



# Floating, As It Were, On the Confines of Sense

Jo Gane, After George Shaw



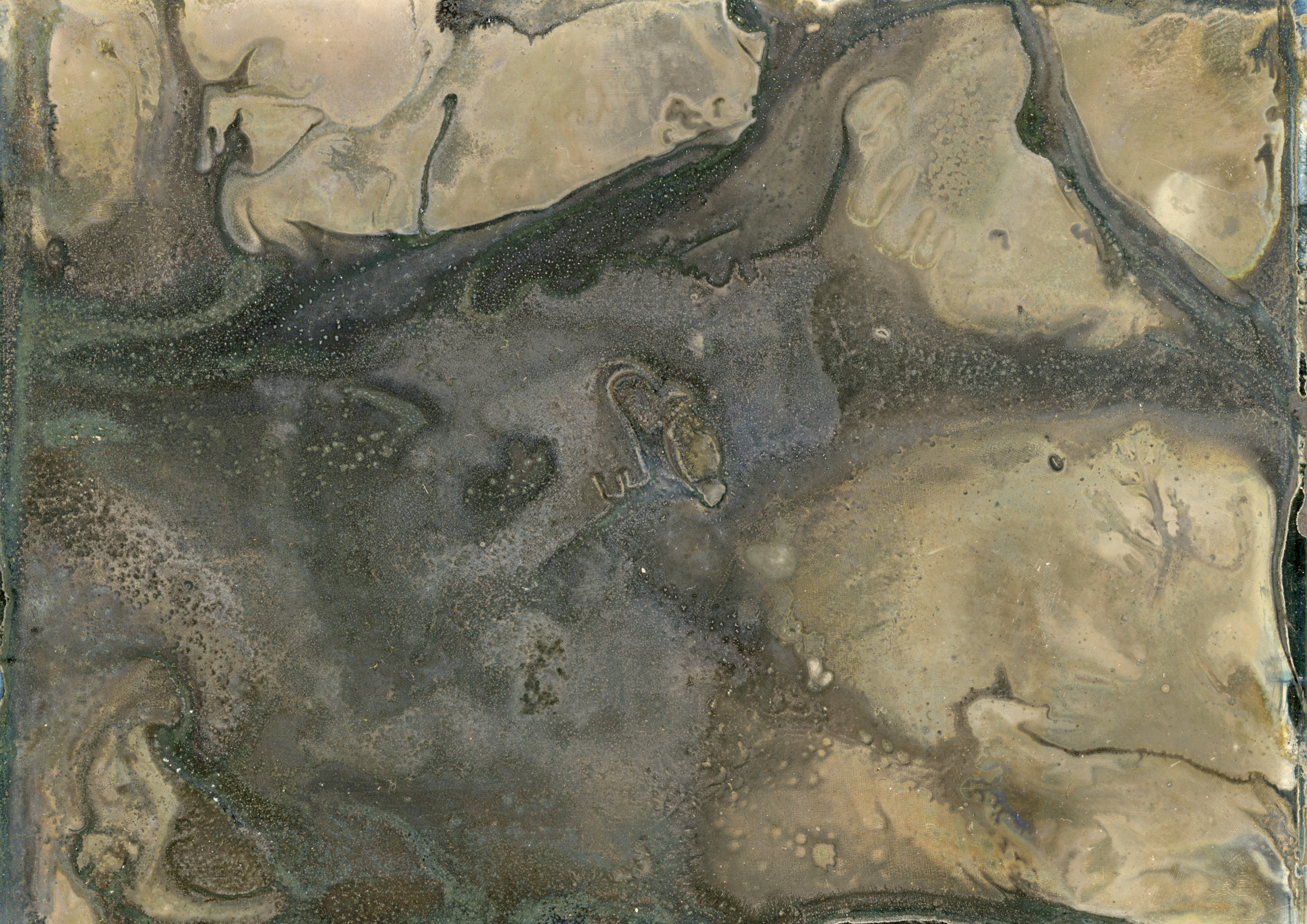
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**Birmingham Open Media, July 2015.**

Daguerreotypes are difficult. The image particles I chemically conjure with sweat and determination onto the silver plates are small. The ephemeral images that appear during development do not adhere to the surface of the plate and dissolve in the fix. The plates hold messy, swooping petrol-in-a-puddle marks that taunt me with the beauty of their iridescent swirls. Sometimes it feels like the red filter I'm using for development is playing tricks, that I've only imagined there was ever any image there at all. It rains and heavy black clouds render the plates underexposed. It's frustrating. I feel the pain of early photographic experimenters in sore arms from repeated manual polishing of hard silver plates. I see the fruitless experiments in my stained fingertips as I pick the lampblack out from under my nails. I create stained sheets of solid silver. Occasionally, under favourable lighting conditions, enough of an image is visible for me to see a spark of potential in the process, to keep going.





It's a dull Thursday lunchtime in the gallery space when I present a talk on this exasperating practice. The talk is delayed, postponed from the previous week when my one-year-old son had poked me in the most essential optical device, my eye, scratching my cornea and leaving me unable to commute into the city. This was fortunately not the dramatic slicing of optical vision seen in Luis Buñuel's seminal surrealist film 'Un Chien Andalou' but just a scratch from a baby fingernail reaching for something shiny and exciting. My experiments with daguerreotypes at this stage can be seen in this way, reaching for a shiny surface I don't yet understand. They don't even look like daguerreotypes. Perhaps they are not. At this stage I'm making non-mercury, Becquerel daguerreotypes using a variation of the process. Later, with help, I begin making mercury daguerreotypes which offer a better-quality image but are more toxic, potentially deadly.

Small steps with room for improvement.

I need support.

Collaboration.

As I stop talking, Pete James invites me to come up the hill to the library of Birmingham to see something.

On the desk in the chill of the climate-controlled photography collections office sits an unassuming navy-blue box. I pause and my body acclimatises to the quiet space away from the bustle of the city. I catch my breath, pausing from the brisk walk uphill. Pete opens the lid, and reflections appear on the ceiling as uncased daguerreotypes bounce light into the room alongside soft ruby-red Moroccan leather cases. The box appears to glow from the inside like the briefcase in the film *Pulp Fiction*. Later, I realise this golden glow comes from the reflection of the yellow ceiling but at the time there is a magical warmth. The daguerreotypes are exceptional. They sing with all the potential of the process I've imagined whilst toiling in the darkroom.



### **New Street, August 2017.**

New St, August 2017. We leave Birmingham Open Media to walk up the slow incline of Hill street towards the bustle of New Street. The camera shakes on the tripod despite the new, sweaty foam of the grip that sits oddly against the smooth wooden surface of our hybrid-hacked replica Wolcott camera. It's a device that sits out of time, simultaneously out-moded and of the future, only relevant in this instance. We move alongside traffic, past the brand-new, modern mirrored metal façade of New Street Station that reflects the cityscape, struck by bright sunlight that appears between white cloud. The sunlight had struck polished silver metal plates here before, when George Shaw made his daguerreotypes on New Street in the 1840s. The railway station may just have been built then, it opened in 1844. Its latest iteration has just opened, layers build upon layers in the cityscape as the pebbledash cladding of the 1980s Pallasades shopping centre has been removed and cloaked with new materials. Both the daguerreotypes in 1840 and the station façade in 2017 operated with the gloss and awe of the new and shiny in their time. The daguerreotypes Shaw made retain their gloss for longer, holding an image of the street as it was in the 1840s that sharply delineates the time that it was made, remaining startlingly contemporary. The station façade has grown dull. The shiny metal surface is pock-marked and dirty, it is repeated in most large cities and has lost its sense of place.



Our borrowed Victorian clothes sit uncomfortably in the summer heat as does the gaze of strangers who wonder what we are trying to sell as they step aside or rush past. We not selling anything. We are experimenting, using the history of the city as our material, moving through space and time via our camera that sits neither in the past or the future. WiFi is patchy and the 4G data connection that has been rolled out in the city is temperamental, it can't process the high-definition video data we are making easily. The video from inside the wooden box glitches, speeding up and slowing down time in the resulting livestream; bending the rhythmic flow of time - the 'forward!' hum of the city we pass through. A series of leaps forwards and backwards; pauses and slow sections that compress and stretch the passing of time whilst we walk through the city centre. The slow sections distil Birmingham, extracting its essence from the visual noise of the cityscape. We see Queen Victoria on her plinth, backed by cranes whilst the new, as-yet faceless building rises from the rubble of the recently pulled down brutalist central library. A girl in a hijab, shoppers, suits on Colmore row and a boy in a white t-shirt all briefly pause and dance as we pass through, soft and blurred slow movement caused by compression and the tiny focus of the lens results in them being taken out of time on our small paper screen. Traces and ghosts on the screen, captured digitally.





The technology we are using is in development, not smooth or refined. It will improve so it becomes seamless and invisible, but for now we can touch its flaws and understand how it operates.

The Raspberry Pi miniature computer has educational potential, attached to a thumbnail-sized security camera in a beautifully crafted wooden box.

Light streams and projects into the box, bouncing off a concave mirror to form an image that lightly hangs on the paper screen, ephemeral, in colour and moving. As we walk the camera changes direction, light pours around the screen and fogs the image.

In the 1840s there was a portico over the door of the Hens and Chickens hotel on new street near here. I'd have stood with the hacked camera on the portico if it was still there in 2017, the light would've been better, the street noise further away.

We'd discussed placing one of the Wolcott cameras on the roof of the Odeon cinema, directly opposite the site of the Pantechnetheca that Shaw had photographed. It was too exposed and risked becoming a hazard to people below. The wind could have blown it away; perhaps this was the same fate as the statues on the front of the Pantechnetheca.

We put our camera in the window of Waterstones, safely ensconced behind glass.

It gazes down over New Street, looking at the street view Shaw recorded in silver.



FLOWERS







### **Key Hill Cemetery, August 2021**

I'm teaching cyanotype in the Jewellery Quarter Cemeteries at Warstone Lane, showing families and children how to make blue prints using flora and fauna from the graveyard, chatting about the symbolism of flowers carved into headstones. After the workshop, I walk down the road to Key Hill and commence several circuits of the Victorian area of the cemetery. Eventually I find George Shaw's family plot, flat and hidden amongst last year's leaves, not far from the upright obelisk commemorating George Dawson, his colleague at the Shakespeare Memorial Library. The impressive epitaph, clear and bright on the stone pays tribute to a sharp mind, well used during a 'long and useful life'.



I take a bird's-eye speedwell flower, snapping the thin stem against the stone. It is a common but beautiful and delicate weed nurtured by the rich soil of Shaw's bones. I press it in my notebook. Later I make some cyanotypes with the flower and paper that was left over from my teaching.

