovered many things from using it, the most important being its ability to float and form itself in water. The zigzag cracks I had etched into my ‘not broken’ ceramics self-formed in the watercolours and later in the works I poured onto paper. Fractals, such self-replicating patterns are called. Throughout nature and the universe certain lines and shapes repeat themselves in multi-scale feedback loops.³³ Fractal, in Latin, means broken. Science, however, has found that fractals are not broken. They are structures with recurring patterns in progressive dimensions that expand in space and time, evolving simplicity into complexity.³⁴

Fractals were discovered and named by Benoit Mandelbrot in 1975. Like dust, they are an ever-moving information-carrying part of integration and disintegration; tracks of dynamical activity creating order from chaos.³⁵ This phenomenon, nonequilibrium thermodynamics, has been investigated for only a few decades yet has the potential to

³² Braidotti, *Posthuman Glossary*, 111.

³³ John Briggs, *Fractals: Patterns of Chaos: Discovering a New Aesthetic of Art, Science, and Nature*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, 21-25.

³⁴ Alexei Kurakin, “The self-organizing fractal theory as a universal discovery method: the phenomenon of life,” *Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling* 8, 4 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1742-4682-8-4>.

³⁵ Kurakin, 2.

reconcile disparate areas of scientific and philosophic research.³⁶ Many scientists seeking the elusive Grand Unifying Theory consider fractals a key.³⁷



Figure 11: TC Overson, *givingbacktakingback 5* (detail), 2020, tea, gesso, ink on paper.

During MFA1 I decided to incorporate the same zigzag pattern I observed in lightning, veins, topography and cracked eggshell through my artwork to symbolise universal interconnectedness.

³⁶ Kurakin, 48.

³⁷ Stephen Ornes. "How nonequilibrium thermodynamics speaks to the mystery of life." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Jan 2017, 114 (3) 423-424; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1620001114.



Figure 12: TC Overson, 2020, *untitled*, tea, gesso and oil pastel on paper, 106x87cm.

That year I drew or carved this line (Fig 12). In second year I have utilised techniques to encourage the lines to form themselves by ‘chance’ as they do in nature (Fig 11 and 13).



Figure 13: TC Overson, *mantle*, 2021, tea, eggshell, gesso, clay, plaster on rice paper, 93x63cm.

Co-evolution

Robert Hazen's work became important in this year's conceptual aims because his research runs parallel to posthuman theory. His work challenges the institutional segregation of geology and biology by advocating geospheric and biospheric co-evolution.³⁸ Cross-pollination and synthesis of information, he argues, induces wisdom greater than the sum of individual parts.

It is common to understand that life needs minerals but less common to know that rocks and minerals need life to form more complex varieties. An encapsulation of Hazen's work on evolution would be: in the 13.8 billion years since the big bang, gasses became minerals, became rock, became life, became more minerals, became more life.³⁹ A perfect deep time cycle of 'becoming' that extends back and forth, as well as to both sides of time.⁴⁰ Jane Bennett endorses this, stating that minerals are evolutionary movers and shakers while humans, for all their self-worth, are a mineral product.⁴¹ Hazen nominates the Great Oxygenation Event as the single most critical period in Earth's evolution because it enabled aerobic life to flourish and therefore mineral species to diversify in continuous feedback loops.⁴²

The Great Oxygenation Event was the first plaster fragment era in my MFA1 work. Triggering the wonder of advanced life on a primordial globe, oxygen extinguished 99% of simple anaerobic microbial life.⁴³ Holes pierce my plaster fragments indicating photosynthesised gas bubbling from the world's oceans (Fig 14). I hedged my 'natural' rule to achieve the blue tone by mixing a dab of acrylic Payne's Grey into tea stain. Later I experimented with blue mineral pigment in tea to achieve a suitable grey/blue and to remain true to the materiality of the project. I miss the ease and precise shade of Payne's Grey, however I prefer the sedimentary quality of natural pigments.

³⁸ Hazen, Robert M. "Mineral Fodder," *Aeon*, (June 24, 2014): 1. <https://aeon.co/essays/how-life-made-the-earth-into-a-cosmic-marvel>. Dr Hazen is a much-published geologist, mineralogist and director of the interdisciplinary Deep Carbon Observatory at the Carnegie Institute.

³⁹ Robert Hazen, *Symphony in C: Carbon and the Evolution of (Almost) Everything* (London: William Collins, 2019), 5-249.

⁴⁰ Hazen, "Mineral Fodder", 1.

⁴¹ Jane Bennett. "Vibrant Matter." *CSPA Quarterly*, no. 14 (2016): 9.

⁴² Hazen, "Mineral Fodder", 3.

⁴³ Michael Greshko, "What are mass extinctions and what causes them?" *National Geographic*, (Sept 26, 2019).



Figure 14: TC Overson, *oxygen 3*, tea, acrylic, clay on plaster, 25x19 cm.

Microbes adapt to consume almost anything, even toxic waste.⁴⁴ I see them as living fractals making order from chaos. Recently, some evolved that digest oil spills and plastics.⁴⁵ Scientists are still not sure whether microbes spontaneously arose in hot deep sea vents of complex chemicals and minerals, from lightning strikes, or if they arrived on earth via one of the many meteors pelting early earth, or perhaps all three or more.⁴⁶

Melting and pressure certainly led to new types of rock, but microscopic creatures gave rise to thousands more. They insinuate themselves via fractal replication and carry air

⁴⁴ Rosi Braidotti, Simone Bignall and MJ Hird. *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*. (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 265-268.

⁴⁵ Damian Carrington. "Scientists accidentally create mutant enzyme that eats plastic bottles." *The Guardian*, (April 17, 2018). <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/apr/16/scientists-accidentally-create-mutant-enzyme-that-eats-plastic-bottles>.

⁴⁶ Robert Hazen, *Genesis: The Scientific Quest for Life's Origin*. (Washington: Joseph Henry Press, 2005), 127.

and water into the heart of stone, breaking it down and altering its chemistry.⁴⁷ This weathering process gradually formed clay and soil which allowed land plants to evolve. “This is truly the ‘age of bacteria,’” Stephen Jay Gould proclaims. “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.”⁴⁸ Tracks of these evolutionary processes can be observed in both Patterson’s *Fossil Necklace* and Hazen’s diagram if studied closely; images that inspire my practice and the cosmic/geo/bio unity I portray in my work.

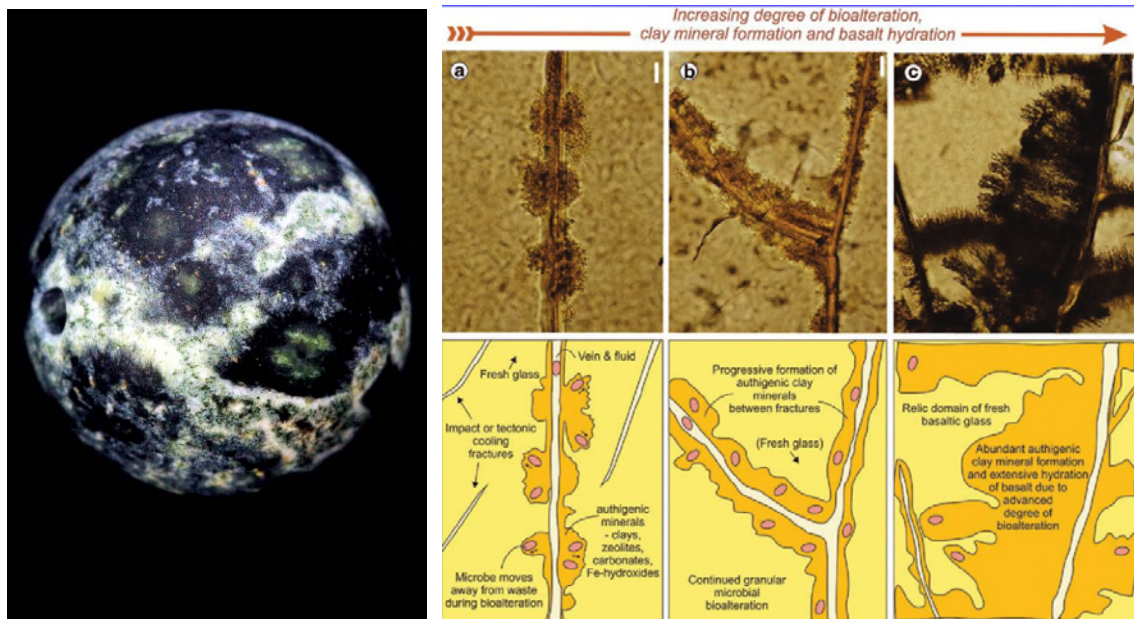


Figure 15: Fractal bio-expansion into rock. 1. Katie Paterson, 2013, *Fossil Necklace*, ancient fossil, 1cm orb. 2. Grosch, Eugene and Robert Hazen. “Microbes, Mineral Evolution, and the Rise of Microcontinents.” *Astrobiology*. 15. 2015. DOI:10.1089/ast.2015.1302.

To grasp the nature of an elemental evolutionary force that does not discern between cataclysm and creation, I needed to discover the science and history backing the concept and then allow the research to inform my artwork. This chapter has followed the most pertinent paths of this research. McPhee’s explanation of deep time led me to the recognition of dust as an ideal example of matter coalescing and dispersing at the same time. A sentence from Wood’s *Deep Time Dark Times* was the lightning bolt that connected the vital materialism of breakfast to my concept. And lightning bolts further connected a zigzag fractal line into my drawing as a symbol of interconnection in a monistic universe. This was the genesis of my project; the theory, processes and materials that extended my vision and studio practice are investigated in following chapters.

