

Parallels: reflecting on identity and alienation  
in existentialism

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MASTER OF FINE ART

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# Parallels: reflecting on identity and alienation in existentialism

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## SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR PROJECT

This studio-based research project seeks to reflect on notions of identity and alienation as informed by existentialist thought through practical experiments with reflections and self-portraiture in sculpture, installation and photography.

## THE BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This project seeks to reflect on the themes raised by existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre and Marcel. The major project is not intended as philosophical discourse per se, but as a way to reflect on the themes raised by these philosophers through a studio-based practice.

This project seeks to explore notions of identity and alienation through the framework of existentialist thought. Concepts of identity are explored by investigating self-reflection and self-awareness through processes of sculpture, photography and self-portraiture. The concept of alienation as a disconnection between the transcendental and the physical realm is explored through the use of reflection as both a physical and metaphorical phenomenon.

The existentialist philosophy that has informed this project pursues an investigation of what Heidegger refers to as Dasein, which literally means “to be there”. “We are thrown into a universe that is not of our choosing. When we begin choosing our lives, we begin with many choices made for us -- genetics, environment, society, family... all those raw materials.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Heidegger, Sartre thinks that only the person themselves can define their essence. Although that person exists, there is nothing to dictate that person’s character and goals in life.

In the Major Project I have used reflective materials such as a glossy photographic print, glass and water to create reflections that aim to investigate what Gabriel Marcel refers to as primary and secondary reflection. He defines these as processes of recalling and re-examining our past experiences in order to understand them. “Primary reflection tends to break down the unity of experience, but secondary reflection tends to restore the unity of our experience.”<sup>2</sup> Marcel found his philosophical starting point in a condition of metaphysical alienation - the human individual searching for harmony in a transient life. It was this harmony that, for Marcel, was to be sought through the processes of primary and secondary reflection.

Self-portraiture in my work investigates a personal (dis)connection between the transcendental and the physical realm, which is explored by investigating self-reflection and self-awareness through sculpture and photography. Through exploring self-portraiture I seek to reflect on the concept of identity and the self.

1 Boeree, C.G. *Individual, Existential, and Humanistic Psychology*, 2003, Retrieved from <http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/genpsyhumanists.html>, Accessed: 02.10.2010. 14:25

2 Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, Reflection and Mystery*, The Harvill Press, London, 1950, p. 60.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- This project aims to develop a series of works that address the central concerns of existentialism and identity through integration of the following disciplines: installation, sculpture, drawing and photography.
- To investigate the notion of angst and alienation - the main obstacles of existentialism and identity - through the assemblage of sculpture and photography.
- To investigate concepts of identity and memory by experimenting with reflection using metallic prints, ink and water.
- To combine the language of logic and science in architecture with the language of playfulness and irrationality in art through the creation of technical/architectural drawings.
- To reveal an awareness of the art making process by intensifying and documenting the physical gesture in my work.
- To construct paintings that reveal the history and existence of their material by using processes of scraping, scratching and revealing.
- To investigate the interplay between rust and fragile materials such as glass by using metallic paint and various patinas on glass panels.

## RATIONALE

This practice-based research project seeks to extend the discussions we find in the fields of existentialism. Writings by thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre and Marcel have been the main source in approaching these issues. As Sartre writes in *Existentialism and Humanism*: “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.”<sup>3</sup> We carry an image of ourselves and it is upon reflection of that image that we understand who we are.

Artists working with similar existentialist interests include Anselm Kiefer and Doris Salcedo. These artists were important in the development of this project because they explore similar issues in their work but differ in their individual approaches. Anselm Kiefer deals with past and historical events, while Doris Salcedo deals with current and ongoing issues. “Kiefer’s post-apocalyptic landscape paintings provide impressions of aesthetic ethics, visual absence and poetic silence. Dealing with the ghosts of the fatherland, especially with the terror of recent German history.”<sup>4</sup> Salcedo on the other hand addresses the question of forgetting and memory through her artwork. She concretizes absence, oppression, and the gap between the disempowered and powerful.

This body of work is a unique investigation of the dialog between the theoretical and personal input in what issues of existentialism and identity can portray. My work brings these issues to the fore and highlights the complexity of placing ourselves in existence. It seeks to combine artistic process to arouse a more thorough contemplation of these issues while emotionally engaging the viewer through the transformative element of reflection. Being Bosnian born, the experience from the country with a tragic destiny has helped me point out the importance of human condition and identity. I am not only talking about the country that split into many pieces, I am also talking about the identity split which brings this issue to an individual level.

3 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Butler & Tanner Ltd, London, 1948, p. 28.

4 Huyssen, Andreas, *Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, The Temptation of Myth*, The MIT Press, Boston, 1989, p. 25.

## KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How can I reflect on concepts raised in existentialist thought such as identity, self-awareness, self-reflection and alienation through the experimentation in sculpture, photography and installation.
- How can I explore the concept of alienation through the use of reflection as both a physical and metaphorical phenomenon?
- How can I reflect on the concept of identity by exploring self-portraiture?

## OUTCOMES

By experimenting and testing different approaches in my art practice, supported by various literature, critical reflection, individual and group tutorial discussions, I aim to create a body of both resolved and experimental work that contributes to a broader theoretical and practical exploration of the afore mentioned themes.

## METHODOLOGY

I often step back in the studio and record the stages of my work, as documenting the process of art making is crucial. It makes me aware of elements that are important for understanding my own art practice, which are easy to ignore if not documented.

Applied methods are described chronologically as different projects were conducted. The projects are divided into six parts that show different approaches and methods that are used.

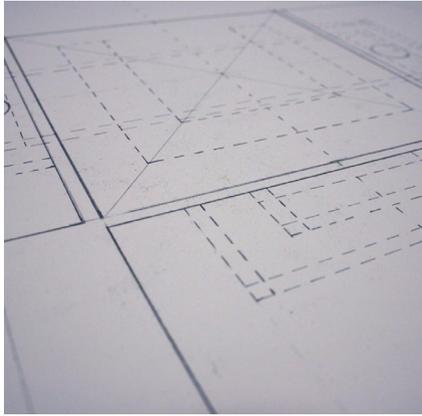


Figure 1.