The heavy blue of the cyanotype does not hold the delicate detail, veins and colours of the petals wash out to a white outline. It feels too simple an act, too easy a process as a blunt commemoration for a man who knew the complicated intricacies of the daguerreotype. There is little nuance to the cyanotype. It is or it isn't. There is no in between. Despite testing varied exposure times; at least with the rapidly coated educational-grade paper materials that I'm using with children in daylight it doesn't hold details.

Shaw didn't make cyanotypes.

I decide to change my materials to a more sensitive coating of silver nitrate on a light paper that suits calotype negatives to make a salt print. This holds more detail. It's better. The paper by Canson frères would be familiar to Shaw, as would the silver nitrate – the granular, sugary white crystals the silver stock-in-trade of much of his life's work in electro-metallurgy. Later, I see the Canson watermark illuminated by morning light through an attic window on a salt print in his archive. We are using the same brand of paper.

During the repeated printing process, the pressure of the contact printing frame makes the delicate flower fall apart and the structure of the stem and leaves becomes knotted and complicated.

The salt print is made by physical contact with objects from the past.

Wet, in flux, during the process it responds and changes with the environment and its handling. It reflects the current environment, connecting history and the present day through photographic, chemical materials.

It is distorted and damaged then re-arranged, but there is detail and beauty in the layering of the petals that might otherwise be missed.





**Nuneaton, July 2018.**

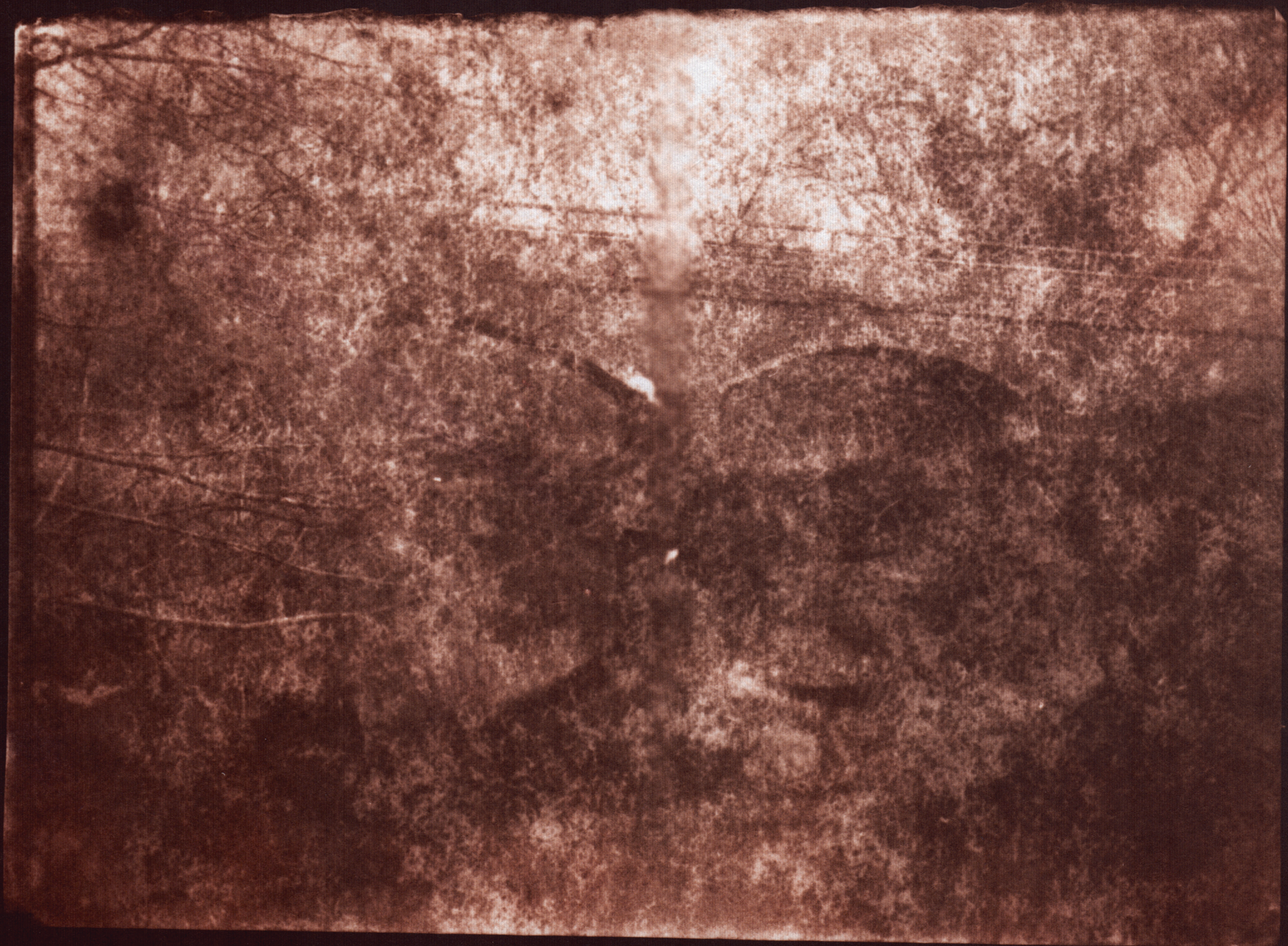
It takes me three days to get to a salt print from iodising blank paper for a calotype negative.

I expose salt prints in my family garden alongside laundry drying in the sunshine. They need constant observation and attention, washing, moving, smelling, stirring, changing.

I hold and appreciate them.

In the beginning my efforts are not reciprocated with beauty. They are messy. Paper textures print through, disrupting the lilliputian detail in the negative.











### **Nuneaton, December 2024**

It is the school Christmas Holidays and I'm teaching wet plate collodion to a friend who is also a mother, jeweller, Izzie Grove. My daughter is watching videos and drawing at the kitchen table.

She's bored and comes out to the studio to observe what we are doing and settles into my lap. I take care not to touch her white jumper with my gloved hands that removed the plate from the silver nitrate tank. We sit together whilst Izzie exposes an experimental wet plate portrait in the winter sun that bounces off the white wall of the studio building.

She moves closer for warmth and her face blurs as she smiles. She leans into the wall, a slouch of boredom, resistance and compliance that echoes backwards to Shaw's daguerreotype of his niece, Prudence Richards.

I'm never able to photograph them sharply, 'still' does not carry a precise meaning when you are 8.



**Shaw Archive, October 2021.**

Light falls at a forty-five degree angle through the small Velux window in the attic, illuminating the cold, sharp image suspended in time upon the gem-like surface of the daguerreotype encased in warm, tactile and soft red leather. The low, winter sun refracts through the loupe enlarging the details of the confident yet curious gaze that confronts me. The face I'm looking at communicates with the assured air of a talented man, secure in his privilege and ambition. Hairs rise on my arms despite the warmth of the comfortable workspace.

The image becomes a mirror.

I close the case and replace the image in its protective foam, carefully cut to size by Pete James, closing the lid of the archival cardboard box. The intense, crystalline silvery sharpness of the daguerreotype holds a powerful physical presence.

Behind glass, inside the case and the box, the man continues to look at the then smooth polished new wood of the camera.



**Caceres, April 2022.**

Making contemporary daguerreotypes is an act of time travel. Between the contemporary moment and 1840, and to more recent times in my practice.

I've got unfinished business making poor daguerreotypes in rainy Birmingham.

Hard, bright Spanish sunlight with the power for fast daguerreotypes glares off smears on the car window. As I pull into the town, posters with green hearts shout 'No A La Mina' from behind shuttered windows in narrow ancient streets. A lithium mine creeps into the landscape, a future spectre under the bleating goats on the hillside; updated photographic technology using extractive materials causing environmental damage for the next generation.

Extraction didn't stop after the industrial revolution, it just became less visible in the west.

Photography has always been and still is an extractive process.

In Joaquín Paredes Piris' cool, shady basement studio white silver nitrate crystals sit within Pyrex lab glass.

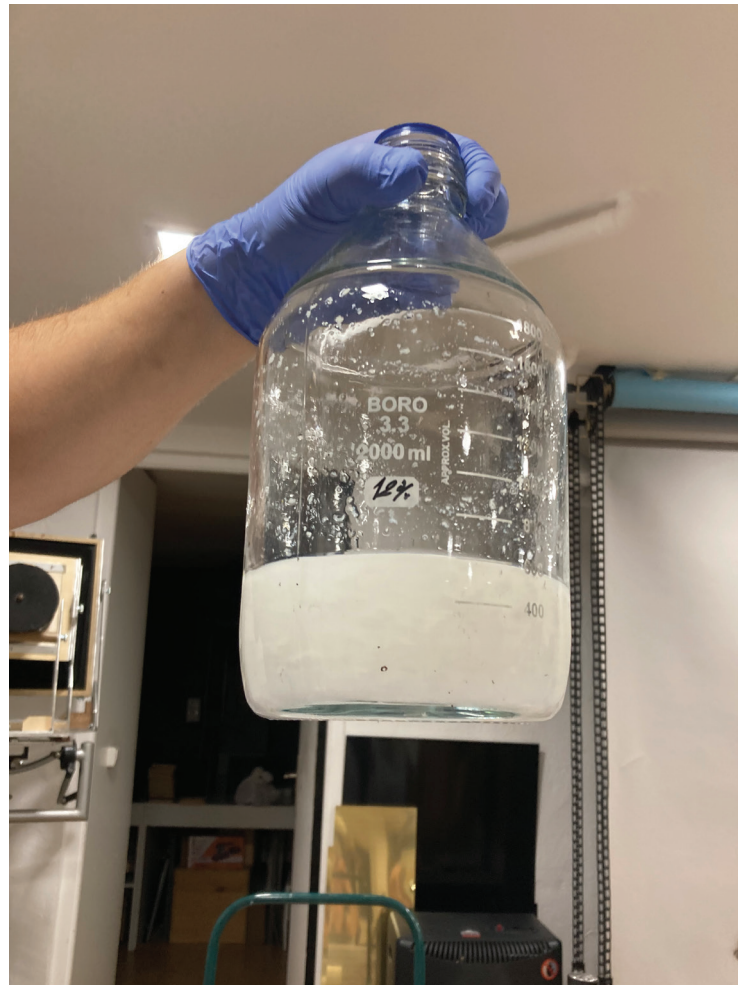
Glistening, reflective, sugary.

Measured precisely on a small electronic scale encrusted with chemicals, poured into the flask in a smooth motion from filter paper. Distilled water is poured into the vessel. Joaquín's hands rotate the glass to make a small tornado that swirls the liquid eroding the sharp edges of the silver particles in syrupy plumes to form a crystal-clear solution as the granular crystal forms dissolve into the fluid.

Potassium cyanide is added. It clouds, making a white curdled scum that pollutes the purity of the solution. Cottage cheese. A similar seemingly impossible lumpy curdled solution forms initially when iodising the calotype.

The solution turns milky and then clears, allowing light from fluorescent tubes to pass through the glass again as Joaquin holds it up for me to see.