⁴⁷ Eugene Grosch and Robert Hazen. “Microbes, Mineral Evolution, and the Rise of Microcontinents- Origin and Coevolution of Life with Early Earth.” *Astrobiology*. 15. (2015). DOI:10.1089/ast.2015.1302.

⁴⁸ Stephen Jay Gould. *The Richness of Life*. (NY:W.W. Norton, 2006), 214.

Chapter 2 – Posthumanism and the Contemporary Sublime

*Our cousins, the trees*⁴⁹

Posthumanist theory exerts profound influence upon the values underpinning my studio praxis. In *A Critical History of Postmodernism* Andy Miah points out different strands encompassed by posthuman theory.⁵⁰ Rosi Braidotti calls it a ‘shareable workspace’.⁵¹ Posthumanism encompasses three main divisions: science and technology, anti-humanism, and moral philosophy.⁵² Each area gives weight to their prevailing platform such as bio-science integration, a technological future depleted of carbon-based intelligence, or instigating a culture by which species and technology inter-relate for the betterment of the planet. The theories influencing my work arise from the third area and advocate inclusive practices integrating human and non-human evolutionary cofactors. They arise from feminist and post-colonial theories denouncing anthropocentric attitudes, exemplified initially in Donna Haraway’s observations and more recently in Rosi Braidotti’s contributions to posthuman critical theory.⁵³ This strand is not nihilistic or misanthropic; it rationalises and acknowledges relational interdependence with non-human and planetary forces in future operational values.⁵⁴

Interconnection

The term ‘interconnectedness’, in academic terms at least, was new to me when I started masters research. I kept coming across it in scientific articles and later in posthuman critical theory. It perfectly described my micro-macro approach to deep time evolution. It also caused me to question the validity of the dualism in the original title of my research paper: *Cycles of Creation and Destruction in Deep Time*.

Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and MJ Hird engross me with their concept of equalised species hierarchy. Species are broadly conceived in their view to include minerals, nature, land masses, technology, universal forces and microbes as well as complex lifeforms.⁵⁵ For instance Hird, with reference to Hazen, writes of the 5000 mineral species that arose on earth as oxygen filtered into the atmosphere, allowing minerals to

⁴⁹ *Cosmos*, Sagan, episode 2.

⁵⁰ Andy Miah, “A Critical History of Posthumanism,” *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity* (January 2009): 19-23.

⁵¹ Braidotti, *Posthuman Glossary*, 342.

⁵² Godiva Reisenbichler. “Revising the Human Subject: From Human to Posthuman-Centered Design.” 1.

⁵³ Rosi Braidotti and Simone Bignall, *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*. (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 2.

⁵⁴ Rosi Braidotti. *Posthuman Knowledge*. (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019), 40.

⁵⁵ Braidotti, *Posthuman Glossary*, 1-13.

‘chatter’ with microbial agents, each evolving the other into more complex orders.⁵⁶ “The adjectives ‘living’ and ‘nonliving,’” bioscientist Alexei Kurakin states, “refer only to a difference in the organisational state of energy/matter.”⁵⁷ His opinion, like Hazen’s, is that this paradigm has the potential to unite many disciplines under a single conceptual framework.⁵⁸



Figure 16: TC Overson, *one*, 2021, tea, clay, gesso on plaster, 39x35cm.

Monism, the belief that matter and space are one, is the ancient philosophy foundational to many scientific and posthuman theories discussed in this exegesis.⁵⁹ Proponents such as Spinoza, Schelling and Deleuze give historical heft to current posthuman thought based on concepts of interconnection and oneness.⁶⁰ Building upon this foundation, critical posthuman theory condemns entrenched humanism, understood as the justification of privilege seeking to advance capitalist and neo-liberal conversion of

⁵⁶ Braidotti and Bignall, *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*, 276-277.

⁵⁷ Kurakin, “The self-organizing fractal theory as a universal discovery method,” Summary, Section 1.

⁵⁸ Kurakin, opening abstract.

⁵⁹ Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 56.

⁶⁰ Braidotti, *Posthuman Ecologies*, 1-14.

global ecosystems into profit and power mechanisms.⁶¹ In posthumanist ethos ‘hierarchy’ and humanist ‘Man’ are transformed into ‘monism’ and the historically marginalised ‘Other’. It has potential to convert what Wood calls the emotions of the Anthropocene—anger, resentment, worry, despondency and resignation—into what Haraway calls ‘response-ability’.⁶² This rings true with me as I have never seen anything of worth come from despondency.

In February this year Sir David Attenborough addressed the United Nations Security Council. “We have left the stable and secure climatic period that gave birth to our civilisations,” he said.⁶³ The truth of this is harrowing for society and life as we know it and Attenborough’s acceptance of the imminent future chilled me. Yet within deep time the planet has been through devastation on multiple occasions, spontaneously re-evolving. James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis stated this in 1972.⁶⁴

As a self-aware animal that has rapidly precipitated environmental carnage well before planetary cycles would have reworked the surface world, humans might search for ways to make reparations. Posthumanist critical theory is a philosophy motivating this by rethinking ethics on an immanent material basis.⁶⁵ To achieve ethical balance requires altering thought processes via interdisciplinary sharing, restructuring educational norms and using creativity to reveal interconnections between all matter in a form that extends the discourse of non-in-trans-meta-posthuman realities.⁶⁶

Posthuman critical theory seeks unification into a vast overarching concept, pitting ethics, responsibility and education against the human constructs of cognitive capitalism and consumerism. In parallel, artistic disciplines such as drawing, painting and sculpture are also forming non-hierarchical hybrids within expanded fields.⁶⁷ Further, in similar ways, many scientists foresee natural sciences unifying into one vast

⁶¹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 7.

⁶² Wood, 78.

⁶³ James Hitchings-Hales and David Attenborough. “‘It’s Too Late’: 5 Key Things to Know from David Attenborough’s UN Climate Change Speech.” *Global Citizen*, Feb 24, 2021. [https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/david-attenborough-climate-change-unsc-cop26/?utm_source=social_facebook&utm_medium=Global%20Citizen%20\(AU\)&utm_campaign=general&utm_content=traffic&fbclid=IwAR1bNVuJ_zrx_vod0VV7ttBf-8VZ2V3QNeKMjMTLaMM7yLruudEXyIIIYWA](https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/david-attenborough-climate-change-unsc-cop26/?utm_source=social_facebook&utm_medium=Global%20Citizen%20(AU)&utm_campaign=general&utm_content=traffic&fbclid=IwAR1bNVuJ_zrx_vod0VV7ttBf-8VZ2V3QNeKMjMTLaMM7yLruudEXyIIIYWA).

⁶⁴ T Lenton. *Encyclopedia of Atmospheric Sciences: Gaia Hypothesis*, (Seattle: Academic Press, 2003), 815. Lovelock concluded that, at Earth’s present stage, human life regulates planetary atmosphere.

⁶⁵ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 81.

⁶⁶ Rosi Braidotti. “A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (November 2019): 33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486>.

⁶⁷ Cornelia Butler and Catherine De Zegher. *On Line: Drawing through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 48.

overarching whole, pitting recent interdisciplinary research against myopic factions of the past. The proximity of discovering a grand unifying theory drives physicists. Merging seems to be emerging everywhere. Scientists, artists and theorists espouse inter-disciplinary practices, inter-species recognition and inter-related broad perspectives. Such ideas underpin my studio output and, as discussed in chapter four, find expression in my choice of materials and their treatment.

Change of Mind

As removed as they seem from a flash-point in a childhood theatre, posthuman theories of interconnectedness became the next act of my art production. Theoretic tendrils of positivity and motivation woven into the drama of our times give me hope, and hope dreams better futures.⁶⁸ Braidotti argues that the future as an object of desire motivates action; I wholeheartedly agree.⁶⁹ I realised afresh that ‘the one thing you have absolute control over is your attitude’.⁷⁰ Therefore I purposely excluded melancholy, solastalgia and cynicism from my studio work this year in accordance with the bigger picture presented by current science and posthuman theory. This has not led to happier art—in fact my recent work is more sombre—but indicates the beyond-human vision embraced.

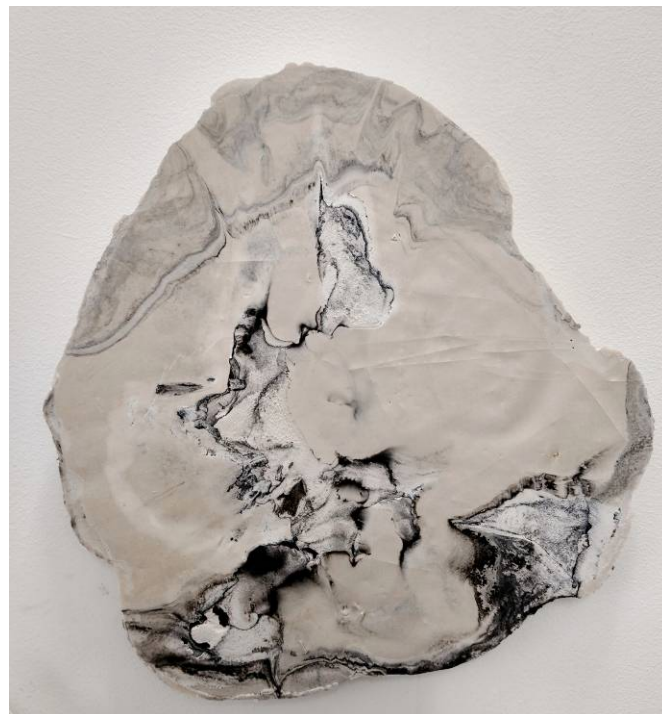


Figure 17: TC Overson, *chatter*, 2021, gesso, tea on plaster, 37x35cm.

⁶⁸ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 192.

⁶⁹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 192.