Starting phase of making *Das Boot*, 2010

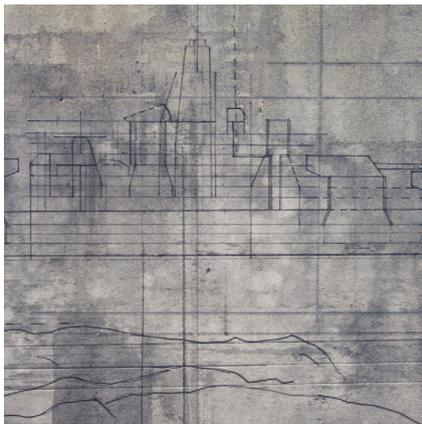


Figure 2.

Detail from *Das Boot*, 2010



Figure 3.

Detail from *Birds*, 2010

## Part I

Period: March 2010

Materials used: Paper, ink, water, diluted coffee and acrylic paint.

In this project the aim was to investigate technical/architectural drawings and appropriate them in a fine art context; taking the language of architecture - logic and science- and combining it with the playfulness and irrationality of art. Investigating the visual contribution of different materials and methods mixed with each other made this project and the following ones develop further.

I studied more closely the early sketches by Italian Renaissance artists and architects such as Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Alberti.

Studying their sketches that had a stained old look, revealed to me the materiality of paper and its limited durability. This made me consider applying stains and scratching in my works. I experimented with layering of different media and testing organic and geometric lines through transparency. In these processes the printmaking technique of dry point was applied, allowing me to enhance the textural surface in these works. (Texture is something that becomes more important in the next project.)



Figure 4.

Detail from *Structure #2*, 2010



Figure 5.

Detail from *Untitled #47*, 2010



Figure 6.

Detail from *Structure #3*, 2010

Technical drawings on paper covered with diluted coffee and ink stains gave interesting results. Stains made them look like old architectural documents. Documents that are usually considered more as historical assets. The scales of works are kept quite small as they were meant to be personal and intimate.

### Evaluation

After making a considerable number of drawings based on architectural principles, these works have showed signs of potential towards a more organic approach. The turning point was more of a physical nature. In contrary to detailed technical drawings, the whole body gesture became more important. That way the process became more apparent in the work.



Figure 7.

Scratching into the paper and painting over it with ink. 2010



Figure 8.

Process of scratching the paper and pouring diluted coffee over it, 2010.



Figure 9.

Tool that I used frequently, 2010

## Part II

Period: 1st-15th April

Materials used: Cardboard, paper, ink, water and acrylic paint

“Come to the edge, he said  
They said: We are afraid  
Come to the edge, he said  
They came  
He pushed them...and they flew”

(Apollinaire)

In this project the aim was to investigate the importance of awareness of process in art making, and to intensify the physical gesture and texture in my work.

“I have been thinking about an art yard I would like to build. It would be a sort of a big hole in the ground. Actually it wouldn't be a hole to begin with. That would have to be dug. The digging of the hole would be part of the art.”<sup>5</sup>

This point in my work came as a physical reaction to the previous project that required carefully planned and slow working progress that sometimes seemed too rational and limiting. Composer Goran Bregovic stated once that not knowing gives him space for expanding his ideas. When knowing, one consciously or unconsciously uses the known parameters, and aims to reach the already known goals.

<sup>5</sup> Walter de Maria quoted in: Celant, Germano, *Art Povera, Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?*, Gabrielle Mazzotta Publishers, Milan, 1969, p. 13.



Figure 10.

Dry point tool, 2010

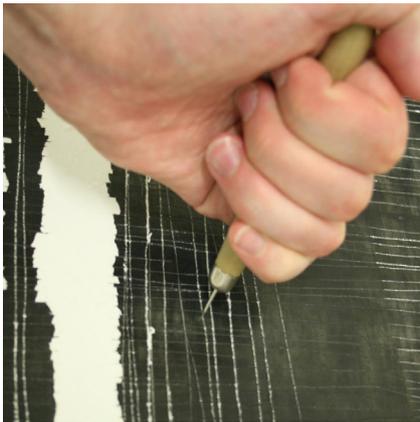


Figure 11.

Using of dry point on the paper, 2010

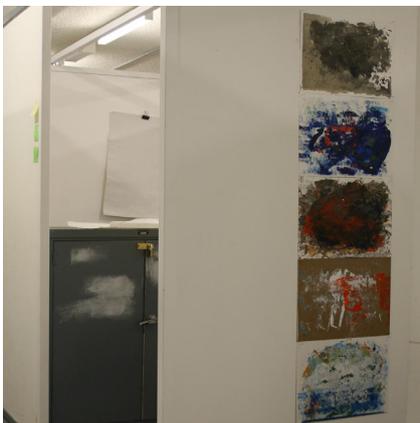


Figure 12.

Palettes on display in my studio, 2010

In this project I wanted to use similar approach of not knowing what to expect. I had a goal to expand both physically and conceptually by not knowing what results I was aiming for. I was trying to do everything that was the opposite of what I thought of at the moment- in a way to free my mind.

I used the dry point needle, which allowed me to test the durability of the material that I was working with. Many times I would end up tearing the work apart. What I appreciated most about this method was the physicality of it. “The reasons for making the work are many and various, however generally it materialises through “doing”, through a physical engagement with materials and often reveals the unexpected.”<sup>6</sup>

Scratching on the surface felt almost like uncovering the drawings true identity.

I save my paint palettes, which is in a way recording my colour usage and the layering history. These things come as a reminder of the importance of the process.

### Evaluation

In order to understand the potential of the work one has to understand the material one is working with. One of the ways of doing it is to test its durability.



Figure 13.

War ruins in Mostar (Bosnia) 2009



Figure 14.

War ruins in Sarajevo (Bosnia) 2009



Figure 15.

War ruins in Sarajevo (Bosnia) 2009

### Part III

Period: 15th-30th April 2010

Materials used: Cardboard, paper, ink, water, acrylic paint and sand

Most of the works from Part I and Part II were of small scale. In this project I worked on 20 x A2 sized paintings. Because of their quantity and many layers, they had to be made in several sittings.

Layering in this project became an important element as it symbolizes the time line.

In this part I also wanted to test the scale and expand in space. By doing that you employ your body movements more intensely. This triggers thought and thought triggers vision.

According to Melbourne based artists Silvana and Gabriella Mangano, “creative process is very often physical where physical gestures provoke a thought and the thought provokes creativity.”<sup>7</sup>

They discussed how their artworks are very much about appropriating their presence to the surroundings they are in. They respond to the space by using its potential and letting new ideas and inspirations emerge.