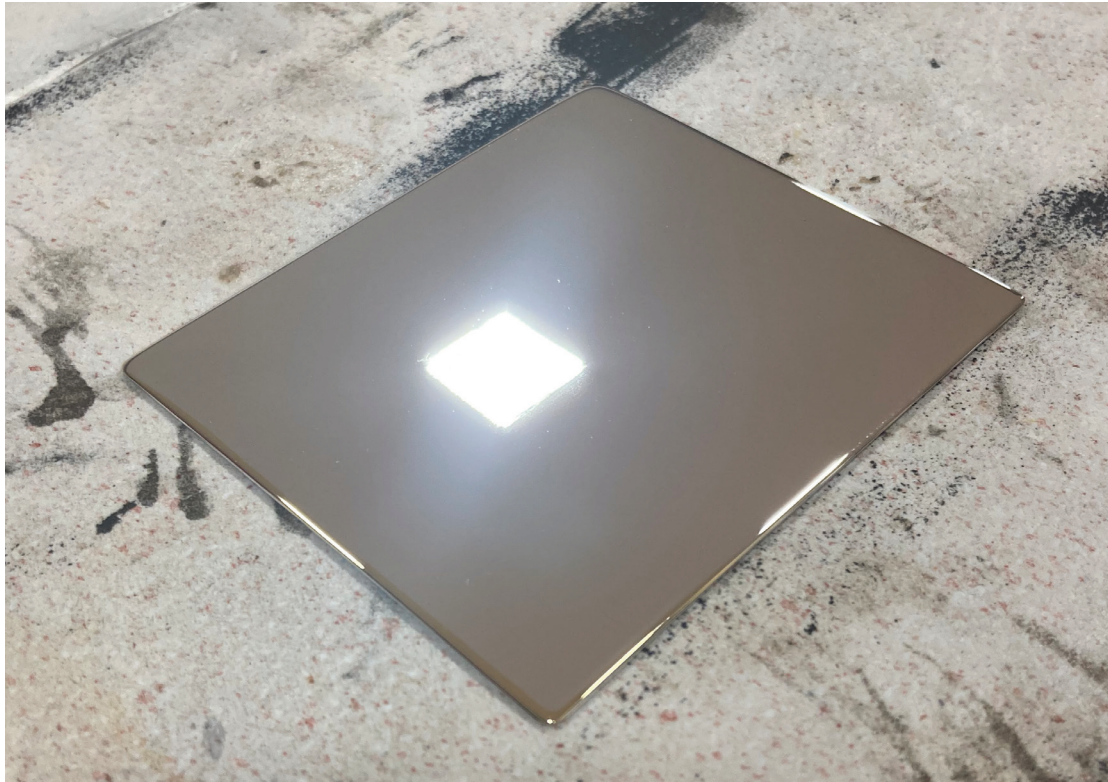
The crystals are transformed. A small miracle.



Watching Joaquin electroplate, handling the materials, I realise how crucial the qualities of silver are to the process. The solid silver plates I bought off've Cookson's in the Jewellery Quarter in 2014 are too hard. Electroplate material feels different to the solid silver and to clad plate I'd used before. It's delicate and easier to damage, easier to polish. It is pure, vulnerable to contamination. It'll scratch with the touch of a loose thread in the microfibre cloth.

I've become familiar with subtle differences in touch by softly coating calotype paper; making daguerreotypes with electroplate requires a similar deft hand.

I return a year later to collaborate with Joaquin and his electroplate to re-create Shaw's daguerreotypes.



The materials of early photography are a bodily experience both for photographer and sitter. I put myself in front of the camera to perform Marrian's role in Shaw's daguerreotypes. This enables me to understand the experience of being photographed for the person in the image, the collaborative nature of these materials in a sensory, embodied process.

The bodily nature of early photography and the daguerreotype makes the processes collaborative performances with materials.

I know the feeling of investing in being photographed. I know how these materials feel. I understand the way the material communicates in flux during the process through the smell and delicate cycles of colour changes to the surface. I understand the sensitivity needed in its handling, the pressure it can tolerate during polishing and that which will cause damage and scratches. I understand that the sensitivity of the material changes in relation to the environment it is used in and the way it is prepared.

The delicate balance of material sensitivity in early photographic processes is matched in power by the delicate emotional sensitivity of photographic surfaces in the portraits that they hold.

I understand Shaw's smile, the relief and satisfaction at a workable process as Joaquin holds an extended smile for a lengthy exposure in the warm, slow red and orange tones of evening sun on the last day of our re-creative work together.









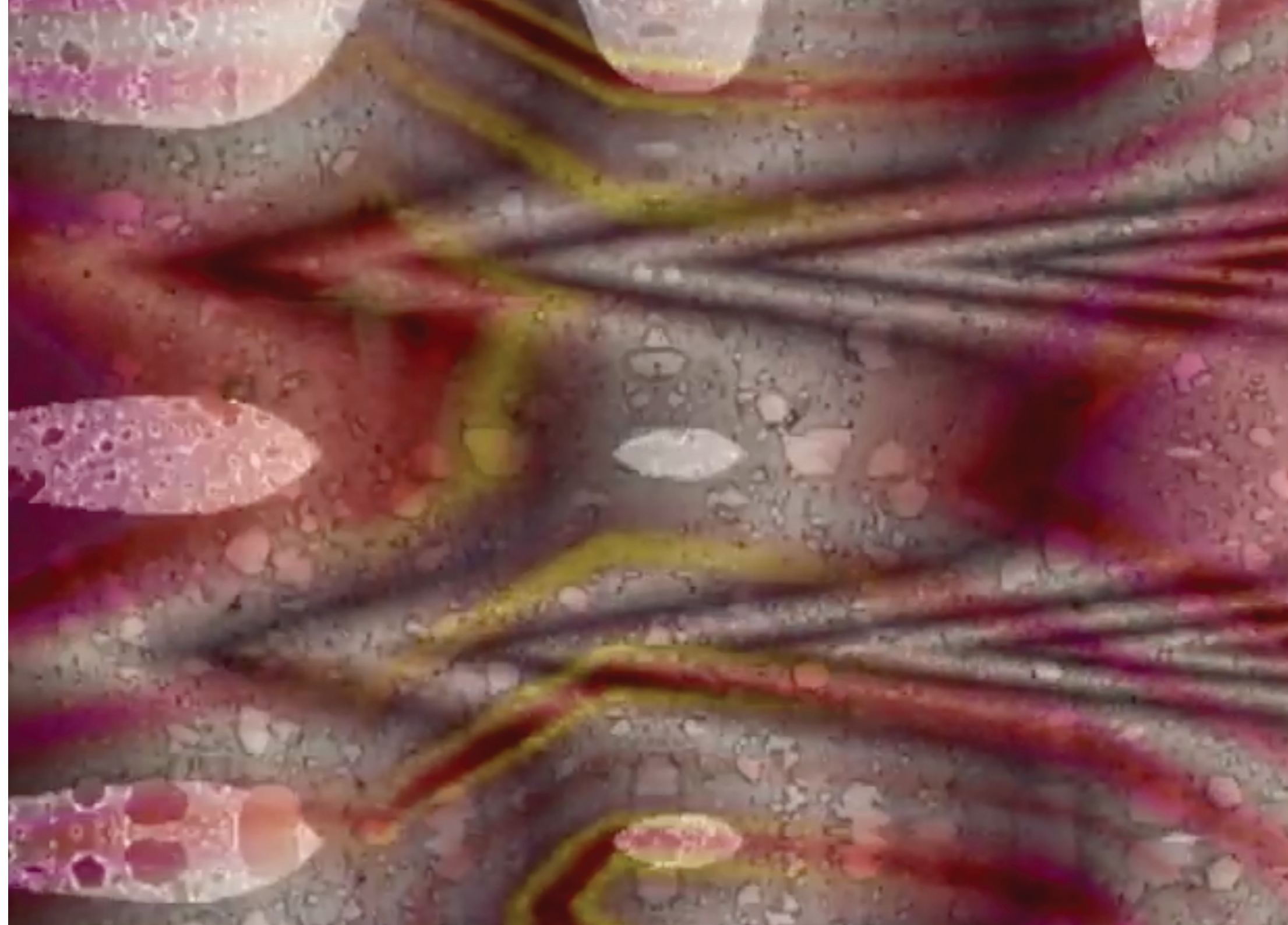
**Compton Verney, February 2024.**

The material structures animate and dance around the gallery space. Electron microscope scans showing the particle structures of calotypes and daguerreotypes driven by a small handheld magneto dynamo move over the walls, wrapping between and around the photographs, casting shadows. The space is filled with the hum of the electromagnetic field created by the movement of the magnets that spin as Leon Trimble turns the dynamo, connected by a sea of wires to a box of flashing lights. Electronic synthesisers hum and buzz, abstract and contemporary noise filling the space with light, movement and colour, a visual and sensory spectacle of technology. This collaborative, experimental performance foregrounds the sensory qualities of these materials as things to be experienced bodily.

I read J P Marrian's paper on the sonorous qualities of the magneto aloud to the assembled audience, embodying historic experiments that expanded the emerging fields of manufacture and industry into the spectrum of communication and cultural identity through photography and sound. In speaking J P's words, I share his tactile, sensory knowledge with a live audience as he did when lecturing at the Mechanics Institute in the 1840s. I embody him through the affectation of a second-hand jacket. Delivering his paper is both a performance and a way of understanding how these materials work upon and with the senses. Sharing photographic materiality collaboratively is a disruptive spectacle to the quiet peace that usually pervades the gallery spaces.

Outside, the red filtered window glows in the night, over the lake.





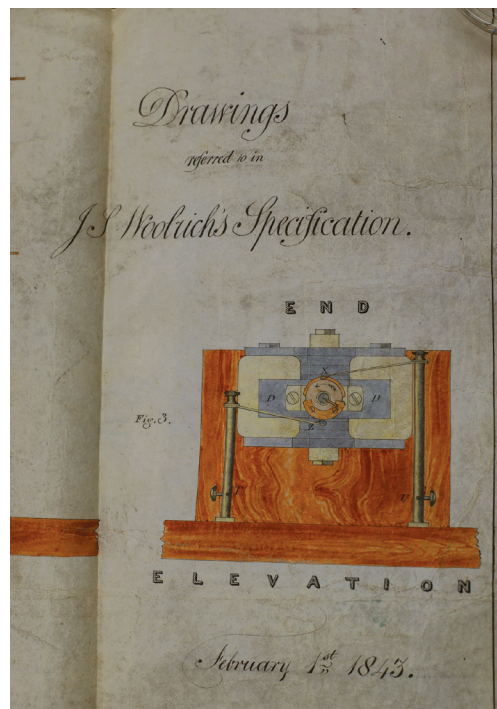
John Stephen Woolrich's magneto dynamo is safely ensconced in Perspex, silently on display in the Think Tank at Millennium Point, Birmingham. My daughter didn't notice it on a visit with her school, it is wooden and dull metal, overshadowed by exhibits which move and emit light and sound.