⁷⁰ Dave Clark and David Soames. “The Theme from Time” Narrated by Laurence Olivier. Capitol Records, 1986. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWXAiLy786A>.

Change of Heart

Placing humans in the context of deep time—my initial goal in this MFA—had a lot of anger behind it. The ‘who do we think we are?’ sentiment was compounded in early 2020 when I read *Sapiens* by Yuval Noah Harari. Harari not only reviews the emergence and development of the human, he outlines how the species has changed its own sense of reality.⁷¹ It confirmed my desire to make my project not about humans, but about the planet, its versatility and age.

In MFA1 I appropriated mass extinction events within evolution as inspiration; which, I later realised, applied a construct from the Enlightenment, prioritising mankind’s rise to the pinnacle of the humancentric pyramid. Comprehending this, I reworked the earlier foundational story of mass extinction and the evolution of life so it became Earth’s story of interconnection and development within cosmos, geosphere and biosphere.

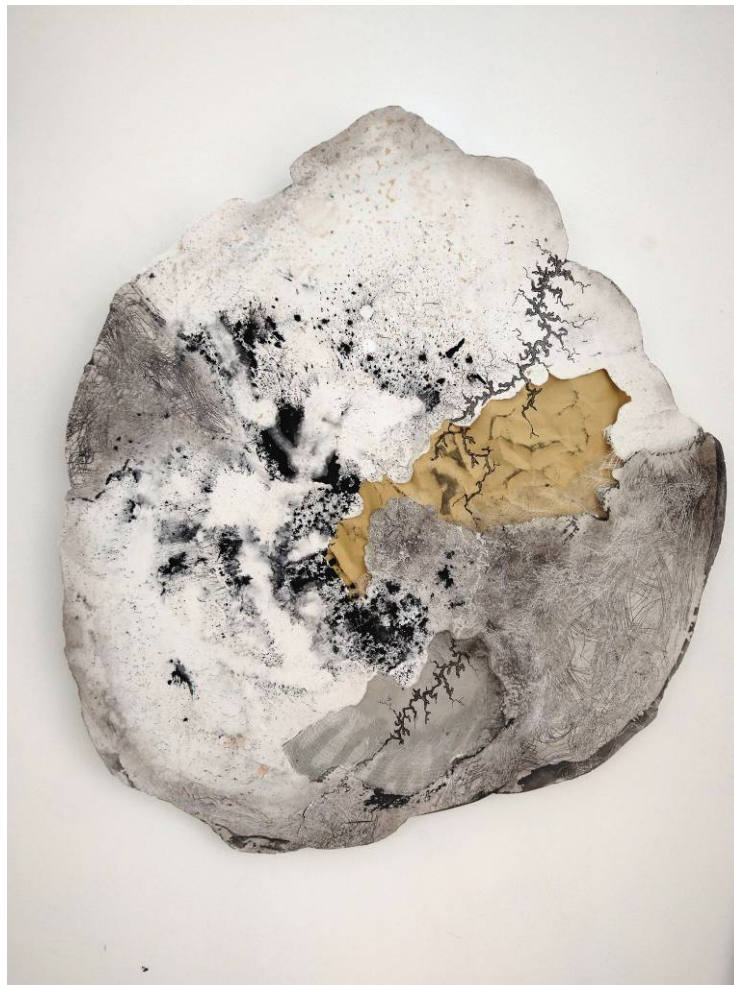


Figure 18: TC Overson, *drift*, 2020, paper, tea, charcoal, graphite on plaster, 55x45cm.

⁷¹ Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens* (London: Penguin Random House, 2011).

The way to put humans ‘in their place’ in deep time, I thought, was by comparing timescale and impact. In the studio I put this approach into practice in subtle yet, I felt, important ways as my second year approached. Giving priority to the concept of ‘oneness’ I retitled my exegesis, *Co-evolutionary Interconnection in Deep Time*.

Change of Focus

In 2008, Robert Hazen et al divided mineral evolution into 10 stages.⁷² Later he and geologist John Ferry classified these stages into three geospheric eras (Fig 19). Ga denotes ‘giga-annum’, indicating a billion years, making 4.56Ga 4,560,000,000 years: Earth’s birthday, give or take.

Era/Stage	Age (Ga)	Cumulative no. of species
Prenebulular “Ur-Minerals”	>4.6	12
Era of Planetary Accretion (>4.55 Ga)		
1. Primary chondrite minerals	>4.56 Ga	60
2. Achondrite and planetesimal alteration	>4.56 to 4.55 Ga	250
Era of Crust and Mantle Reworking (4.55 to 2.5 Ga)		
3. Igneous rock evolution	4.55 to 4.0 Ga	350 to 500*
4. Granite and pegmatite formation	4.0 to 3.5 Ga	1000
5. Plate tectonics	>3.0 Ga	1500
Era of Biologically Mediated Mineralogy (>2.5 Ga to Present)		
6. Anoxic biological world	3.9 to 2.5 Ga	1500
7. Great Oxidation Event	2.5 to 1.9 Ga	>4000
8. Intermediate ocean	1.9 to 1.0 Ga	>4000
9. Snowball Earth events	1.0 to 0.542 Ga	>4000
10. Phanerozoic era of biomineralization	0.542 Ga to present	4400+

Figure 19: Robert Hazen and J Ferry, *Three Eras and Ten Stages of Earth’s Mineral Evolution*, 2010, Mineral Evolution: Mineralogy in the Fourth Dimension, <https://doi.org/10.2113/gselements.6.1.9>.

Then in 2015 the Anthropocene Working Group also delineated three main stages in the evolution of Earth’s biosphere.⁷³ To stimulate the vision and narrative of my MFA2 studio work I combined the above eras of geospheric and biospheric evolution into a background story of six interconnecting eras of deep time straddled by a single self-organising force. This was not with the expectation that viewers should understand the science behind the work, but to induce scope, inspiration and fact into the art I create.

⁷² Robert Hazen, D Papineau, W Bleeker, RT Downs, F Ferry, T McCoy, D Sverjensky, H Yang. “Mineral evolution.” *American Mineralogist* 93 (2008):1693-1720. <https://hazen.carnegiescience.edu/research/mineral-evolution>.

⁷³ Braidotti and Bignall, *Posthuman Ecologies: Complexity and Process after Deleuze*. Chapter 14, *Lines of Shite*, Myra J Hird and Kathryn Yusoff, 270.

Mark Williams of the Anthropocene Working Group delineates the three major eras of biological planetary development as: 1. the microbial, 3.5-0.65Ga, 2. the metazoan, 0.65Ga to recent centuries, and 3. the global homogenisation stage, post Industrial Revolution.



Figure 20: TC Overson, *accretion*, 2021, tea, gesso, clay on plaster, 60x42.5 cm.

In terms of scale, materiality and process my work lends itself to open interpretation, suggesting the intergalactic, planetary or microscopic as states of a single expression of evolution. My series of rock-like plaster fragments share these qualities. *Accretion*, (Fig 20) is an example of Hazen’s first era of planetary development when tiny circular chondrites clumped together, due to gravitational and centrifugal forces, to form Earth’s earliest body.⁷⁴ Yet it also evokes bacterial multiplication. *Chatter* (Fig 17), is indicative of the third era, microbial mediation, when early life entered rock, initiating creative evolutionary feedback loops. Yet it also suggests cosmic visions. Movement of tectonic plates—the second era, or era of crust and mantle reworking—is what *drift* (Fig 18) is based on. This change of focus still anchors my work to the sublime.

⁷⁴ Hazen et al. “Mineral evolution.” *American Mineralogist* 93 (2008): 1693.

The Contemporary Sublime

The sublime fell out of fashion in the twentieth century after suffering paltry corruptions and political exploitation. When it returned—due in large part to the writings of Lyotard in the late 1970s espousing a sublime art that presented the unrepresentable—transcendence and nature were replaced by technology, consumerism and terror as sources of awe.⁷⁵ Julian Bell claims that showmanship is part of contemporary renditions of the sublime.⁷⁶ In his opinion, super-sized art often equates with awe in what he terms the ‘kennelled sublime’ where the ‘caging’ of monsters in contemporary spaces overpowers the viewer in mental shock rather than transcendent imagination.⁷⁷ Anthropogenic art is often concerned with loss or, conversely, crushing abundance. Both visions induced by the excesses of consumerist capitalism. The art emerging from it tends to produce shock coupled with a sense of lethargy that Robert Macfarlane calls ‘the stuplime’.⁷⁸ It is a form of desensitisation by repetition or sheer size; an aesthetic strategy to stupefy.⁷⁹ In my work I ask details and materials to speak quietly. Exhibited, it is intended to be as defined as a single piece or as extensive as a chaotic mass.



Figure 21: TC Overson, exploring installation ideas, 2021, 200x500cm.

⁷⁵ Paul Crowther, *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*. (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 71.

⁷⁶ Julian Bell, “Contemporary Art and the Sublime”, *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, (January 2013): 3. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/julian-bell-contemporary-art-and-the-sublime-r1108499>.

⁷⁷ Bell, 12.

⁷⁸ Robert Macfarlane. “Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet for ever.” *The Guardian*, (April 1, 2016): 4. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/01/generation-anthropocene-altered-planet-for-ever>.

⁷⁹ Sianne Ngai. “Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics.” *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2. (2000): section 10. doi:10.1353/pmc.2000.0013. <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.100/10.2ngai.txt>.

Artists who inform my work wade into the deep waters of the sublime and fall into three categories: those who embrace materiality, discussed in chapter four; those who play with random eventualities, analysed in the next chapter; and those who interpret the unrepresentable, initially illustrated with Patterson’s science-inspired work and explored below in two artists informing my practice in light of posthuman theory and science.