Raw materials like earth, sand, water and concrete, were frequent materials that I have used in my earlier works. I feel connected to these materials as they are usually untreated and have a strong smell that reminds of ruins where the layers of materials are exposed to the surface. It reminded me of the first time I visited my home country (Bosnia) after the war.

<sup>7</sup> From the MFA Seminar talk by Silvana and Gabriella Mangano, conducted 21. June 2010



Figure 16.

Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair* 1964. Wooden chair with fat, 91.4 x 28 x 28 cm



Figure 17.

Anselm Kiefer, from installation *Sternfell*, at the Grand Palais 2007. Concrete, iron and lead.



Figure 18.

Mono-ha, Removing the mould from 'Phase - Mother Earth' 1968.

What has informed this project?

Artists Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer and artists movements such as Arte Povera and Mono Ha were the key influences in this particular project.

Joseph Beuys viewed certain materials as having important associations with his past, and through repeated use they attained a personal symbolism. Other materials were viewed as having magical or therapeutic power both for Beuys and for the audience. Anselm Kiefer studied with Joseph Beuys during the 1970s. His works incorporate materials like straw, ash, clay, lead, and shellac. In most of his works, the use of photography as an output surface is prevalent and earth and other raw materials of nature are often incorporated. "I remember the first day I saw lead. I lived in an old house in Germany-a cheap place, because I had no money-that had lead plumbing throughout. I needed to fix some pipes, and the material fascinated me. You could smell it, form it, and mold it. It was a shock, and then I started to learn about lead, to read books about it, and also about transformation, about alchemy. I've never stopped using it since."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Wright, Karen, *The Ruins of Barjac: Politics, Alchemy, and Learning to Dance in Anselm Kiefer's World*, *Modern Painters* (November 2006): 68-75. Art Full Text, WilsonWeb, Accessed April 5, 2010



Figure 19.

*Grey horizon*, layers details, 2010



Figure 20.

*Grey horizon*, displayed on the wall, 2010



Figure 21.

20 cardboard panels placed on the floor (most of my works I made on the floor), 2010.

Artist movements that I have looked up were Arte Povera and Mono Ha.

'Mono-ha' refers to a group of artists who were active from the late sixties to early seventies, using both natural and man-made materials in their work. Their works sought to question not only the traditions of Western art the East had so recently inherited but by extension to challenge conventional notions of art. Their aim was simply to bring 'things' together, as far as possible in an unaltered state, allowing the juxtaposed materials to speak for themselves. Hence, the artists no longer 'created' but 'rear-ranged' 'things' into artworks, drawing attention to the interdependent relationships between these 'things' and the space surrounding them.

### Evaluation

The reason why I find these movements and artists interesting is their approach to the use of raw material. It is the fresh and instant nature of their works that interests me.

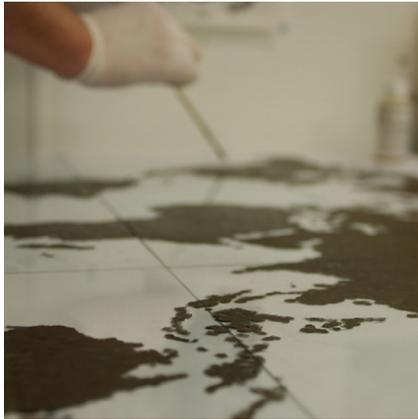


Figure 22.

*The Wrold* in making, 2010

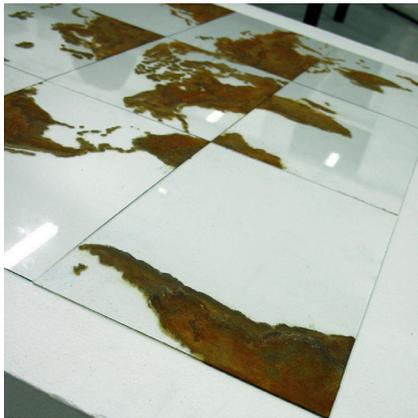


Figure 23.

*The World* displayed on plinth, 2010



Figure 24. Untitled, 2010

## Part IV

Period: May 2010

Materials used: Iron B Metal Coating, Bronze B Metal Coating,

Light Green Patina and Fe Nitrate Patina on glass.

Since my BA, glass and rust have become very important materials in my work. The fragility of glass indicates the danger that this material can portray. Together with rust, which suggests decay, glass became something irresistible for me as an artist.

The aim in this project was to create a painting on transparent and fragile material. Applying patinas on metallic paint gave some interesting results. The most interesting part was to observe its reaction to paint and its ability to create its own pattern, without being controlled. The patterns were complex and unpredictable.

### Evaluation

Observing the development of this work made me more aware of reflection and reflective materials in my art practice. The fragile, decaying and dangerous nature of the materials I have used, made me more aware of their durability and temporality, something I have decided to explore further in the next project. It has again been proven to me how the process of art making is an essential element in discovering the content of the work.

“You cannot intellectually discover a content. It’s in some mysterious interplay with material, with form, with scale, somewhere, perhaps, content emerges. It’s about the intelligence to hold it, work with it, help it grow and let it help you grow. And I feel that’s what the real work is: to discover a content; the rest is peripheral.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Kapoor, Anish, Interviewed for Icon, Marcus Fairs, <http://www.motinternational.org/recall.html>, Accessed: 24.10.2010. 16:35

## Part V

Period: Jun 2010

In this project I decided to use my own body as a main object. Consequently for this piece I made the cast of my own head. I decided to do that because I wanted to get to another level of my own physical involvement in my art practice. The other reason why I did it was because I felt a certain detachment to my previous work when I was finished with making it. The only time I felt connected to my work was in the moments when I was making it.

I aimed, in these works, to investigate the issues of existentialism and identity. Every individual has questioned the nature of his/her own existence and therefore can relate to these issues. They are both quite central and wide issues that concern everybody on different levels.

What has informed this project?

The work draws upon wide range of philosophical writings by Heidegger, Marcel and Sartre that discuss these issues from different points of view.

Artists that have influenced the progression of this project are: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys and Doris Salcedo. Since my work talks about issues of existentialism and identity, my art practice automatically reflects my personal identity that has influenced my existence and myself in society.