In 1845 this magneto dynamo was alive, at work producing magneto-plate silver in Thomas Prime's works on Northwood St, a stone's throw via a short downhill walk from Elkington's establishment. It had hummed and buzzed, adding to industrial noise that reverberated through the city, creating electrical sparks that illuminated the factory space. The spectacle of this technology was a sight to behold, visited by men of high scientific attainment and praised in Shaw's Manual of Electrometallurgy. Importantly it allowed for Woolrich jnr to escape Elkington's patents on electroplating, making it possible for him to operate legally as an electroplater within the close geographical confines of the city. This was vindicating for John Stephen Woolrich, a man who was described as a thorn in Elkington's side and pursued aggressively by Elkington for patent infringement on a process he felt that his father invented.

John Stephen Woolrich and his magneto-plate material were disruptive innovators that challenged established hierarchies in Birmingham, competing for their livelihood in a commercial, industrial environment.

The sparks from the dynamo had illuminated Michael Faraday when he visited with John Percy to see the results of his pure scientific thinking applied to industry.

Sparks of light from Leon's projections illuminate the gallery, unexpectedly catching on the clothes of visitors casting shadows





## **Nuneaton, March 2022**

The vats of Digbeth Water had sat below the surface of the Marrian's pub in the 1840s as electrolytic fluids sit hidden beneath the polished image surface of magneto-plate silver in the archive. Convivial fluids of silver and alcohol that are capable of both facilitating and disrupting communication.

The silver nitrate solution I use for wet plate pictures was mixed seventeen years ago. It's aged and operates as the fluids brewed in the farm, maintaining a 'mellowness of age and a briskness of youth,' occasionally replenished with a sprinkle of sugary crystals and maintained through sunning and boiling.

It's a liquid that tells stories, steeped in all the photographs it has produced.

I've made lots of portraits recently and it is ready for a cleansing steam to remove alcohol that has seeped in from contact with large sheets of glass coated with collodion. The potential presence of alcohol in the silver makes me nervous, I filter out precipitate as I pour the silver bath into the sensitising tank, hoping the alcohol evaporated from previous collodion plates won't interfere with the process today. I can't smell it strongly so it should be ok, but there is a tinge, an acidic smelling taint to the air around the mouth of the filter. In the pour bottle I mix old and new collodion to make a blend not too new – old, ripe, red toned collodion balanced with new fresh straw yellow syrupy solution of collodion to produce the right balance of tonal range and workability.

The past and present moments combine and 'the farm' Elizer Edwards described at the Marrian's pub remains, surfacing in my contemporary practice.



**Silver St, Coventry, April 2022.**

In the old grammar school building on a sunny Saturday morning, optical glass, without the trap of a mechanical shutter, sits behind a soft black velvet lined leather lens cap on my nineteenth century studio camera. The person in front of the camera is stilled by a delicate touch, balanced within an assemblage that stands in for a head brace.

As I load the plate holder into the back of the camera, liquid silver nitrate drips onto the floor, making a corona that slowly develops in time in the shade into a circular dark spot. It is in the shade and is not seen until a few days later once daylight had acted upon the spot, causing it to develop. This small corona on a paving slab is both after and before Harold Edgerton freezes his milk corona in the mid-1950s, 160 years after Shaw and Marrian freeze the shape of milk yet materially prior to Jeff Wall's photographic spillage of white liquid.

The materials are bending time.

I'm pushing things at this scale and there is more silver to slide and drip across the glass surface of the plate than when I've worked with this process before. It is the first time I've made portraits with this large camera publicly and I'm learning how the materials behave. It's a spectacle.

I count down to the moment of removing the lens cap, exposing the plate that has been opened by a visible removing of the dark slide when the person is comfortable and the camera is still. I hold my breath in sympathy with their stillness as the lens cap is removed and I pause, for the camera to be still, then countdown long seconds loudly willing the relief of movement and life to restart.

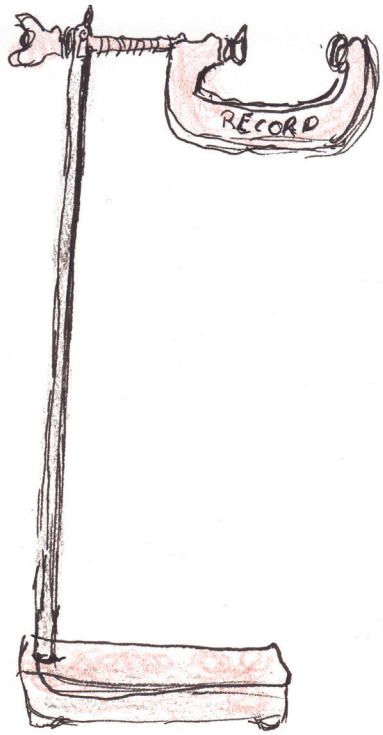
My head brace 1.0 supports the person in these first portrait sessions. It is an assemblage of a 'Record' vice clamp found in the garage, used by my partner for woodwork and by the previous occupant of my house before him, mid-twentieth century artist Jo Beck. The clamp is screwed onto a scientific retort stand lent to me by Coventry artist Adie Blundell and yet to be returned. An assemblage of woodwork and science helped along by familiar connections and art, that needs refining. I soften its brutal appearance with a silk scarf, humanising the mechanical tools. Later this becomes head brace version 2.0, a microphone stand and drawing curve, a slightly more refined combination of performance and drawing. It carries the metallic weight of photographic guilt in its heavy base as it provides an imperfect, wobbly anchoring point between the sitter and the ground.

I apologise for it to the people I am photographing.

Shaw's daguerreotype portraits were made informally, outdoors with a fast exposure speed and no head brace, it wasn't needed. Later I decide to work outdoors, with more light and then I don't need the head brace for stability. But the stand remains useful as a place marker, a focussing tool for balance rather than a brace to hold the sitter still.

I'm collaborating with my friend, photographer Jason Tilley, teaching him new old skills of wet plate photography. I'd first met Jason fifteen years ago in Pete James office in Birmingham, at the brutalist library building just off Paradise street. Spitting distance from the original Queens College building where Shaw and Percy had worked together. Explaining the process to Jason as we work and to the people we are making photographs with communicates what the materials are doing and feels like a fair exchange, knowledge and experience in return for a portrait and stories. At one point, the silver becomes too contaminated by alcohol from the large-scale collodion plates. It fogs, stops working and takes me a while to figure out why. Alcohol can fog clarity in an image and in life. No-one seems to mind except for me, they are curious to talk, to see the camera. We share our frustrations.

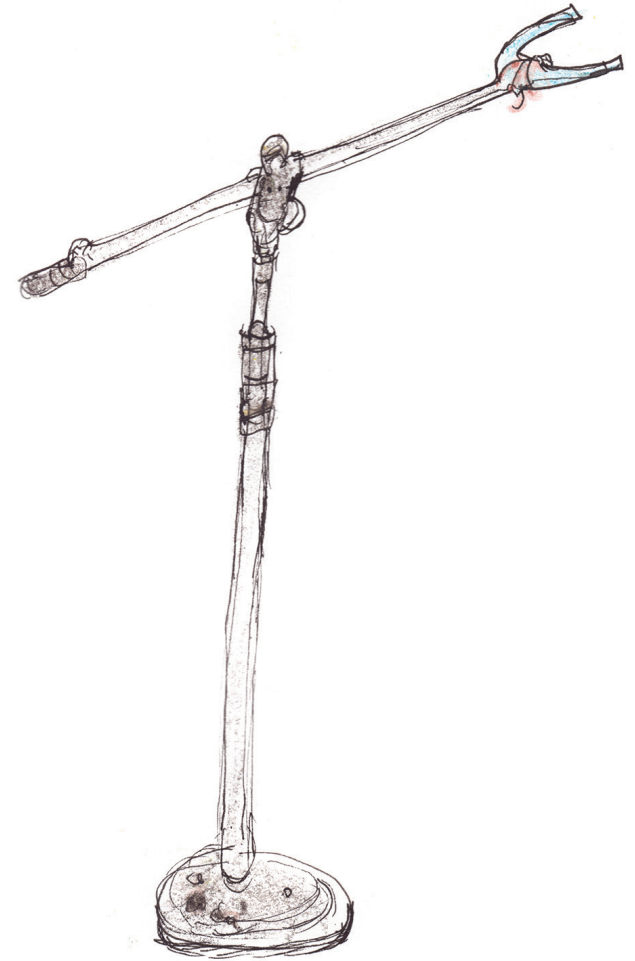
The process goes beyond the image, it is an experience that articulates our lives. The process of photography brings people together, forging networks of support.



Head Brace 1.0.



Head Brace  
1.5.



Headbrace 2.0.



### **Compton Verney Chapel, November 2023**

My photographic equipment and materials are not mechanical. The movement of my body and human touch in the processes are central.

It's cold in the chapel and my body temperature affects the collodion surface, an element of the process I am in tension with, working both with and against the impact of my body upon the photographic materials. I wear three gloves on my left hand, layering and separating my skin from the plate to avoid warming the glass and putting finger-sized circular variations in tone on the plate surface.

Pouring plates is a deft action within a balancing act.

If I'm nervous, tired or working in an unstable situation my body reacts and the materials misbehave - chemicals spill, drip and flow in the wrong direction, glass breaks and smears with sweat from my palms. Silver scratches, smudges, paper tears, wood sticks.

In a well-rested, collaborative and hospitable environment, these early material processes flow and portraits are convivial and productive. The materials respond to their human handling in flux during the processes of transforming and making an image.

These photographic materials are a perceptive mediator of human emotion, my emotions during the making process as well as those of the person in the portrait, preserved on the finished image surfaces of the plates. Sensitive surfaces.

The photographic materials and technology respond to the environment and the weather.

It is a dark day in November in the chapel making exposure times as long as two minutes, well beyond the limit that it is possible to hold perfectly still for a portrait. Damp winter air makes the wood on my dark slide swell; it resists opening and I pull the tab harder. The tab pulls away and the sensitised, exposed plate is trapped. I lever the door of the plate holder with the lid off a broken biro found in the bottom of my bag in the dark, releasing the latent image for development. It's slow to appear, the winter light is too flat. Liquid developer is held by the surface tension of the glass beyond the recommended 15 seconds of development time. Highlights aren't visible on the plate so I hold the developer on the plate surface in my left hand for longer. That reluctantly coaxes an image into being.

The image fogs, as the fog hangs low in the sky outside.