Primarily considered a sculptor, it is Richard Serra’s drawings that excite me. Unlike many artists he does not use drawing as a preliminary step, but rather to distil his completed sculptures into a different aesthetic language.⁸⁰ Black is the sole colour he draws with because he believes only black has the weight and intensity to act as a property within itself.⁸¹ Space, to Serra, is a material, and weight, an emotion.⁸² In this project I have come to my own understanding of these aspects. Space is relative and I find artwork need not have grand scale or solitude to instil an impression of density.

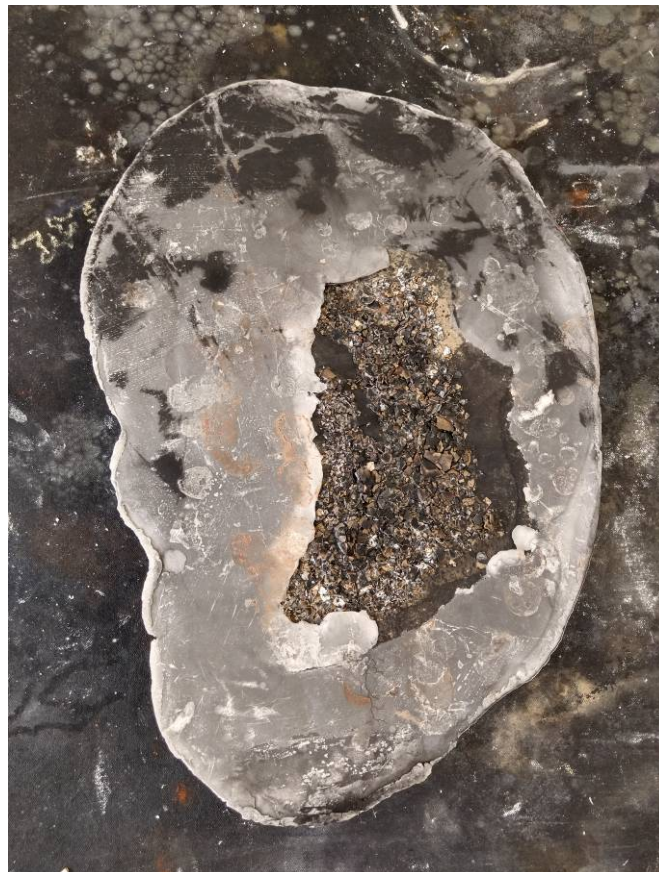


Figure 22: TC Overson, *rise I*, 2021, tea, eggshell, gesso, clay, paper on plaster, 42x28cm.

⁸⁰ Richard Serra, Bernice Rose, Michelle White, et al. *Richard Serra, Drawing: A Retrospective*. (Houston: New Haven; London: Menil Collection; Distributed by Yale University Press), 2011, 13.

⁸¹ Serra, 48.

⁸² Lance Esplund. “Sculptural Presence in the Prints of Richard Serra.” In *Richard Serra Prints: From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer & his Family Foundation*, (Virginia, University of Virginia, 2016), 6.

The power of one is fundamental. Sometimes individuals are more potent than the mass.



Figure 23: Richard Serra, *Out-of-Round X*, 1999, oilstick on paper, 201.9x200.7cm, MoMA, NY.

Serra's series, known collectively as *Rounds*, were particularly influential. They reminded me of the concept I had earlier in this project when considering dust. Is what I am seeing coalescing or dissipating? Or perhaps, as happens in time, achieving both at once? Serra uses feet and hands to compress large, tailor-made oilsticks into his substrate. This process creates dense layers of richly textured blackness that reflect and absorb light, resulting in a semblance of topography when studied closely, or a void reminiscent of Malevich's iconic *Black Square*. The drama of the works is absorbing; their power, raw.

In response to Serra's oil-stick, I crushed and layered oil pastels, kneading them into toothy papers with my knuckles. The technique was soon dismissed, however, as it was implicitly incorrect within my self-imposed boundaries of domestic and non-synthetic material. Allowing gesso, because of its rabbit-skin glue and gypsum base, I mixed chalky black or white gesso with tea and tipped it from a height onto hardy 360gsm Hahnemühle paper in a method I thought of as 'spot and blot'. The 'spotting'

satisfyingly fulfilled my goal to relinquish full control of creative outcomes. ‘Blotting’ the centres allowed fractal zigzags to form as materials reacted with each other during different stages of methodology. In the process I was enticed by the self-forming marks of an instant, layering them in works that seemed concurrently to recede and expand.



Figure 24: TC Overson, 2020, *givingbacktakingback 9*, gesso, tea and ink on paper, 106x87cm.

After making dozens of *givingbacktakingback* works I set that phase of my project on hold for coming years when room allows me to substantially increase the size of the works. It was also, I found, difficult for those who viewed the work to see beyond an image of the Big Bang, which was more limited than I had intended.

American educator/artist Xavier Cortada uses installations as well as intimate drawings to interpret environmental degradation. Melding art and science, his practice provides

images for some of the mortal-and-beyond considerations of the Anthropocene. Art and literature are often the first areas to articulate new social experiences.⁸³ Historically, while artists were often amateur scientists, scientists needed artistic skill, both professions relying heavily on observation and conceptualisation.⁸⁴ Freed from the role of recording images, since the invention of photography, artists now interpret and express scientific phenomena in conceptual ways.

Cortada's *Astrid* was created during his residency in Antarctica.⁸⁵ It is a tiny work but signifies a great deal. Melted polar ice touched with blue watercolour was allowed to disperse by chance over a background of rock sediment.



Figure 25: Xavier Cortada, *Astrid*, 2007, sea ice from Antarctica's Ross Sea, sediment from Antarctica's Dry Valleys and mixed media on paper, 22.8x30cm, <https://cortada.com/2007/ice-paintings/sea>.

Resembling a satellite photograph or simply an inkblot it encapsulates polar and glacial disintegration in clear, radiant blues. Poignantly, seven years after it was made scientists announced that the West Antarctic had gone into irreversible withdrawal. The tender clarity of this work is penetrating and somewhat deceptive. Its power lies in its materials. Information about his theme and process is not immediately accessible, yet unfolds in revelatory layers leading to multiple readings of what is happening to the planet's ability to sustain life as we know it.

⁸³ Norah Campbell, Aidan O'Driscoll, Michael Saren. "The posthuman: the end and the beginning of the human." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, (29 March, 2010): 86-101. John Wiley & Sons Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.306>.

⁸⁴ Elaine Strosberg, *Art & Science*. Second ed. (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 2015), 27-28.

⁸⁵ Alan Braddock and Renee Ater, "Art in the Anthropocene," *American Art* 28, no. 3 (2014): 2.

Traditional Romantic concepts of a spiritually supportive Nature are reversed. *Astrid* is sublime in its power to provoke pleasure and terror simultaneously. Yet as captivating as it is alone, it is just one of over a hundred such paintings which, as a collective, overwhelm the viewer in the crystalline blues and whites of a melting continent of ice.⁸⁶

The strand of posthuman philosophy woven through my work has been highlighted in this chapter. It is a strand expounded upon by theorists Bradotti, Haraway and Hird, among others. The primacy of interconnection and interdependence that they ground their theories on underpins my work visually and ethically and links it to the scientific research I summarised in chapter one. In this chapter I expanded the input by introducing three major geologic eras and three eras of biologic evolution. Due to my exploration of posthuman critical theory during this MFA my work has extended from a humancentric perspective of evolution into a wider planetcentric beyond-human concept. After indicating the influence of Serra and Cortada in my practice, I spoke briefly of contemporary iterations of the sublime, distancing my work from large-scale showmanship and ‘stuplime’ stun-value. From the beginning, process and materials were to be the codes I utilised to give weight to my work. In the next two chapters I address these aspects.

⁸⁶ TC Overson, AHT300 Essay 1, 5.

Chapter 3 – Chance and Process

*Heaven and Hell*⁸⁷

John Cage claimed “Chance brings us closer to Nature in her manner of operation.”⁸⁸ Since apparently-random events propel cosmic and planetary evolution it seemed fitting that processes promoting random eventualities drove my methodology. Hoping to interweave drawing and happenstance mark-making into process and installation concepts, I made the decision to allow self-formed outcomes a role in my MFA work. I wanted to see where materials and marks might lead when given their own authority. Christopher Turner calls this mode “deliberate accident”.⁸⁹ Ceramicist Tania Rollond speaks of “processes to remove total control”.⁹⁰ How do I visually interpret a monistic evolutionary force that does not distinguish between creation and destruction? This was the question I set out to investigate at the start of my research. The answer, I felt, lay in instigating methods often referred to as ‘chance’.

Random Mutations

Developments in quantum physics accelerated the acceptance of chance as a serious artistic tool. Physicists proved that random eventualities, in the most infinitesimal scales of reality, were a fact.⁹¹ Biologists, since Darwin’s *Evolution of the Species*, have demonstrated how random mutations drove evolution.⁹² Asteroids pummelling early Earth had random trajectories that, geologists hypothesise, introduced organic molecules as well as mineral ones into a young planet’s chemistry.⁹³ With such scientific foundations, how could my project not incorporate the conceptual motivation and practical application of chance?

Pouring stains, gesso and plaster necessitates similar movements to achieve similar forms. A small movement alteration can result in quite different outcomes. It is a wonderful technique to play with but experimentation must be weighed against time management and the body comes to know the dance and stance needed to realise results

⁸⁷ *Cosmos*, Sagan, episode 4.

⁸⁸ Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: Exhibitions That Made Art History 1962-2002* (London: Phaidon, 2013), 121.

⁸⁹ Christopher Turner, “Deliberate Accident,” *Tate Etc.* Issue 21 (Spring 2011). <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue21/blotsturner.htm>.

⁹⁰ Tania Rollond. “The Artist’s Practice.” STS400 Seminar lecture, National Art School. October 14, 2020.