Figure 25.

*Parallels*, sculpture in making, 2010



Figure 26.

*Parallels*, sculpture in making, 2010



Figure 27.

*Parallels*, displayed sculpture, 2010



Figure 28.

*(De)Constructed Memory - Constructed Identity 2010*

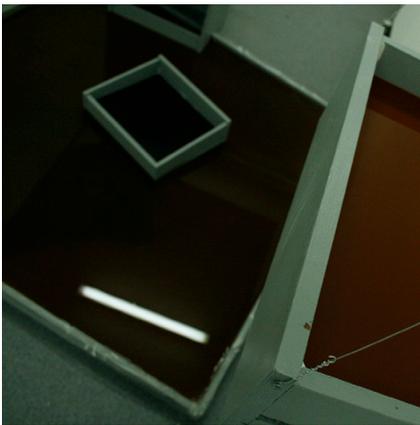


Figure 29.

Detail from *(De)Constructed Memory - Constructed Identity 2010*

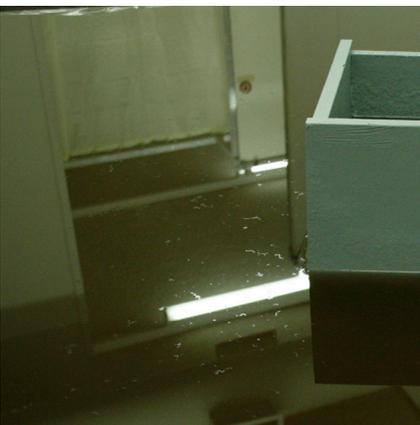


Figure 30.

Detail from *(De)Constructed Memory - Constructed Identity 2010*

## Part VI

Period: July - August 2010

*(De)Constructed Memory - Constructed Identity*

Materials used: Ink, water, plastic and furniture

In this project the aim was to construct an installation that explores individual sense of self and the role that memory plays. It is through experience and memory that one builds up the understanding of oneself, therefore these are key factors in the process of building identity.

The installation was supposed to refer to a domestic scenario with surreal references. Our memories like our dreams do not always have rational explanations.

“The parallel lives of these two terms alert us to the facts that the notion of identity depends on the idea of memory, and vice versa.”<sup>10</sup>

Memories help us make sense of the world we live in. It is through the experience and memory that one builds the understanding of oneself and the world around.

<sup>10</sup> Wolschke- Bulmahn, Joachim, *Places of Commemoration: Search for Identity and Landscape Design*, Dunbarton Oaks, Washington D.C., 2001, p. 2.

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## MFA SEMINAR TALKS JUNE - JULY 2010:

MFA Seminar talk by Dr. Justin Clemens, conducted 21. June 2010

MFA Seminar talk by Silvana and Gabriella Mangano, conducted 21. June 2010

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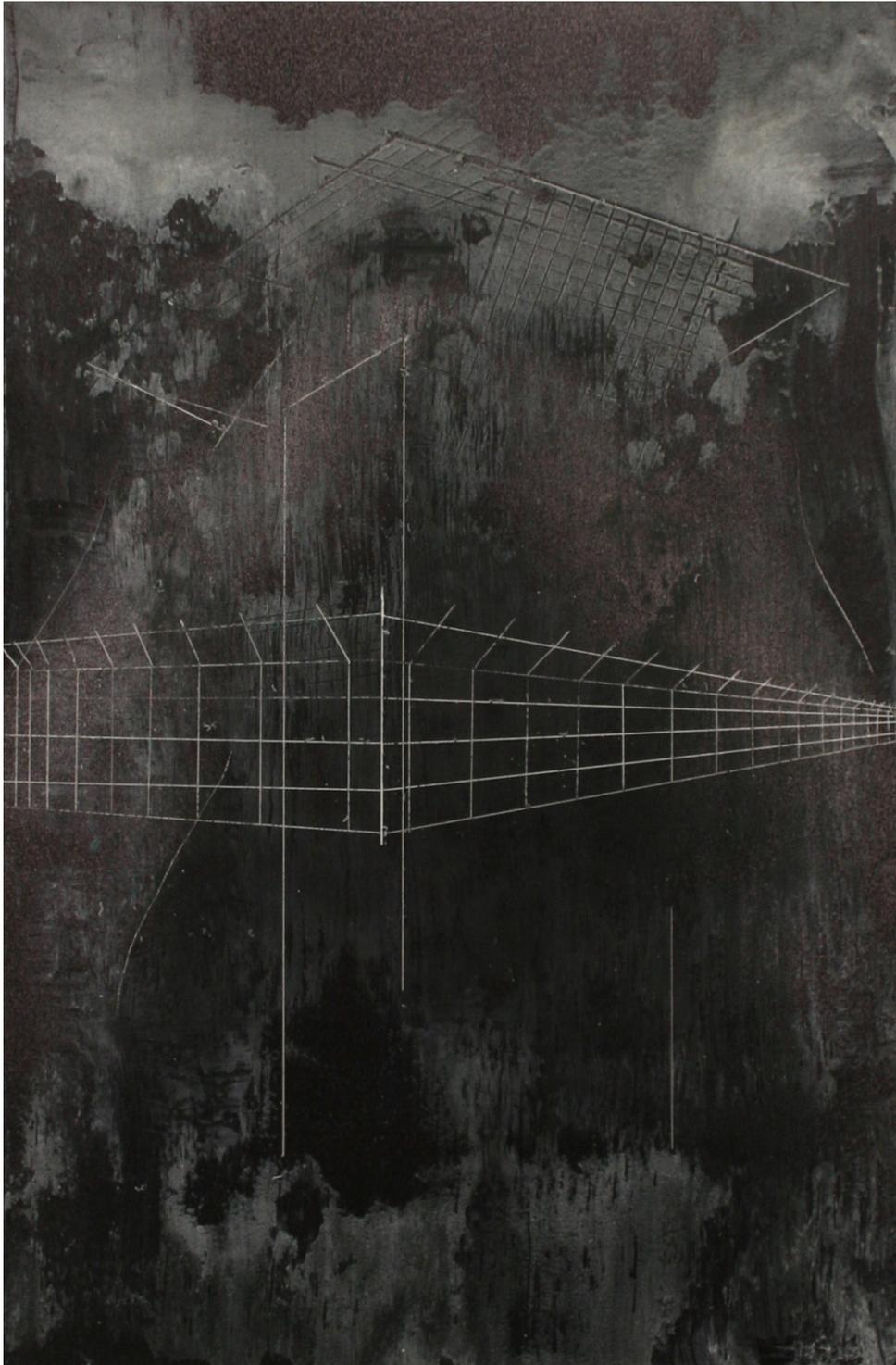