My hand tilts slightly and developer sluices off the plate in a clean sweep. There is an image but it is faint, foggy. It would not have passed muster in a Victorian portrait studio, where process artifacts were not valued and the aesthetic and commercial drive was for clean, sharp images. Yet today it speaks of the making process, of time passing and of history. It's not technically my best work but it holds a sense of time and process. Most importantly, Alun, the person who is in the photograph, likes it and is pleased to see their portrait made with a nineteenth century process. The process has done its job in this instance.

A local resident sings evocative seventeenth century choral songs from the balcony and his haunting voice swells around the chapel, echoing from the tombstones, adding to the sensory experience of the past, muffled under the red light inside my processing tent.





### **Nuneaton Library, April 2023.**

I put to work what I'd learnt through practice, working on the street outside Nuneaton library with the outside Victorian studio camera, maximising the available light, using the shelter of the building for my darkroom and to house the camera when it rains.

Libraries are places of support that allow networks to become established, beyond a simple place to borrow books. Nuneaton library acts as a hub for local services to support people. Birmingham central library supported the development of photography in the city as did Queens College, both no longer exist in the same form. The modernist building of Nuneaton library, with large, beautifully curved windows that bring the town outside the building inside, is soon to be demolished. I work to gather stories, making portraits and memorialising the place through the people who use it. The building holds memories as do the photographs that I make. Photographs memorialise.

Networks of people in a place communicate to develop technology, spread ideas. To survive. Moments of connection in places pass and new places emerge, things are in flux and change. Liquids ooze and move in the collodion surface that flows, active in the process and environment before it gels and sets. Both my work and Shaw's is collaboration with people and materials, pushing at the boundaries of technology future and past to communicate. I'm not re-inventing the wheel but I'm learning in the present from the past.

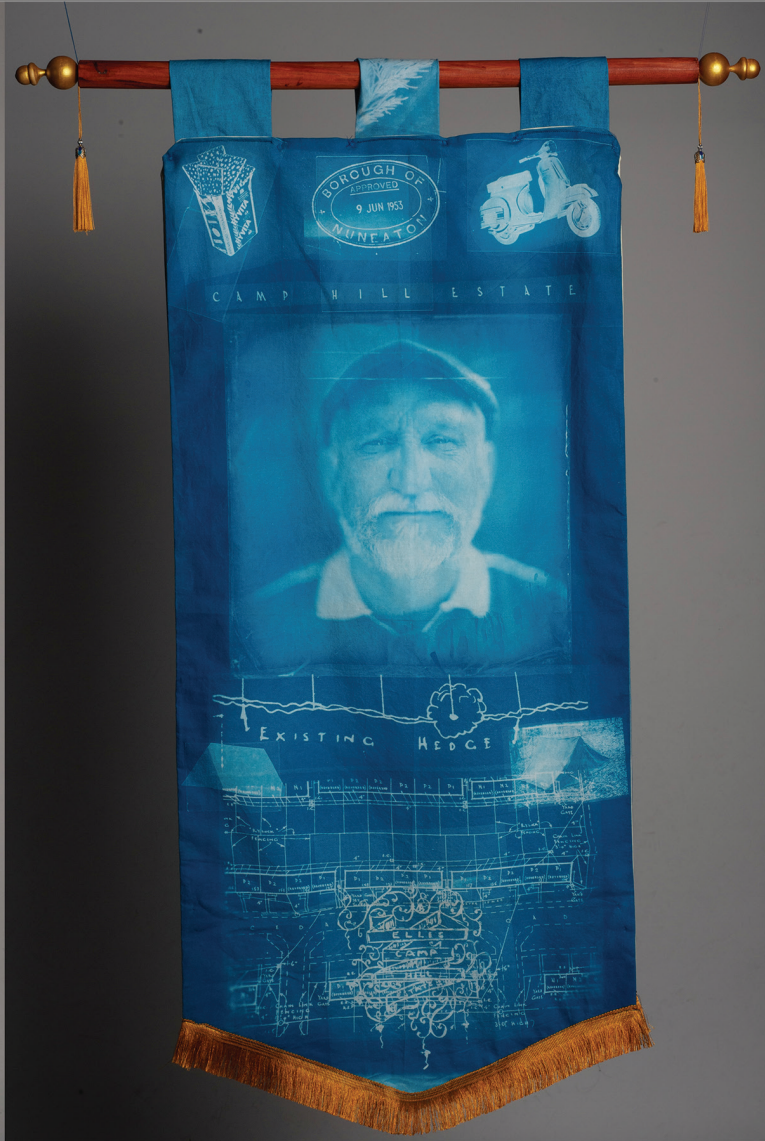
The historical camera I'm working with is a spectacle, a performance of novel technology – novel in its age now rather than the newness of Shaw's was in the 1840s. My camera draws people in for a conversation about history. My lens is later and slower than those Shaw used but still ancient in the contemporary moment, large and brass-bound. I'm told on the street that it looks like 'summat off've the Titanic' in a Bedworth accent. A mixed accent that is the product of migration to the mining town from Newcastle, Scotland and the north, an extractive economy where people were brought together to work the now redundant coalface. Off've. From, of, have. Both from and of a place, taken from and belonging to. Photographs were submerged with the Titanic, layers of personal histories beneath the liquid surface of the sea. The photographs I make preserve personal histories with memories of the place in the fluid photographic emulsion on plate glass, sealed in a thick lavender and sandarac varnish.

Sheila has a story to tell. She is part of the history of her town and wants this to be recorded for posterity. She arrives at the library in her best clothes with a sparkling necklace and eyes. She has prepared, carefully recording her history of the place, her story of love and life on Nuneaton's milk floats at the co-op dairy. It's an important story of her daily life, highly personal and moving that has been told before and recorded. Her experiences in the town are individual, like each of the people I photograph, individual experiences in a place at a certain time that must not be generalised. Her portrait is personal and her stories are human, fleeting and precious. The subjective experience of being photographed and the experience of looking at a photograph changes according to our response to the materials and how the materials respond to us.

The material of wet plate collodion is problematic in recording human skin. Reds, pinks and oranges appear darker with wrinkles and marks in the skin highlighted because of this spectral sensitivity of the material. I know the commercial and emotional importance of a portrait that smooths skin, I've spent long hours re-touching skin on early versions of photoshop in the back-room of the high-street portrait studio on Ball Hill. Photographer Gabi Jandu taught me to use over-exposure with a digital camera and studio lights to make a flattering portrait as a teenager in his portrait studio in Coventry; but the collodion material I'm working with here cuts the light differently and there is no room for easy retouching. On the street outside the library, Sheila watches the plate appear in the fix and asks if she 'really looks that old?' The photographic surface bends time and the spectral sensitivity of the light sensitive surface. The photographic material is not neutral and records things in specific ways that have an emotional impact when photographs shape the way we see ourselves. The marks of time are her life and memory. Her photograph emerges from the clouds in the fixative, and I print the image on the non-emulsion side to soften it with a few millimetres of glass to diffuse the focus.









**National Science and Media Museum, Bradford, March 2022.**

Shaw has aged in the large-scale portrait made in 1849 by John Jabez Edwin Mayall. His image floats on and within the silver surface, reflecting the tiled ceiling of the archive and the iPhone I record it with. He has lost some hair and gained a little weight between sittings, changed his waistcoat. His face changes as the light moves. I recognise him.

The stiff, starched and high white collar cut uncomfortably into his neck. He'd worn his best clothes for the photograph, this was his city attire. In the landscape with Henshaw, he'd dressed more comfortably. The stiff fabric holds Shaw's neck still and extended, he looks composed, ready for exposure. He's hoping the materials work well.



### **Packington Park, October 2021.**

The remaining leaves move too easily in the autumn wind to be sharp in the calotypes so I wait to photograph the tree branches in winter. During the autumn, whilst the leaves still cling to the trees I use the digital camera on my phone to plan the calotypes. In sharp contrast the calotype process records the sensation of being in place, the passing of time and the reaction of the chemicals in paper to the environment, not simply the light or the object being photographed; it is a process of being in a place. My historical brass and wood field camera records the longer moment and sensation of being in a place, the surfacing of history in the parkland.

Walking in Packington Park, I can feel the surfacing of history and map Shaw and Percy's calotypes in the landscape. The people I met at the Hall think that Shaw's photographs may have been made behind Hall Pool. I spent several days walking this area, sharing the space with shrieking corvids, exploring the ruins of an old mill before finding the path out of the woods to the River Blythe.

The topography remains as it was in the 1840s. The view is as it was seen by Shaw and his camera. Photographs don't exist by Shaw or Percy of the mill, and as I photograph the ruined mill wheel, I realise this is because it is heavily backlit by the sun and sinks into the shade of the topography of the land. My calotype of the mill is fogged by direct light hitting the lens, it contains an odd highlight and solarisation. The position of the sun in front of the camera lens has made the calotype paper fog and drawn in the outline of the metal wheel. The lie of the land is not suited to the photograph. Perhaps Shaw had known this and so turned his camera around instead to the trees and the path.





I head out of the woodland, walking downhill towards the River Blythe. The fisherman and the farmer I've met in the landscape who work in this area of the parkland talk of changes to the flow and path of the river, but it's general location and the topography of the land remain constant. There are fewer trees here to block the light in the valley and the land is flat; it is a good position for the right angle of sunlight to communicate with the calotype paper in favourable weather conditions. Today, rain picks up and I shelter the camera under a spotty umbrella.

Shaw made a calotype here. He'd likely seen the view from the railway viaducts on the way through the parkland.

The height of water flowing in the river changes daily. Traces of what was there before remain, sometimes visible and sometimes submerged. A monument to Shaw's calotype remains in a weathered post of wood which sits in the river. A post which had supported the old bridge he photographed. The post is both surfaced and submerged, depending on the weather. It is a monument that surfaces and disappears that I return to photograph throughout the winter.

Post medium. Post photography. Post digital.









### **Nuneaton, February 2022.**

The moon remains as full and silvery as it was during the iodising of the paper the previous night when I head out to the garage shed to sensitise the paper at 5am. I was worried about fogging from the moonlight during the extended wash of the paper overnight with the garden hose, but at this stage, iodine is in excess of silver in the paper surface. It's not very sensitive.

Luminous clouds fly rapidly over a partially clear sky. The wooden door is nearly blown clean away in a gust of wind when I head outdoors to collect the glass plates from the shed. Storm Dudley is blowing over as I wash the glass at the kitchen sink, questioning the logic of long exposures today with my antique wooden camera. I'll use a stronger sensitiser to speed things up. I take comfort in the storm, 'Dudley,' carrying a Midlands name and decide to carry on; it might have an affinity with the history I'm chasing. Shaw senior was born and worked as a glass maker in Holly Hall, Dudley. I wonder if he is demanding attention, surfacing, in the wind that rattles by. I clean and polish the glass plates to an immaculate shine, stacking them on the cutting mat next to plate holders and a blade on the kitchen worktop. Lifting this pile to move out of the house into my temporary darkroom tent in the soon to be demolished garage, a sheet of glass slides and shatters on the tiles, sending dogs scooting out of the kitchen. I stop to collect and sweep the shards which could cut a child's foot in the short time it will take for them to be up and calling out of the kitchen door, shoeless in their pyjamas.