⁹¹ Marcello Gleiser. “Meaning in a Silent Universe: Human Uniqueness in the Cosmos II.” *The New Atlantis*, no. 47 (2015): 81. Accessed May 21, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43671542>.

⁹² Gleiser, 85.

⁹³ Hazen, *Symphony in C: Carbon and the Evolution of (Almost) Everything.*, 87.

with particular random qualities. It became a relationship that led to a progression of my individual style integrated with happenstance.

Chance marks left on surfaces during the making of art have always fascinated me. In my BFA and MFA1 I reworked the plastic drop-sheets I used when making moulds and plaster sculptures into what I called *makings* of the work produced on them (Fig 26). The completed works satisfied me as palimpsests of prior, present and future work. Creation/destruction and cosmic/biologic interpretation is left open. This is the ambiguity I seek.



Figure 26: TC Overson, 2020, *makings 1 & 2*, plaster, resin, pigment, pva, clay on recycled plastic, 195x175cm & 175x170cm.

The fugitive nature of plastic as a surface eventually frustrated me however, so I switched to canvas. After preparing an unstretched canvas with black gesso I spread it like a tablecloth over a workbench in my studio. I have been making work on it ever since. The image, *rockpool*, (Fig 27) is a detail of how this heuristic drop sheet looked in October last year. It has had time since to grow. The only purposely drawn aspect of it is the zigzag fractal lines, used to symbolise interconnecting micro and macro states.



Figure 27: TC Overson, 2020, *rockpool (detail)*, gesso, clay, plaster, watercolour, tea, rust, oil pastel, graphite on canvas, 180x140cm.

Though a secondary strand of my work, I gained much from this process. Recently, in more subtle ways, I poured plaster onto the chance lines left from my making processes to scar and stain their surface with half-chance mark-making, giving them random yet interconnected qualities.

The Human Hand and the Microbe

To minimise the artist's hand I avoid brushes, hence brush marks, and rarely use pencil, preferring liquid graphite or powdered charcoal. Instead I tip, drip, immerse, splash, sponge, spray, dribble, scrape, scratch, hit and weather the plaster fragments; expanding upon traditional forms of drawing. I create the substrate to be part of the drawing process and my mark-making responds to the surface created. Mould is encouraged, discouraged and encouraged again, deepening the relationship with calculated chance while incorporating the tiny microbes that inspire my project.

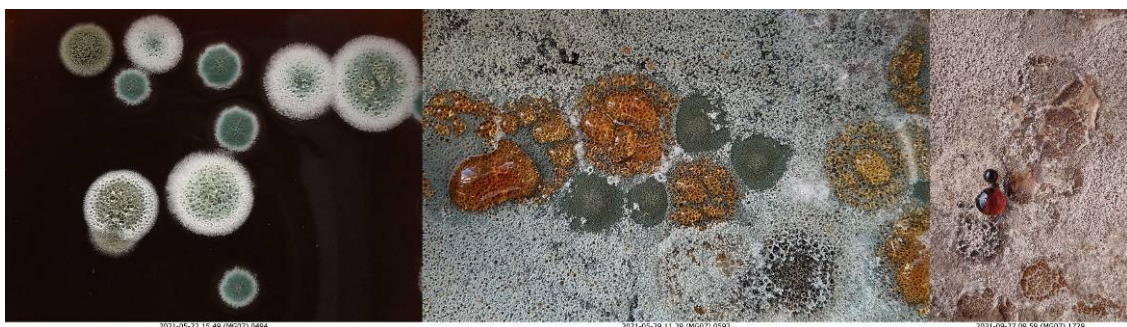


Figure 28: TC Overson, 2021, photographed mould formed on tea stain over time, microbes on tea.

Initially my work incorporated traces of the hand, images of which, on rock surfaces, have been powerful, enigmatic symbols of humanity for nearly seventy thousand years.⁹⁴ Last year my fragments—linking to mass extinction—used excavating, grabbing indentations to indicate the sixth era: human exploitation (Fig 29).



Figure 29: TC Overson, *sfruttamento*, 2020, tea, gesso, clay on plaster, 51x44cm.

In so doing, the work featured what it was trying to minimise: the hand. That paradox has since been addressed. Humans and their hands are almost nonexistent in my recent work. In ratio with time, this is accurate.

Art in Process – Historical and Contemporary

Victor Hugo’s Tachist works influence my processes and materials. Adopting Leonardo da Vinci’s advice to ‘look into stains’ Hugo created chance marks which laid the groundwork for intuitive work of Gothic sublimity.⁹⁵ It is, however, his abstract images and use of nontraditional materials that motivates me. Ahead of their time, they enounce geologic and cosmic transcendence, balancing the sublime on the edge of the abyss.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ DL Hoffmann, CD Standish, M García-Diez, PB Pettitt, JA Milton, et al. “U-Th dating of carbonate crusts reveals Neandertal origin of Iberian cave art.” *Science* Vol. 359, 6378 (23 Feb 2018): 912-915. DOI: 10.1126/science.aap7778.

⁹⁵ Robert Zwijnenberg, and Leonardo. *The Writings and Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci: Order and Chaos in Early Modern Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 60.

⁹⁶ Cynthia Burlingham and Allegra Pesenti. *Stones to Stains: The Drawings of Victor Hugo*. (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum and DelMonico Books, 2018), 16.



Figure 30: Victor Hugo, *Silhouette de l'Ermitage*, 1855, stencil cut from creased paper and charcoal, 15x11cm, Bibliothetheque Nationale de France.

To create *Silhouette de l'Ermitage* Hugo folded, cut and ripped a small piece of paper into which he had rubbed soot.⁹⁷ The piece displays little more than elementary shadow and light but it emits palpable power. Guided by the title the viewer is led to read the image as a ruined tower. It can also be read as a representation of the distinctive rocks of the Channel Islands, where Hugo was exiled, its folds replicating the rocks distinctive block-like fissures or, perhaps as an abstract silhouette of his fictional character Quasimodo. The atmospheric ambiguity of much of Hugo's work encourages open-ended interpretation and imagination, the result I seek.

Dadaist Jean Arp countered the horrors of WWI with absurdity.⁹⁸ His chance-driven collages encouraged the acceptance of chance techniques in Western art and demonstrated his belief that an understanding of the randomness of nature could lead self-indulgent humanity to fundamental truths.⁹⁹ Arp's material influence on my work is discussed in the next chapter but his place as an originator of chance technique in twentieth century art needs to be stressed.

⁹⁷ Burlingham, 92.

⁹⁸ Ideelart, "Jean Arp and the Abstraction Inspired by Nature," *Ideelart Online Magazine*, Jul 25, 2016, <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/jean-arp>.

⁹⁹ Paul Crowther, *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 81. ProQuest Ebook Central.



Figure 31: Jean Arp, *According to the Laws of Chance*, 1933, sugar paper on plywood, 16x17.5cm, London: Tate Gallery.

The terrors of WWII and threatened nuclear holocaust unleashed Jackson Pollock's hallmark action-driven use of chance. His physicality and horizontality are evident in my work, though I was unaware of the influence until well into my works on paper.

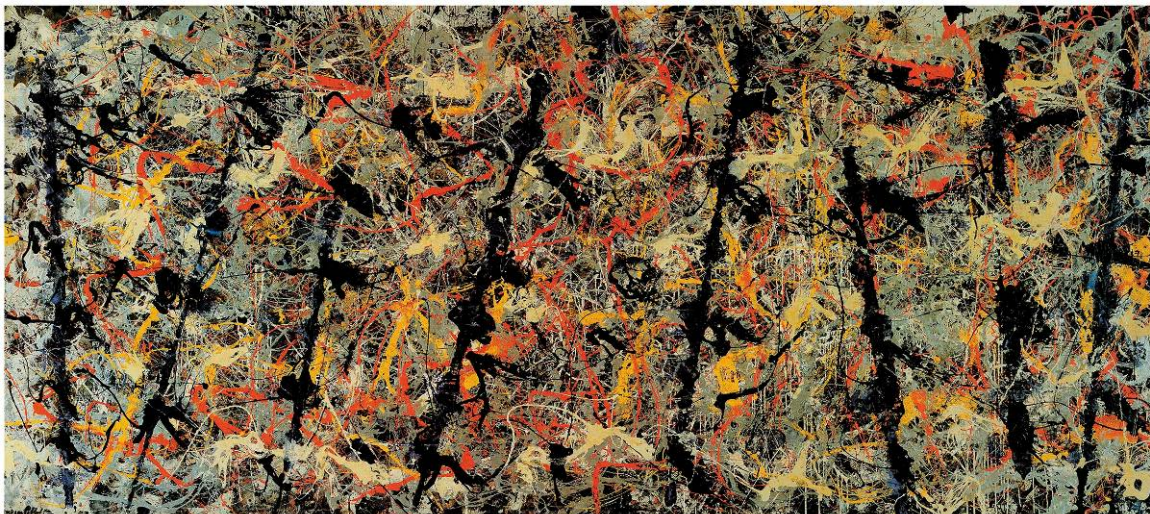


Figure 32: Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles (No 11)*, 1952, Enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas, 212.1x488.9cm, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia.

A decade ago I saw *Blue Poles* in the NGA. Standing in front of it was like being lost in a dense autumnal forest. The dark underpainting sucked like a void. Lately I have come to believe his all-over style has an incidental relationship with posthuman non-hierarchical ethos, as discussed in chapter two.