Figure 31. Untitled, 38 x 26 cm, March 2010  
Wax, acrylic paint and scratched drawings on photographic print



Figure 32. *Untitled #47*, 50 x 43 cm, March 2010, ink, acrylic paint and coffee on paper

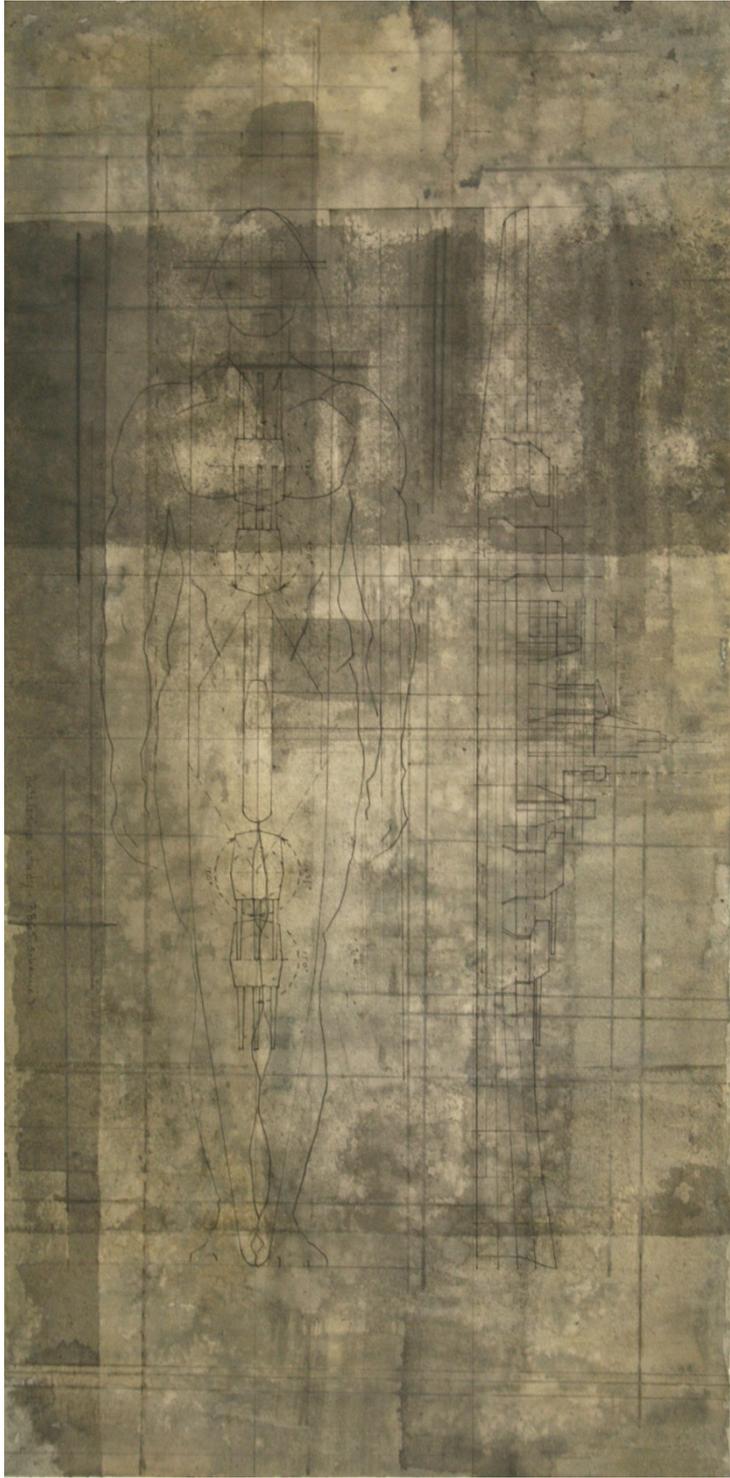


Figure 33. *Das Boot*, 25 x 50 cm, March 2010, ink, acrylic paint and coffee on paper



Figure 34. *Birds*, 27 x 50 cm, March 2010, ink, acrylic paint and coffee on paper



Figure 35. *Untitled #3*, 50 x 45 cm, March 2010, ink, acrylic paint and coffee on paper



Figure 36. *Structure #1*, 27 x 35 cm, March 2010  
Ink, acrylic paint and diluted coffee on paper