The darkroom tent is set, and iodised paper sliced to plate size and stretched, taped onto the blotting paper. I pause from sensitising the prone paper, aiming to limit the time between sensitising and developing to the shortest possible to try to stop the stained paper which muddied the already soft, grey weather contrast in last week's negatives. The stronger sensitiser is more likely to fog. I go to walk the dogs who are waiting anxiously by the kitchen door. Over the canal towpath a small circle of clear blue sky is emerging from the night as the birds sing a raucous spring dawn chorus. I return and feed the children, who were woken by the whining of the dogs:

Toast, cereal, tea and biscuits; CBeebies to keep them happy and then back out to the shed.

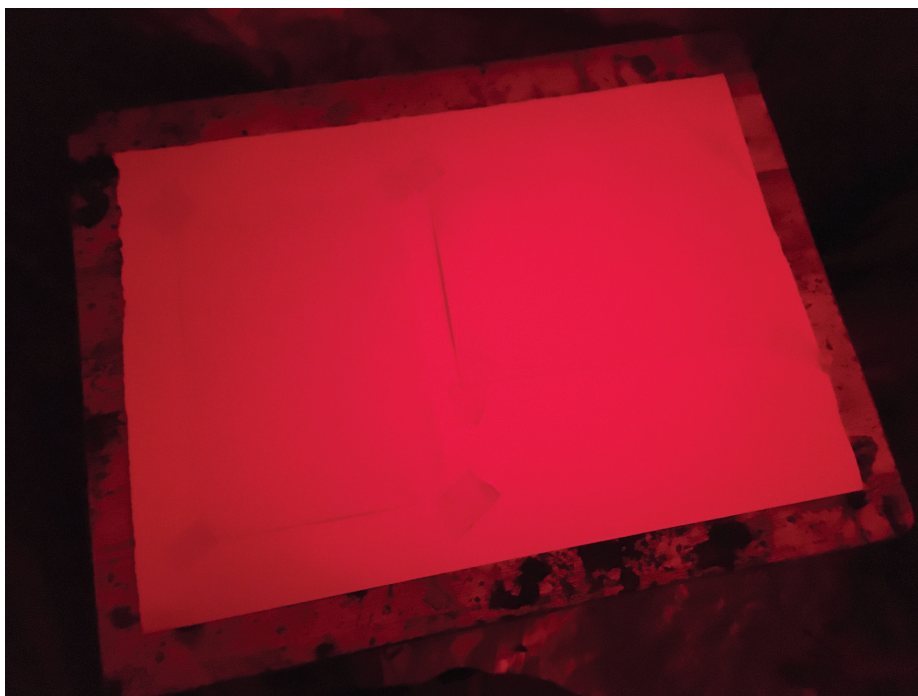
The acetic acid is in its solid glacial form and a bowl of hot water gently steams it back into motion. Glacial, icy, a chemical named by drawing together the natural phenomena of the landscape with the lab practices of chemistry. The glaciers are melting. The small glacier inside the plastic bottle melts and smells like chips from a distance, at closer range it stings.

I paint 6 new shiny and damp landscapes with an eye on blending the liquid horizon lines as they emerge onto the paper, glinting under the dark red light when viewed with a squint at the right angle, with my body contorted in the small tent.

Landscapes as yet of nothing, isolated behind glass.

Rain and wind batter the corrugated asbestos roof of the garage that threatens to blow away as I do the school run, hoping the weather will lift.

2.5ml aceto-nitrate. 14 drops glacial acetic acid (more than usual to try and restrain the staining)





## **Packington Park, January 2022**

In the car, the radio talks of the end of storm Dudley and the damage done as the sky clears. Another storm, Eunice is on the way and I hope to operate in its lee today, before it blows over the park. A straight ruled line of grey cloud hangs in the sky. It's moving away. The sun and calm miraculously emerge. Urban Cookie Collective on the commercial station sing of having the key and the secret and HS2 works divert me around the long way. Skylarks hover over the field looking for their precarious nests as I bump downhill on broken suspension to the river valley. It's bright and still as I park near the river. I cross the bridge over the swollen river, the hooks on my waterproof boots catch each other. I fall. Instinct makes me cradle the antique wooden camera against my body, protecting it from the ground I take the weight of my fall in my knees. I can feel this a week later as I write and a deep purple bruise emerges from behind my kneecap. The camera is undamaged, cushioned by my body.

Two swans graze by the water's edge. The flood plain is wet, the water has been over and they dabble in the puddles, enjoying the damp grass as they leave triangular tracks in the mud. They've moved downstream from Hall Pool, blown away from the large body of water by the storm winds to find shelter behind the trees.

The river is the highest I've seen it. I'm not getting in it today. The pole that remains of the old bridge is covered with only a small v shape in the surface flow patterns revealing its place under the water; it's only just holding its place, marking time passing in the landscape. It could be washed downstream, past the smooth hill of the former landfill site by my next visit. I set up to make a calotype of the whole river, willing the swans to stay still on the bank at the edge of the ground glass frame. I focus on the ripple just visible on the surface where the post is hidden by the rivers flow. The dark slide sticks and awkwardly crops the moving swans.

EV14 exposure 11 seconds.

My spotty umbrella blocks the gusting wind from touching the camera and blurring the image. I need more hands as my body becomes a makeshift shelter from the wind that is intent on moving the camera, catching the open dark slide like a sail as the damp calotype paper is exposing in the camera.

Moving downstream, closer to the submerged pole I briefly consider again standing in the water to make the calotype. The pull of the water is strong. I'd been in on the last visit, measuring the river's height against the pole that memorialises its past. I decide, sensibly for once, that it is too high and fast today, the water would be well over my waders and the camera carried downstream by the fast flow. It is foaming ominously. I set up the camera on the bank, spreading the legs of the tripod low and hoping that the wind doesn't send it into the water.



The water courses rapidly, a stream of shit, angrily fast-flowing, rushing over the pole that had once supported a bridge over the river. Carrying in the movement of the water the anger of the fisherman who spits in frustration as he talks of the environment agency. The rustic, rural wooden bridge that once was photographed by Shaw and painted in several places by Henshaw remains as a striated monolith, layers of wood sculpted by flowing water.

A memorial to a different era.

Sunk and obscured by the high water today.

This bridge, now a pole, was even then a Victorian motif of a simpler country existence, a picturesque way home from the fields for the industrialised urban middle classes of Birmingham. Self-made men and industrialists of the city, drawn in by a view of a simpler life already nostalgic to those working in the 1850s city, removed from the natural landscape.

The river had bubbled gently in sunlight, low beneath Shaw and Henshaw's bridge. It's now a raging torrent. The middle class, urbanised and suburban lifestyle that Henshaw's paintings and etched prints sold a rural ideology to has today resulted in new houses, concrete driveways, tarmacked roads and infrastructure channelling more water upstream into the river. Yet the beauty of Henshaw's painting, Shaw's photograph, offers a soothing balm to the reality of the landscape as a lived experience. The paintings, the photographs, answer calmly to notions of suburban isolation, not far away, where reproductions of these paintings sit fashionably framed on the walls of immaculately cleaned suburban homes.



The undercurrent of the river, disrupted by the post forms a v-shape in the surface of the water, an arrowhead pointing to changes in the landscape. Progress and manufacture impact upon the rural environment, they are felt here. The bridge was here before climate change was reported on. Before it was known that manufacturing improvements, reliant upon extractive industry would spark changes to the climate cycle. When the Chartists protested in Birmingham during 1839 was their movement away from the land partially what they were angry about? The industrial revolution took people from the fields around Packington into the city. Photography is complicit in this. This movement away from land concealed climate changes. Hidden undercurrents move under the surface of the water, under the surfaces of the photographs. Undercurrents of fear and dis-empowerment at rapid, wholesale changes to a way of life. Photographs construct an aspirational identity for the young men in Shaw's images. Painters who have become dislocated from cycles of the land and of politics regain this connection, for themselves and their audience through their art. In 1839 the fields that Francis Marrian knew as a child were ceasing to surround New St in the centre of the city.

The pole that supported the bridge's structure remains, disrupting the flow of the water and directing the undercurrent. A rupture to the flow, a marker of time.

The simpler rustic bridge has been replaced downstream by steel from the Birmingham and Derby Junction railway. Beyond this, the digger's metallic jaws glint in the light as it turns the topsoil on the former landfill site on the horizon where waste without the value to make it into the archive decomposes under the smooth hill. HS2 rises into ruin behind the crumbling stone bridges, increased speed to London, flattening time and space. In many ways, obsolete before it is made. Planned obsolescence sits in the landfill site.

I photograph the light that moves on the surface of the water, using obsolete processes.

EV 14.5 exposure 11 seconds.





The slow exposures of the Calotype today are made faster by the bright sun bouncing off the shape of the water's surface which makes the river and the pole disappear. A faint shadow of the v-shape remains impressed on the calotype paper, softened by the rapid movement of the water. The bridge is drawn back in by the movement of chemical materials under my hand, a chance interaction between place, material and process that has happened here before. I hold the tripod, resisting the wind that threatens to blow the camera into the river with a fallible dotty umbrella.

The light drops and the incoming cloud makes the previous exposure feel too short. I head back upstream to the swans and retake the first shot of the swollen river. The aloof swans have gone away, grazing further along the bank and refuse to be tempted back into shot for the crumbs of my 11am biscuit. Why would they? – the early almost-spring grass is sweet and fresh.

EV 13 exposure 40 seconds.

I sit on the driest mound of grass I can find to change the plates and damp seeps through my coat as I swap the plates over in the dark bag. Noticing mud on my fingers I dabble in the icy water to clean them first, drying them on the dark cloth that swaddles the plates; avoiding contamination of the paper. Natural agents like mud have the potential to cause spontaneous development in the volatile calotype paper.

Walking over the wind-flattened reed-bed of the flood plain, unstable ground shifts beneath the dry matting of rushes. It's hard to tell where the river ends and solid ground begins. A lone oak tree with a huge bird box on the side resists the incoming storm winds that are picking up pace. The reeds and rushes in this grassland have been flattened by the previous winds from the storms. Behind this tree the bridges stretch, crumbling, once carrying the trainline away to London. The wind gusts across the crunchy grass, pushing south across the park, the same direction that the trains picking up speed created a breeze through open carriage windows on the faces of passengers. I tie the darkcloth around my shoulders as a shawl against the wind and unfold the wooden box of the camera.

EV 12.5 exposure 50 seconds.