Pollock and Arp led me to recognise that in confronting the unthinkable, artists enlist chance as a method of saying what conscious images and words cannot. Recent analysis further connects with my work, exposing fractal replication throughout Pollock's action

paintings. The self-similar patterns came from his instinctual movement and were painted decades before Benoit Mandelbrot identified and named fractals in nature.¹⁰⁰

In 1957, a year after Pollock's death, George Brecht wrote *Chance Imagery*, outlining the influence of chance in the first half of the twentieth century. He elaborates on its potential to stimulate perception in both science and art, but states his doubt that chance can be utilised without bias.¹⁰¹ Dadaist and Surrealist fascination with chance is explored, leading to Brecht's analysis of Duchamp's use of mechanical aids to invoke chance and then Pollock's subconscious bodily techniques.¹⁰² Brecht then returns to science, mathematics and ways of implementing random outcomes, seeking to add weight to his argument that divinity lurks in spontaneity. His essay supported my desire to use chance as nature does: to bring forth inexhaustible, undetermined outcomes.

Australian artist Cameron Robbins works with chance by inventing drawing machines that respond to weather events. Robbins interests me with his ideas and processes fusing nature and mechanics. "Randomness," he says, "is like a function of physics that works on the very large scale all the way down to a micro scale, whereas chance is a result of local forces colliding or changing."¹⁰³



Figure 33: Cameron Robbins, *Oenograf*, (detail) 2020-21, permanent marker on paper, 50x50cm, MCA.

¹⁰⁰ Richard P. Taylor, "Order in Pollock's Chaos," *Scientific American* 287, no. 6 (2002): 119.

¹⁰¹ George Brecht, *Chance Imagery*, (New York: Great Bear Pamphlet, Something Else Press, 1966), 17.

¹⁰² Brecht, 7-11.

¹⁰³ Cameron Robbins, David Walsh, et al, *Cameron Robbins: Field Lines* (Hobart, Tasmania: Museum of Old and New Art, 2016), 102.



Figure 34: Cameron Robbins, *Oenograf*, 2020-21, fermenting grapes, demijohn, motors, bearings, stainless steel, aluminium, carbon fibre, plywood, paper, Nikko permanent marker pens, MCA. Photograph TC Overson.

His recent kinetic drawings in Sydney's MCA during *The National 2021* used fermenting grapes to drive mechanised processes. *Oenograf* makes a statement about the repercussions of rising carbon dioxide in Earth's atmosphere.¹⁰⁴ However, although it is CO₂ that moves the pen, in a very real way it is microbes doing the work. Motors rotating the paper mean bacteria can only express themselves in feathery spirals. Robbins' alchemical installation, however, gives them the well-earned chance to make art for a while, rather than just wine and planetary transformations.

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Kent. "Artist Text." *The National, New Australian Art 2021*. MCA, Sydney. <https://www.thenational.com.au/artists/cameron-robbins/oenograf/>.

Cornelia Parker's interest in scale, temporality and matter stimulate my work conceptually and practically.¹⁰⁵ *Cold Dark Matter* is particularly important; mixing calculated chance and chaos with planning and order.¹⁰⁶

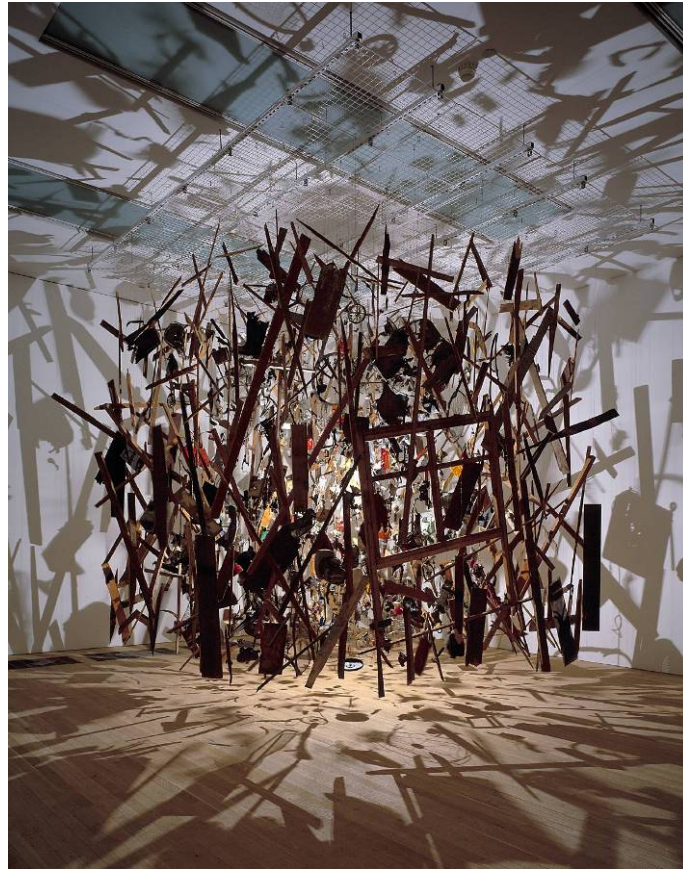


Figure 35: Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter*, 1991, Wood, metal, plastic, ceramic, paper, textile and wire, 400×500×500cm, London: Tate Gallery.

Titled after the term for universal invisible matter, the installation uses an exploded garden shed to speak of cosmic, psychological and domestic themes.¹⁰⁷ It captures a moment, an explosion of stored items and wood. The viewer, initially overwhelmed by the spectacle, in time comes to notice its individual parts and the beauty within a pause of chaos. In Parker's work I see elements that I find significant in my own: the fascination with fragments and moments that ask to be seen as collective components, yet also individual players. Theatrical light and shadow enhance Parker's installations, increasing their drama; a powerful method of entering hearts and souls that I recall from my theatrical experience. Similar use of spot-lighting to cast shadows around my rocklike fragments is part of my installation's visual experience, giving the illusion that the fragments hover over their background.

¹⁰⁵ Cornelia Parker, *Cornelia Parker* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2000), 12.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Iversen, *Chance* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), 188.

¹⁰⁷ Iversen, 189.

Having time and space to discover what might come from a research/practice feedback loop has been valuable. Graeme Sullivan calls this going ‘beyond knowledge into understanding’.¹⁰⁸ Barbara Bolt terms it ‘double articulation’.¹⁰⁹ Moving from workshop to plaster room to studio, I chose not to focus on any singular discipline or outcome for over a year. What emerged was often unexpected, and this made it exciting. Chance thrives so well it led me to wonder if chance is chance at all or perhaps another form of interconnection.

In this project I explore the history of chance, founded in art and science, the twin areas where my praxis finds bedrock. Nature’s affiliation with chance plus the driving force of random mutations in evolution convinced me to emulate such processes to inhibit artistic control. This chapter explored the means I use to interpret a monistic evolutionary force by appropriating seemingly-random methods of Nature. Floating pigment on liquid to create self-formed fractals; using random marks from prior works to form further iterations; pouring stains and plaster with action methodology; and incorporating mould and decay into my work makes recycling and chance intrinsic to my evolving technique. Victor Hugo, Jean Arp and Jackson Pollock inform my experiments and decisions when contemplating the use of chance. Juxtaposition of order/chaos, and machine/human co-factors are present in the work of Cornelia Parker and Cameron Robbins, artists who influence how I approach the installation of my work. Having scope to advance my practice through the research/studio feedback loop has been invaluable, allowing me to investigate processes and, as will be considered in the next chapter, the materiality of what began as an idea.

¹⁰⁸ Graeme Sullivan, “Ch 4 Art Practice as Research” in *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts* (December 2009), 96. <https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oc/art-practice-as-research/book233902>.

¹⁰⁹ Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 29.

Chapter 4 - Materiality and Matter

*Who speaks for Earth?*¹¹⁰

Without a sense of scale the cosmos and microcosmos look similar. From cosmic stardust to chondrites, the original mini-meteors; from microbial life to complex metazoan cells; from sub-atomic to intergalactic, all have much in common because, research affirms, all come from a single organisational low entropy source/force.¹¹¹ Theoretical physicist David Bohm describes it as the “unbroken wholeness of the totality of existence as undivided flowing movement without borders.”¹¹² This allows matter to be seen as information that can be woven into concept as support and code; a vital tool for a contemporary artist who is moving away from more traditional materials.

Materials

Initially I was overwhelmed, wondering how I would present a project that had words like ‘trillions’ and ‘eternity’ attached. To reinforce my narrative objectives, part of the answer had to lie in process and material as much as aesthetic decisions. Materiality is crucial to my studio work both as a form of truth and as a limitation. The scope of the narrative had the potential to spiral my art practice out of control, especially in a two year framework, so I created self-imposed limits within which to limit the limitless.

David Wood’s description of sipping coffee at breakfast while the universe happened around him provided a key.¹¹³ The dilemma of what materials best expressed my theme was resolved. Forming images of deep time from common kitchen materials was ‘the perfect folly’, according to one of my colleagues.¹¹⁴ It was, he said, a seemingly foolish idea that gave a light touch to a dense subject. Timing was also perfect, folly-wise: all I had to work on in a small studio apartment during last year’s COVID lockdown was a kitchen benchtop.

Back, eventually, in the plaster room I began the series of plaques I wanted to create as fragments suggesting deep time. I also spread large canvases and blankets of paper on the floor, working on them horizontally and simultaneously.

¹¹⁰ *Cosmos*, Sagan, episode 13.

¹¹¹ Brian Greene, *Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe*. (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020) 30 and 266-271.

¹¹² David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 218.

¹¹³ Wood, *Deep Time, Dark Times*, 78.

¹¹⁴ Luke Thurgate. “Crit Session.” *DRA400*, National Art School, September 17, 2020.



Figure 36: TC Overson, horizontal art making Hoff Loft, July 2020.

Material diversity and exploration are vital to me. Finding solidification of an idea in material outcomes, semi-independent of my conscious control, allows me to feel the interconnectedness I strive to express. The ‘thing power’ excites me.¹¹⁵ Materiality, I found, has language, but speaks with nonhuman voices.¹¹⁶ Discussed below are four of the nonhuman material voices that help this project make a statement.