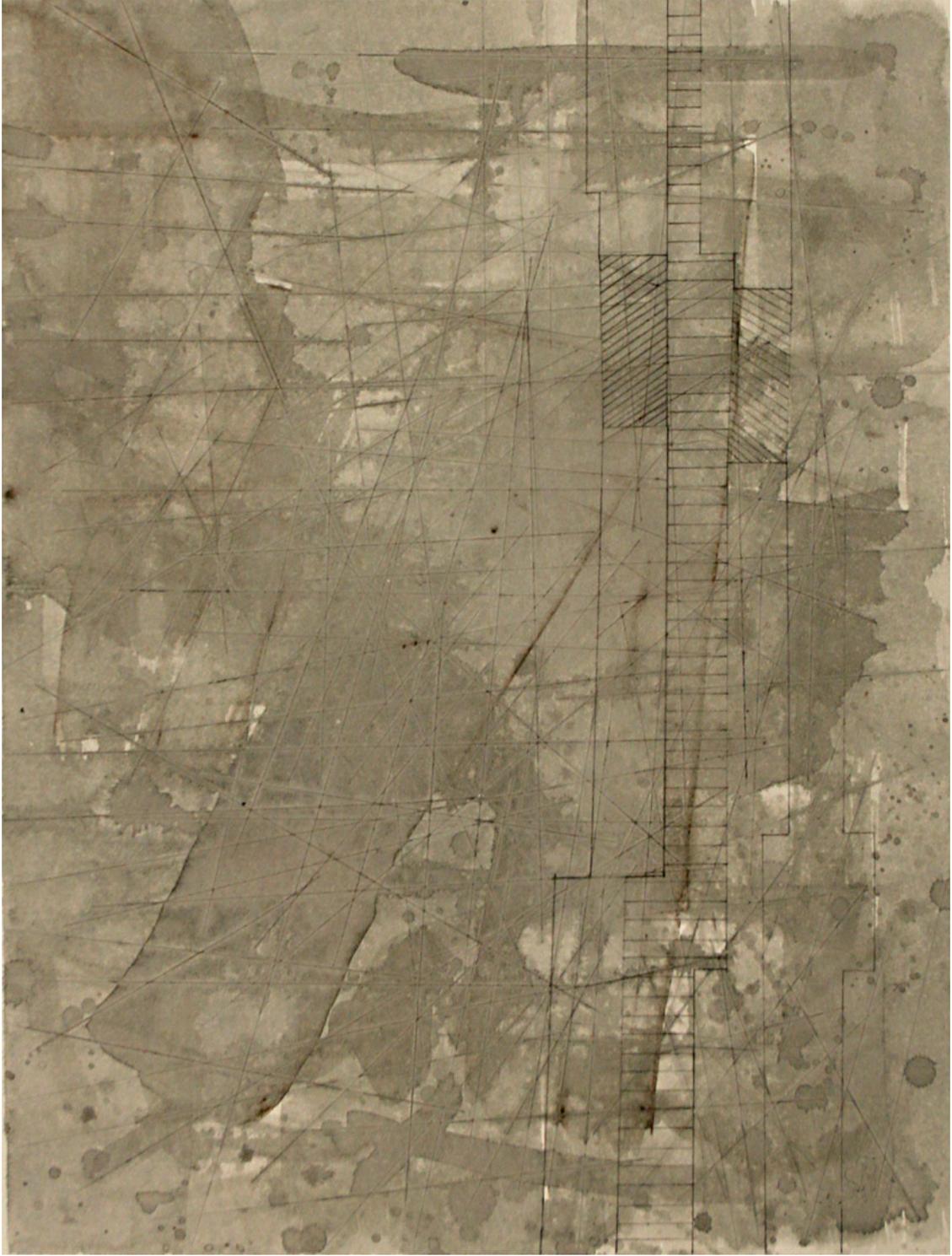


Figure 37. *Structure #2*, 27 x 35 cm, March 2010 *Structure #2*, 27 x 35 cm, March 2010, ink, acrylic paint and diluted coffee on paper

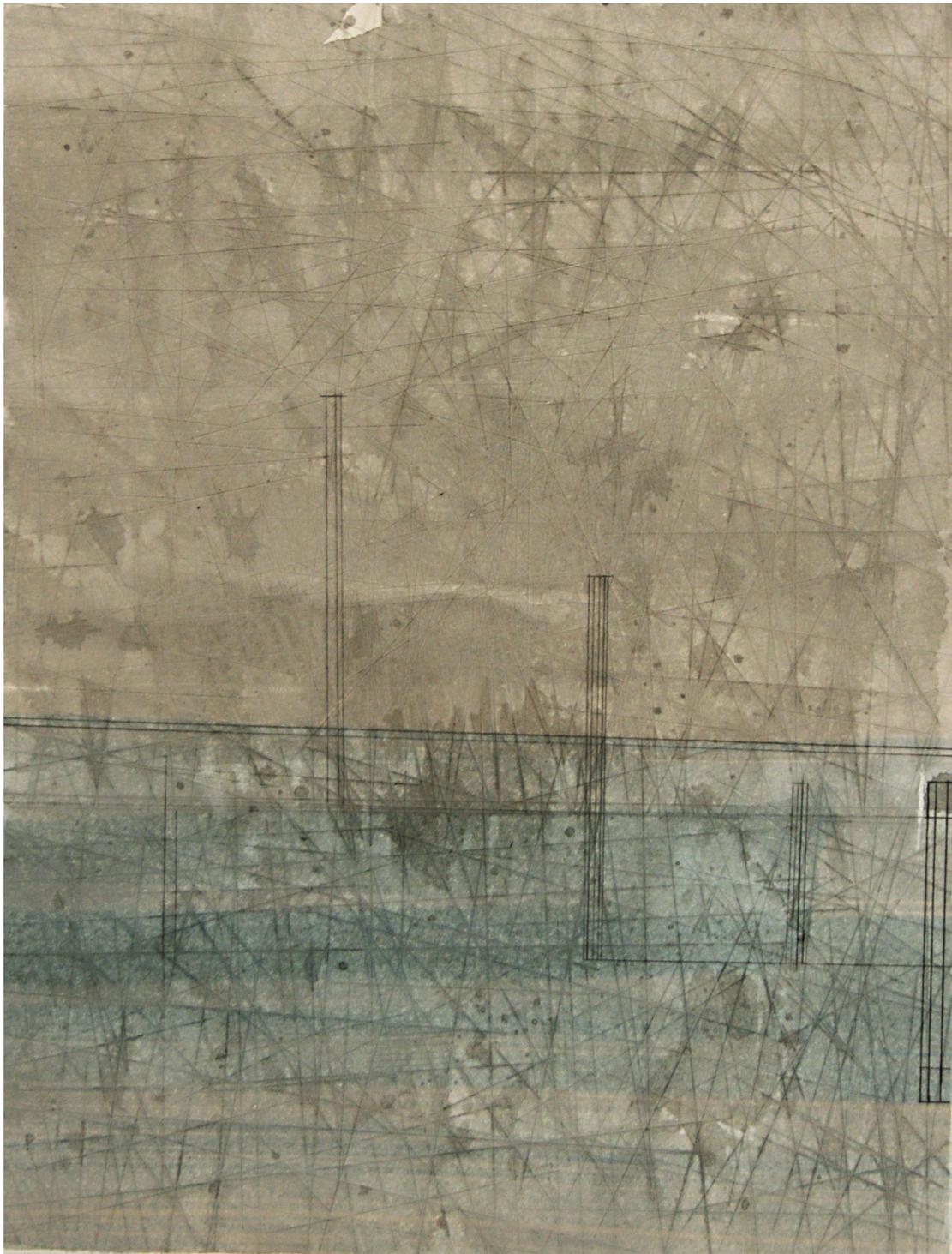


Figure 38. *Structure #3*, 27 x 35 cm, March 2010, ink, acrylic paint and diluted coffee on paper