I've overcooked it and the focus slides off behind the tree as the 150 year old brass mechanism resists on my camera. It should have retired to landfill long ago. The wind batters the wooden box and I put up feeble resistance with the spotty umbrella as light touches the calotype paper. The heavy branches of the tree offer a good resistance to the increasing wind, remaining relatively still. I hope they can find the softness to bend and flex around the incoming force of Storms Eunice and Franklin. A cormorant streaks overhead towards hall pool and a buzzard drops onto the field behind the embankment.



I fold the wooden camera and head into the more sheltered lee of the railway arches. Here the wind is not gusting, sheltered by crumbling bricks. The warmth of spring can just be felt in the bright light, the sun's rays turning the grass a brighter green. It's too early for spring. Finches dart in the small trees which emerge from the riverbank. Distant machinery whirs and a reversing beep sounds, carrying across the landscape from the devastation of HS2 or downhill from the landfill site. A jet engine roars overhead as I set up the tripod. I'm comfortable in the shadow of the bridges today, there are no unexpected branches crackling and I don't feel observed.

The bridge at Packington failed in 1935, but the bricks won't fall today. The stonework of the viaduct does not move in the wind, holding firm as it anchors in place onto the damp paper. Sharper than the trees that move with the wind.

EV 12.5 exposure 30 seconds.





I head back to the car for tea on the saggy boot. I can see the spire of Little Packington church where Percy photographed over the viaduct as the winter branches are still stripped of their leaves. Marvelling at the time I briefly consider rushing to return in time for a zoom meeting but I've not prepared. I make myself lighter, shedding the thoughts of the meeting, dark bag and exposed plates into the car and walk into the woods behind hall pool to make the last exposure. The rooks are silent today, the storm has driven them from the trees.

The light has changed. Now it is a flat grey that suits the shadows within the wood, less contrast allowing for the details of the trees to impress upon the calotype paper. This is the slower, flatter detail revealing light I needed last time in these woods, at the mill. I only have one remaining sheet of sensitised paper and need a better version of this view.

Shaw made this view before me.

EV 11 exposure 1 minute.

Arriving back at the car I call the estate office let them know I'm safely done, not trapped beneath wind broken trees in the woods or washed away by the raging river.

It is comforting to know that they care.

I drive off up the field watching skylarks again hovering next to the car, looking for their precarious ground nests between the crops in the plough. I'm grateful for the brief window in the weather as the car radio warns of future storms and on commercial radio, Natalie Imbruglia sings of impossible things.

I return to the crumbling concrete shed to develop the calotypes.





### **Compton Verney, July 2023**

We met in the servant's hall to discuss the logistics of working in the lake. **SERVANTS HALL** hangs in gilt letters above the door to make sure everyone is in their place. Above the long table the cold dead eyes of the Verneys, George, John and Greville stare down upon us from portraits in ornate gilt frames. Bedworth eyes will stare back at them in a few months. The delicately painted Verneys are pale, lily-white, removed from the tanning of the elements in their carefully constructed landscape. Soil dug and turned by workers directed by the grand plans of Capability Brown to offer them a perspectival view of a landscape painting from the shelter of the Palladian columns.

Throughout our health and safety meeting the dead-eyes of the Verneys continue to stare downwards, they look like pallid fish. Cod-eyed.



Later, at the lake we pull a floating common roach from the water, its glassy fish-eyes putrid and soft, dead, poked with a stick. It stinks, putrid sulphur decomposing rotten flesh. It has died by consumption, choking on a chub that was too big when it tried to eat it that remains wedged in its mouth.

The two separate in a last-gasp which expels more putrid air from the fishes rotten insides.

I wonder if its decomposition will phosphoresce at night, like John Beale's putrid pig carcass but it stinks too much to find out. The boys are now lobbing it at each other, along with handfuls of pondweed so I wrap it in the black plastic of a dog poo bag and bin it.

Nature, consumption, greed, waste.

The pondweed the boys are lobbing is the tickling fingers and hair of Jenny Greenteeth, the apocryphal lady of the lake from English folklore, who drags children and the elderly to their underwater deaths. The thought of the pondweed as Jenny's hair and what might lie beneath the surface, bigger, ready to consume us is terrifying. Tales pedalled by irate groundskeepers of six-foot sturgeon and mythical tangling Jenny or poisonous blue-green algae lurking in the depths persist to keep trespassers from swimming in other local Capability Brown lakes, to keep people in their places in the hierarchy of the landscape.

The blue light after sunset hangs still above the lake for a drawn-out hour and a half after the sun has disappeared behind the bridge and the road, behind the grand house. The lake surface shivers, silvery.

We work like ants between the car park and the shore, moving large chemical trays, the boat and the bulky raft through the woods to the lake, beneath the ancient great cedar tree. Plastic green twine which binds the reused photo-chemical tanks to the raft threatens to snap with gravity as we put the weighty raft down on the ground. The pallet that held building blocks for my studio creaks and groans as it settles into position on land. It is made for the surface of the water, not the soil. I turn on the red lights in the tanks via remote control and they glow silently in the half-light of the evening.

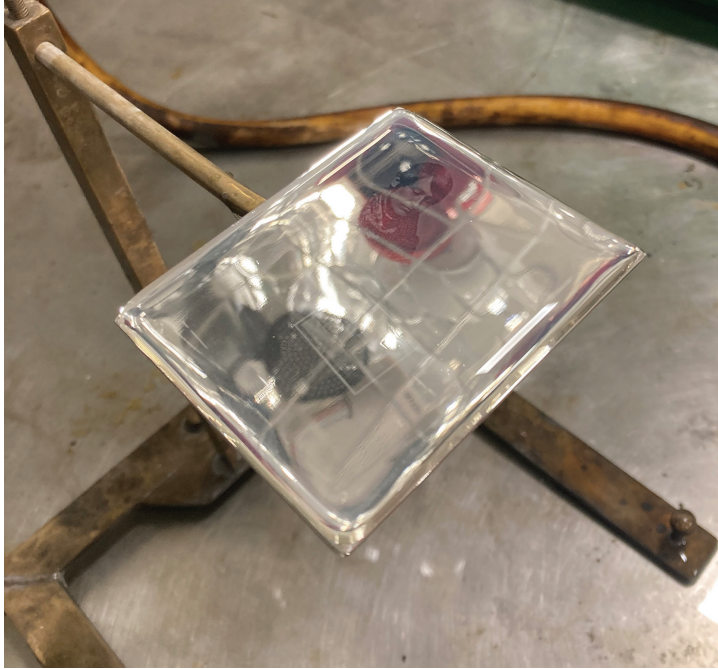
The dead fish might be silently phosphorescing in the bin, beneath the black plastic layer of the dog poo bag.

The darkroom has no roof, its ceiling is a hawthorn tree offering shade against the blue light of the evening. A red strip of LEDs is stretched to mark its edge between the trays and the lake. Trays containing liquid chemical surfaces of dev and fix are separated from the edge of the lake by a sheet of heavy plastic, recycled DPM from my studio build, towels and the strip of red light which glows in the almost-darkness.





It is almost dark enough now and a three-quarter moon has risen above the lake. The water surface has changed from glassy blue to a moonlit silver. A liquid silver which stretches away to the horizon, channelled by the gentle man-made valley, still and polished on the surface with hidden currents and flows moving below. Imperceptible currents and flows under the still surface are driven by the pull of the moon and gravity, invisible cycles of the earth. These natural forces were imitated by Woolrich's magneto machine in the flow and force moving electrolytic liquids in tanks at Thomas Prime's works. The flow and material structure of the liquid silver is frozen beneath the image surface of George Shaw's photographs. In places here, in the almost dark blue of the night reflections of clouds punctuate the polished surface from above and pond weed fingers bloom from below, as the clouds appear on an electro-silvered daguerreotype plate before polishing.





I swam the lake earlier, in daylight, tracking the hazardous weed patches. Green teeth and clawed fingers occasionally grabbed at me, sometimes gently, a soft fingered tickle but in the centre of her body of water away from the swim paths Jenny pulled and tangled with a hard-edged, sharp weedy grasp that could take you down to the sharp freshwater mussel teeth on the silty bottom of the lake. A kayak, spotters and a risk assessment do battle for the use of the lake. At night we stay in the shelter of the cedar tree, hoping that she doesn't climb down from its branches and slip under the surface.

James Poole didn't need waders when he felt the allure of Jenny Greenteeth, but it is cold tonight for summer and the water remains at a spring temperature so we protect ourselves from Jenny and the chill of repeated dunking with the flexible warm neoprene of wetsuits. Shiam is almost invisible in black neoprene against the dark whilst my orange arms, gaudily inscribed with 'open water' in an irritating script blend with the red glow of the raft. Seals, sealed, encased in black plastic, like the dead fish and the photographic paper, protected from the influence of the elements. I doubt the pale skin of the Verneys went in the lake, it would have been beyond their decorum. They would have viewed it from a distance through the surface of a Claude glass. Rose-tinted black glassy reflections, eighteenth century Instagram filters that did not feel reality.