Tea, Eggs, Paper, Plaster

Tea, specifically Madura’s Earl Grey, has a resonant russet tone similar to burnt sienna (and smells like sunshine) or, when diluted, a golden honey tint. Time alters the way it unites with a surface. Soon after brewing it flows smoothly over the substrate. Then, a couple of hours later, it separates into self-forming fractals, similar to Prima-tech watercolour. After a day or two it provides a clumpy mould-induced wash that quickly blooms on damp plaster, dyeing (and dying) as the plaster dries. This alchemy is even more pronounced when small amounts of gesso are added, making the graining more intense. Being mildly acidic it will have reduced archival length, but what it lacks in endurance it makes up for in flavour.

¹¹⁵ Bennett, “Vibrant Matter”, 8.

¹¹⁶ Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, 13.



Figure 37: TC Overerson, *theia*, (detail), 2021, Tea, gesso, clay on plaster, 43x41cm.

Instead of water I added tea to the plaster from which I made *theia* (Fig 37). The plaster became thin and fragile, but took marks easily and re-stained satisfyingly. Although the result was aesthetically pleasing it had to be replicated with stronger plaster after learning another worthwhile lesson. I wanted the fragment to indicate massive impact. Early Earth was hit by a planet-sized asteroid, which was obliterated, bequeathing Earth most of its mass. Eventually, the debris consolidated as Earth's moon.¹¹⁷ This event was in my mind as I worked. The larger, stronger version I remade will be a suspended drawing on stained, creamy plaster that might suggest Shakespeare's 'circled orb' or possibly Carl Sagan's dandelion seed adrift on random currents.^{118 119}

Egg, or more accurately eggshell, is an alluring material. The shell is a beautiful and resilient substance that is an ideal example of Robert Hazen's explorations uniting mineral and biological co-evolution. Being 95% calcium carbonate shell and 5% protein lining, it is a mineral capsule containing life.¹²⁰ Broken from the inside, it releases life;

¹¹⁷ Stewart, *Earth: The Power of the Planet*, 39.

¹¹⁸ William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2 Sc 2: line 110.

¹¹⁹ *Cosmos*, Sagan, episode 1.

¹²⁰ Tim Birkhead, *The Most Perfect Thing: Inside and Outside a Bird's Egg* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 26.

broken from the outside it gives nourishment to life. My organic free-range eggshells are the *Gallus gallus domesticus* variety, broken from the outside when providing nutritious breakfasts.

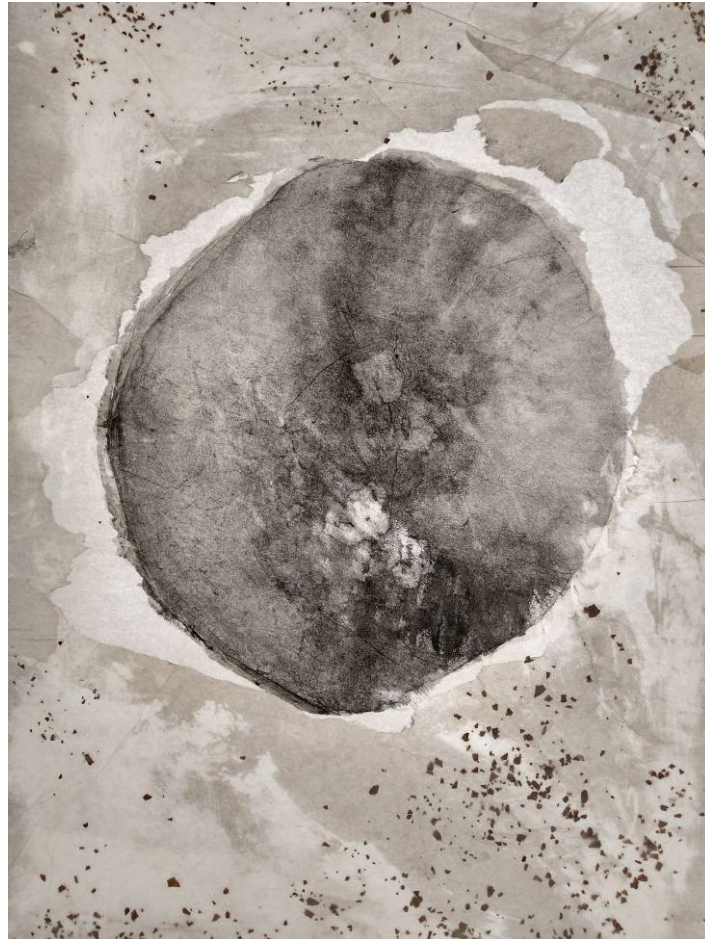


Figure 38: TC Overson, 2021, *spore*, tea, eggshell, graphite on rice paper, 93x63cm.

Generally, I crush the shells to tea leaf size and stain them with tea and gesso solutions to give them grainy textures and defined edges. They are then incorporated into plaster and paper works as texture, embellishment and symbol combined. As a dense surface they suggest landmasses or stone cities crumbling into deserts; vaguely biblical, certainly fractal (Fig 22). As a loosely scattered surface, the vision is conversely cosmic or microscopic, like rough planetesimals or water-borne elements dispersing or coalescing (Fig 38).

I also use them in jagged halves in photographs and sculptural works, implying links between their circularity and universally-spherical bodies, relating their tattered air-sacks to environmental concerns (Fig 39). As yet, I am unsure how dozens of these works, created in confined space during lockdown 2021, will be exhibited. I am mindful that the egg has a rich and crowded artistic lineage and I tread cautiously when using it.



Figure 39: TC Overson, *air sac series*, 2021, tea, gesso, rice glue on eggshell.

Paper is the third major material that lends its versatility to my work. This year I replaced Hahnemühle rag with rice paper, which is strong yet translucent and excellent for layering. Glossy, crisp PVA was replaced by rice glue, which is gently malleable, acid-free and transparent. I can make it in my kitchen. It enters my natural-material inventory with the distinction of age-old use in Japanese paper crafts.

After experimenting last year, this year I focused on uniting my work. The skills of drawing along with the versatility of chance have combined in my works on paper, I believe. Diaphanous layers of rice paper, often ripped or worn, allow me to compile drawn images and frottage with randomly scattered shell and leaf and then complete them with charcoal and fractal-forming pigments afloat on a tea-liquid surface. Paper has a different visual language to plaster, but is integrated via the organic shapes being replicated so that both echo each other's single source. *Progeny* (Fig 40) uses *accretion* (Fig 20) as a forerunner for both the frottage base and the plaster piece connected as part of the extended work.



Figure 40: TC Overson, *progeny (for cq)*, 2021, tea, graphite, eggshell, clay, plaster on rice paper, 93x63cm.

When using **plaster**, my fourth vocal material, art meets the geological sublime directly. To make a material useful for art and building trades, humans crush and cook a mineral that formed on Earth 600-230mya when oceans receded. It has a chemical make-up not far removed from eggshell: mainly calcium. Water recrystallises it from powder.

Pouring plaster is about line, to me, not mass. My raw plasters embody a possibility, capturing a ghost image of what was created making a prior solid image. Though an untraditional drawing substrate I found plaster supported me in my intention to share this project with chance and, at the same time, spoke to mineral evolution, just as rice paper spoke to biological evolution.

After I make my bare plasters I study their surface, imagining ancient artists contemplating stains and fissures in cave walls, allowing a facade to prompt intuition. Sometimes I disrupt the random surface, engraving drawings and marks into mysterious elemental formations. Other times I leave them raw, putting down the sgraffito tools, lost in the beauty of chaos and order keeping time (Fig 41).



Figure 41: TC Overson, *metazoa*, 2021, tea and gesso on plaster, 60x30cm.

The plasterwork of Jean Arp motivated my decision to use plaster in similar ways: in one-offs rather than a modest tool of replication.¹²¹ Plaster is a mediated material of the earth with a thirst that is almost human. Strong and brittle, malleable and demanding, I felt it captured the essential flux of creative/destructive unity.

¹²¹ Crowther, "Meanings of Abstract Art", 90.

I devised methods of embellishing it without highlighting the human hand. As observed in frescos of old, the mark of a brush is immediately sucked into plaster's upper strata—unblendable and obviously the work of the artist's touch—and pigments, if not liquid enough, sit uncomfortably on the surface awaiting the opportunity to flake off. Once dry it is a skin-deep medium that highlights process.

Plaster's absorbent character is also worth comment: being the antithesis of—in Robert MacFarlane's words—"sunken networks of extraction, exploitation and disposal that support the surface world".¹²² Plaster strikes me as feminine in essence, in that it traditionally allows reproduction and feeds artistic endeavours without ego: customarily, a supportive substance. I feel well-pleased that in my work it is featured as the very stuff of Mother Earth's creative story.

The haptic quality of my plaster fragments has been mentioned in critique sessions: their 'silky cool rough heat', a desire to 'run fingers into the voids' or 'turn them over like a rock to see what's underneath' are comments that have satisfied me greatly.¹²³ I have made almost 170 plaster fragments, some of which I see as individual pieces and many as installations indicating the sweep of the subject, its theme and time span.

The Matter of Art

Like clouds, influences of certain artists pass. After illuminating vision they edge beyond the horizon. Other artists are celestial bodies. In this section I highlight two artists who have formed my concept of beauty and my idea of materiality.

Anselm Kiefer is the sun whose bricolages of painting, drawing, sculpture and photography have strongly influenced my desire to experiment with mediums and accept decay as part of the creative process. Kiefer's mixed-media *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe*, is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection. I saw it in 2016 and visited it many times, each time fascinated by its impact and raw materiality (and unruly staples). Kiefer extends the scope of materiality in hybrid works; part painting, drawing and sculpture; objectives that directly feed my artistic intentions.