Figure 39. Works exhibited at 1000 Pound Bend as part of ScanArt Sep - Oct 2010



Figure 40. Works exhibited at Collingwood Gallery, July 2010



Figure 41. *Grey Horizon*, 58 x 294 cm, April 2010, acrylic paint, wax and sand on card board

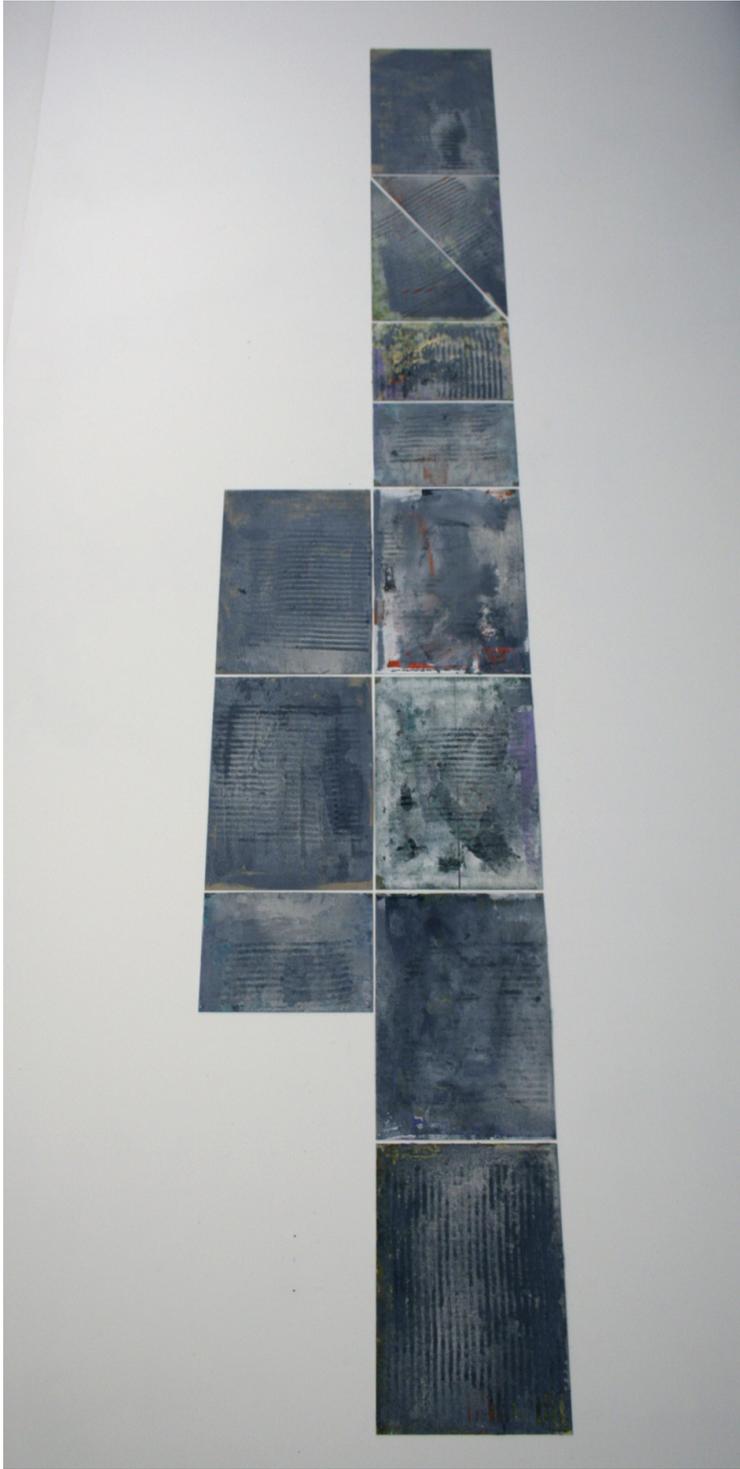


Figure 42. *Grey Horizon*, 58 x 294 cm, April 2010, acrylic paint, wax and sand on card board