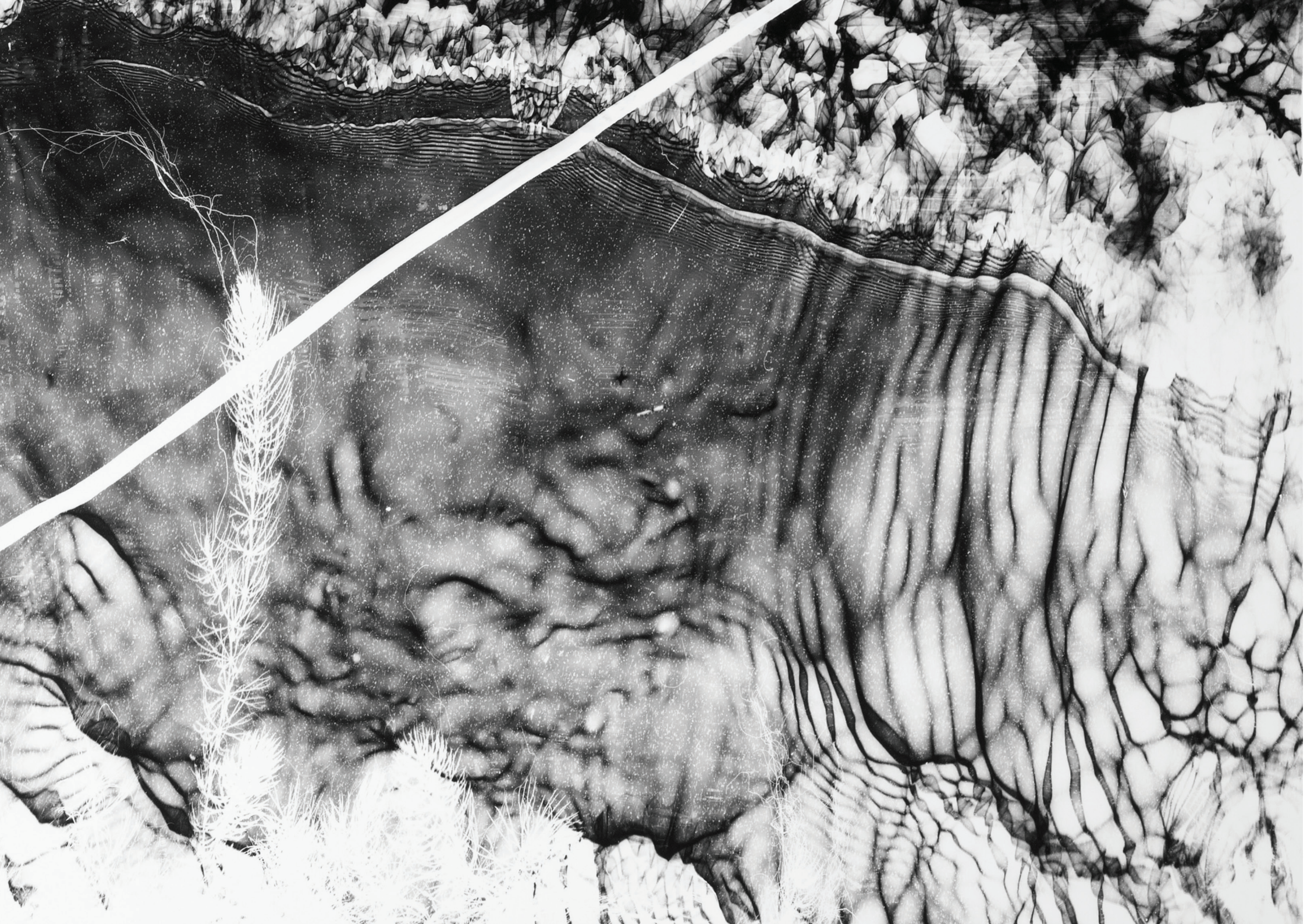
The bank is slippery from recent rain, we slip and sit to slide the raft into the water, breaking the immaculate surface stillness as the forces of our movement ripple the polished silver, disrupting almost photographic reflections of the landscape in the liquid silver surface. The raft needs to sink so that images of the flow can surface. We push down on the floating mass, drowning the tanks in lake water, they fill and glug under the surface, choking, drowning, glowing red beneath the surface tension as the raft partially sinks. It needs to sink more, the second time we ensure its depth with bricks lashed to the underside.

The raft is submerged and the red glow subdued by the green of the water and the brown silt stirred by our feet on the mats that protect the lake bed. A large silver gelatin paper sheet (animal, mineral, physical, spiritual in the words of a later Brummie) is removed from light proof packaging in the shade of another sheet of plastic, in a carefully choreographed movement, upside down to protect from still blue light it is conveyed to the lake and secured under elastic that is stapled to the surface of the raft, below the surface of the water. Knicker elastic from a sewing box that belonged to Joan Beck in the 1950s. The paper sits below the water, below a sheet of black plastic DPM, secured by part of Joan Beck's pants.

The process relies upon layers of protection for the material; for us from the environment and for the environment from us. Barriers through which controlled quantities of light and particles can percolate, mediating our bodily experiences. Surfaces of plastic, neoprene, light, water and chemicals form porous barriers which impact upon each other as they touch or are restrained from touching.

Photographic surfaces mediate our bodily experiences.

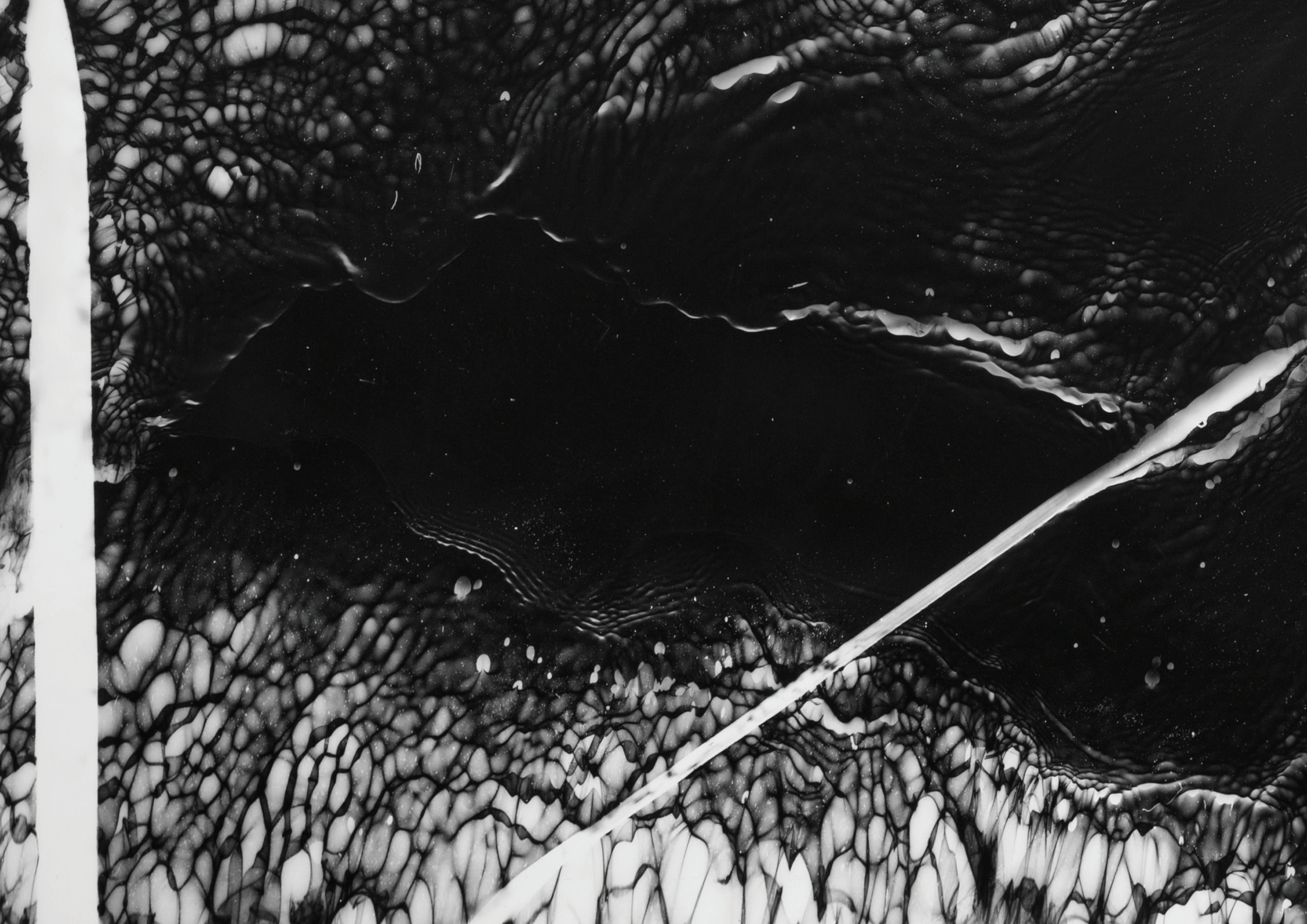




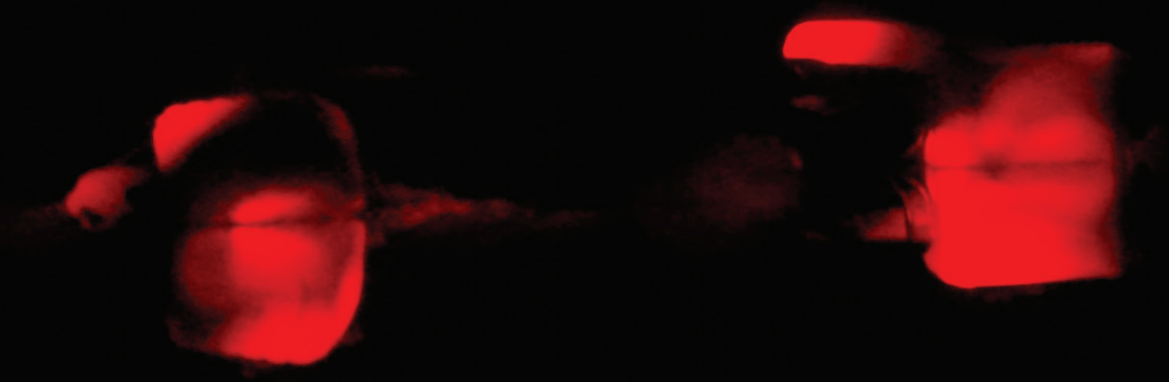
We swim with the raft, dragging the blue ropes behind us. It is heavy in the water, a tether that tests the strength of our strokes and their impact upon the liquid silver moon-lit surface of the lake. We take it out, beyond the shelter of the cedar tree. It is both a floatation device and a trap. It glows like a spaceship, a foreign body in this environment. Away from the shore we tread water, wondering what might be moving below. Suppressing these thoughts of lake-monsters we peel the black plastic layer back from the paper. From the kayak, the hum of the flash charges in an electronic tone. Sonorous qualities of machinery, electronic noises explored by JP Marrian in 1843. A flash of light freezes the movement of the water and Jenny's grabbing at the surface of the raft, the paper, merging the surfaces in a moment of visibility in the darkness of the lake. We swim back in with the exposed paper on the raft. The lifeguard offers a rope to bring us back in but I resist and pull harder with my arms against the liquid resistance to the shore.

The first exposure is too light, so we re-angle the flash from the height of the bank and stay in the safety of the cedar tree. A fisherman's hook pierces my foot, a tangle of unexpected wire in the dark. The next exposure is dark, and on the third exposure we find the middle point, a rich detail of flow patterns is revealed on the light sensitive paper under the red light of the developing trays. We hunch over the trays as if in a séance, conjuring images from the liquids.









Beneath the surface, things are moving.

Historical events and figures surface.

They can be sensed, in places becoming visible.







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## **Acknowledgements**

This research was made possible by Midlands4Cities doctoral training partnership with funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It has been supported using public funding from Arts Council England with additional funding and encouragement from Colmore BID and Heart of England Community Foundation.

I'm grateful for the support of Compton Verney, Warwickshire Libraries, Coventry Biennial and Packington Estate in providing spaces to make new artwork.

I'd like to recognise the ongoing support from my knowledgeable and patient supervisors, Professor Kelley Wilder, Dr Sian Vaughan and Stuart Whipps.

Thanks are due to my friends Shiam Wilcox and Helen Wheatley for repeatedly submerging themselves in cold water. I'm appreciative of encouragement from photographer Jason Tilley and photographic historian Dr Rose Teanby for pushing my exploration and experimentation with photographic materials, which would not have been possible without the generously shared material knowledge of calotypist Robert Douglas, daguerreotypist Joaquin Paredes Piris, audio visual artist Leon Trimble and cabinet maker Jamie Hubbard.

*For Pete James, who introduced me to George Shaw.*