¹²² Robert Macfarlane. "What Lies Beneath," *The Guardian*, (April 20, 2019).
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/20/what-lies-beneath-robert-macfarlane>.

¹²³ Drawing cohort seminar with Dr Maryanne Coutts, STS400, NAS, Sept 17, 2020.



Figure 42: Anselm Kiefer, *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe*, 1984-1986, emulsion, synthetic polymer paint, shellac, lead on photo document paper on linen canvas, 280x380x75cm. Sydney: AGNSW, Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund. Photograph: TC Overson, side detail.

His trademark use of lead—gold to an alchemist, yet highly toxic; light-absorbing, yet satiny; melancholy, yet creative—is part of his artistic language, giving symbolic and physical weight to works that speak of lost civilisations and forsaken belief. Lead is human-unfriendly, traversing the placental barrier and causing deformations that are not random or evolutionary¹²⁴. A material so vibrant, it kills. Lead also protects; blocking radiation from damaging living cells. Banal binaries fall short of monistic transition. A concept Kiefer enhances.

¹²⁴ RA Goyer. “Transplacental Transport of Lead”. *Environ Health Perspect.* (Nov 1990): 101. doi: 10.1289/ehp.9089101.



Figure 43: Victor Hugo, *Taches*, 1875, ink wash and soot on paper, 44.3×55cm, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Victor Hugo is a constant source of inspiration. He is my moon. Although I worked for years in the Australian stage play of *Les Misérables* I was unaware of his place as a visual artist until my BFA. Since then Hugo has motivated my processes and materiality profoundly. He gave me liberty to allow a moment to form a lasting image. In *Taches* (Fig 43) I see seeds of my work.



Figure 44: TC Overson, *rise 3*, 2021, eggshell, tea, gesso on plaster, 38x34cm.

Still Not Broken

As mentioned in chapter one, the ‘not broken’ concept has been a lasting theme running through my writing practice as well as my art practice. In a consumer society, if a thing is broken it is useless. Earth and the universe contradict this: if something is broken it is reused as something else. I find that ‘broken’ is a word like ‘chance’, neither is black or white. Raw materials sift like dust, adrift yet on-hand in an un wasteful universe: not broken, just in a state of endless transition.



Figure 45: Harlequin Theatre, 1982, *Doc Frail and the Lucky Lady*, showing the fourth wall, beyond the proscenium arch, wherein people breathed.

At *Harlequin*, the theatre of my childhood, when a play season was over the set was pulled apart, flats and scrim repainted, lighting was reset and props reused in the next show. We were on a budget. When plasters crack they are not broken – they are the makings of further work. Like mould, dust makes for wonderful surface patina when sealed by wax or matte varnish. Eggshell is not broken.

To quote Alexei Kurakin:

“The process of self-organisation on all scales is driven by economic competition, obeys empirical laws of nonequilibrium thermodynamics, and is facilitated and, thus, accelerated by memories of living experience persisting in the form of evolutionary successful living organisms and their constituents.”¹²⁵

Buckminster Fuller puts it more succinctly: “Nature is always most economical.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Alexei Kurakin. “Order without Design.” *Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling*. 7. 12 (2010): abstract. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1742-4682-7-12>

¹²⁶ Buckminster Fuller, *Critical Path*, (New York: St Martin’s Press), xxvii.

Conclusion

*Journeys in Space and Time*¹²⁷

This project's roots grew from the strata of creativity—ever-changing—below the floorboards of my childhood home, where a cave was once spotlit in a small theatre and humanity played out its last moments. It resurfaces now in the context of my art studies.

To develop this project and answer its vital question about whether destruction and creation could be seen as a single evolutionary force, I needed to trace the field of my practice through the artistic sublime to three primary foundations: science, art and philosophy. To encompass, with integrity, the story of this planet's evolution I went beyond geology and even astronomy into physics, microbiology, philosophy and posthuman thought. There I discovered deep time, microbial chatter, interconnectedness and wonder, sublime in its unfolding veracity.

David Wood allowed me to understand the philosophy behind an anthropocentric vision of deep time. Iain Stewart provided an overview of Earth's geological journey. Robert Macfarlane offered the visceral experience of going into submerged time capsules, and Peter Ward explained extinction events. Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway unveiled posthuman concepts that underlie my work. Finally, Robert Hazen amalgamated these concepts in books upon which I founded my MFA2 work.

How does an artist interpret such a force? This investigation was the core of my practice. After exploring all I have during Masters, prepared for different conclusions, I have come back to where the spiral started, but with more nuance and knowledge. For me, Carl Sagan initiated the concept of juxtaposing the numinous with city streets, and my family home demonstrated that the cosmos could exist in an old wooden house. The ability of illusion to give the soul flight, I find, cannot not be overestimated.

My artistic vision has been lit by the earliest of Earth's painters who placed their hands on cave walls, by the Romanticists capturing the numinous in nature, and in the welter of thought from contemporary artists such as Kiefer, Parker, Serra and Paterson. These artists reaffirm the sublime and give context to the hybrid works of expanded drawing that I make.

¹²⁷ *Cosmos*, Sagan, episode 8.

Four non-human voices contributed their vibrant materiality to my practice, acting as code, contributors and inspiration. Co-opting tea, eggs, paper and plaster also unites my work and provides boundaries in a boundless subject, the potential of which extends into an endless array of ideas and projects for my future practice. Initially I aim to find residency within a natural science facility or museum where my art can interconnect with science directly.

From art and science I have chosen Chance as my clever partner. It is wise, I have found, to listen to this partner's suggestions. Though I throw some strange materials and techniques into play, Chance reworks them, as it has throughout time and space, and I feel good being part of that unknowable reality.

Epilogue

*The persistence of memory*¹²⁸

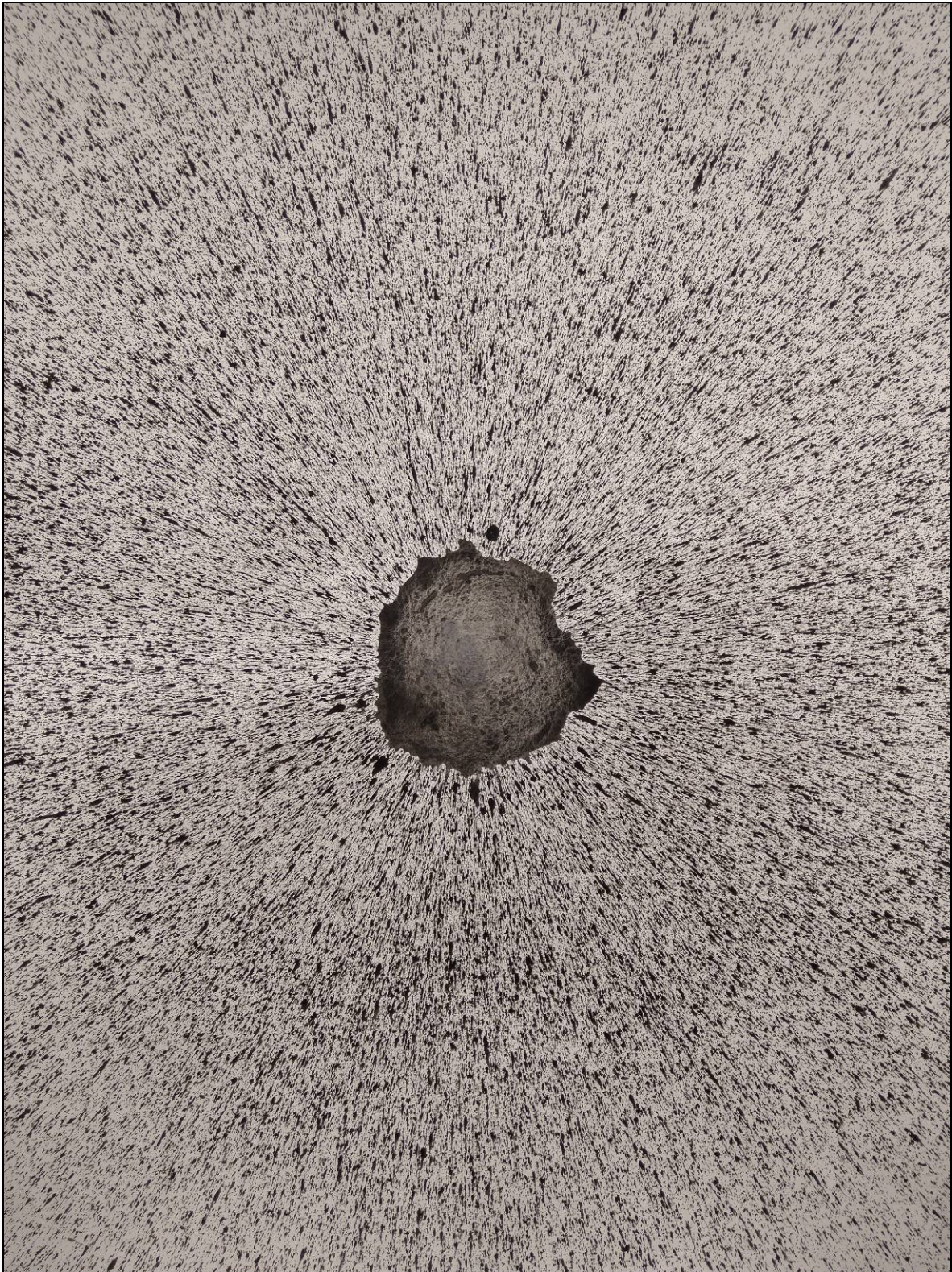


Figure 46: TC Overson, *sparkie (for mro)*, 2020, gesso, tea on paper, 106x87cm.

¹²⁸ *Cosmos*, Sagan, episode 11.

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