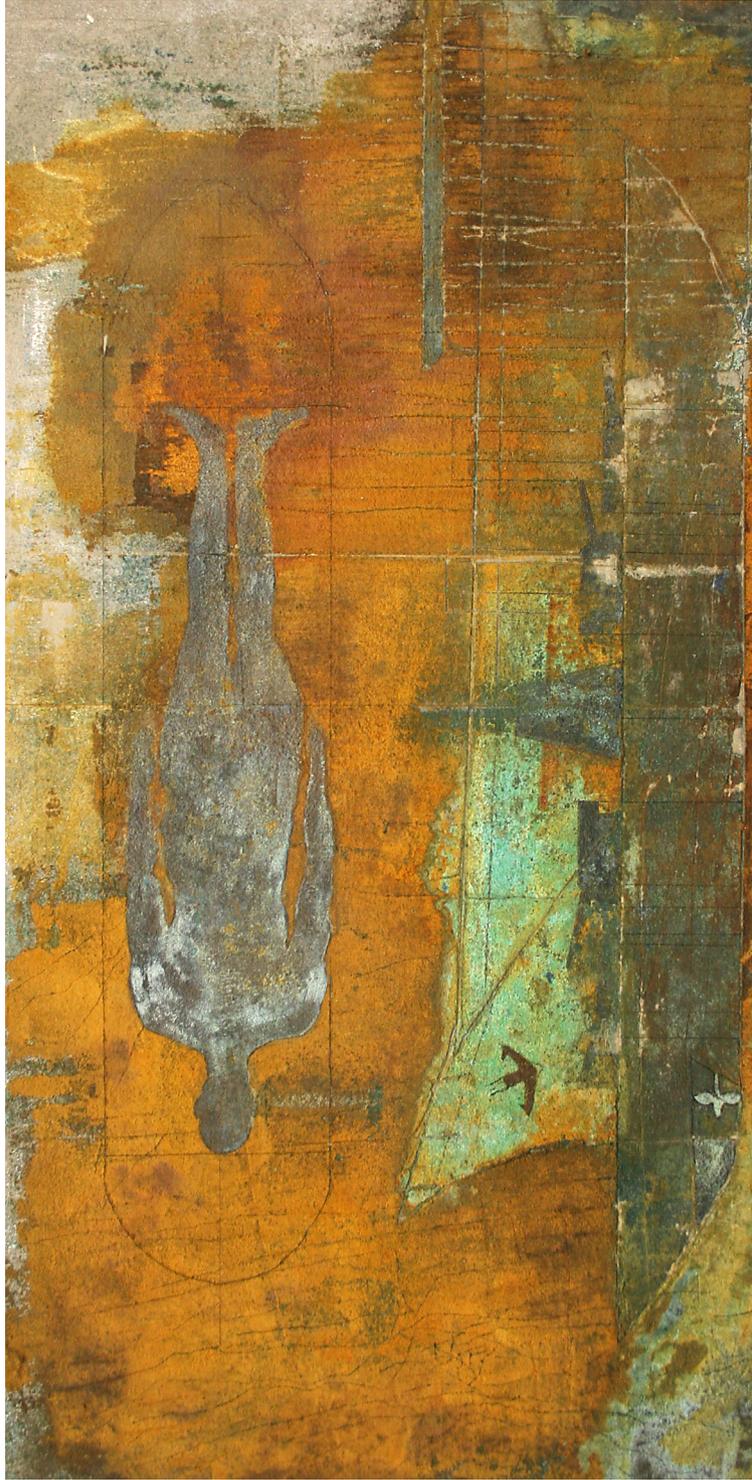


Figure 43. Untitled, 39 x 75 cm, June 2010, wax, sand, Iron B metal coating, Bronze B metal coating, light green patina and Fe Nitrate patina on paper



Figure 44. Untitled, 37 x 37 cm, May 2010  
Wax, Iron B metal coating, Bronze B metal coating, light green patina and Fe Nitrate patina on photographic print



Figure 45. *Our world* (9 glass panels) 63 x 88,5 cm, May 2010, Iron B metal coating, Bronze B metal coating, Light green patina and Fe Chloride on glass panels



Figure 46. *Our world* (9 glass panels) 63 x 88,5 cm, May 2010, Iron B metal coating, Bronze B metal coating, Light green patina and Fe Chloride on glass panels



Figure 47. From the installation *Parallels*, 20 x 25 x 27 cm , June 2010  
Plaster, Iron B Metal Coating, Bronze B Metal Coating, Light Green Patina and Fe Nitrate Patina

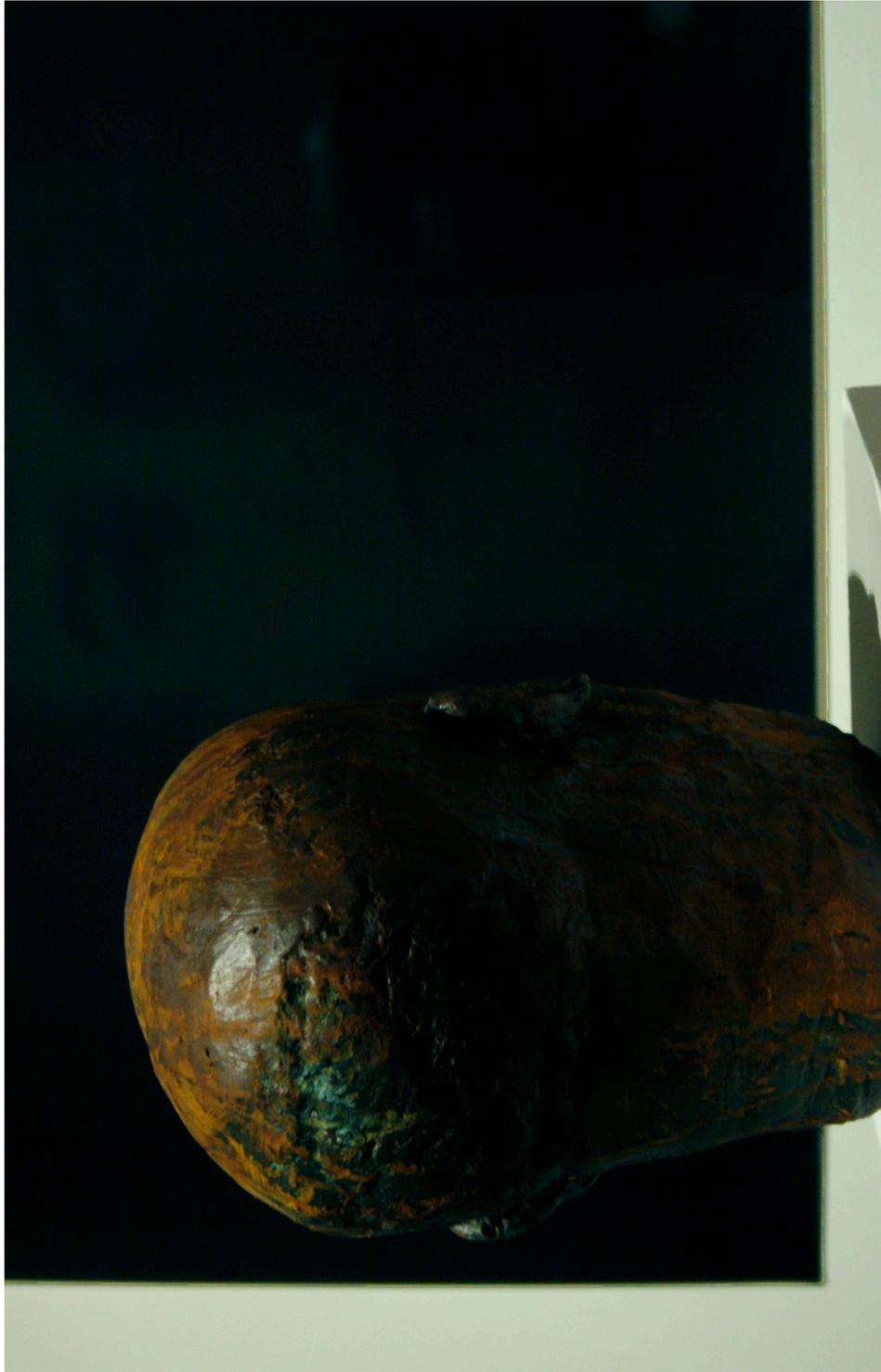


Figure 48., From the installation *Parallels*, dimensions variable, June 2010  
Plaster, Iron B Metal Coating, Bronze B Metal Coating, Light Green Patina, Fe Nitrate  
Patina and digital photographic print

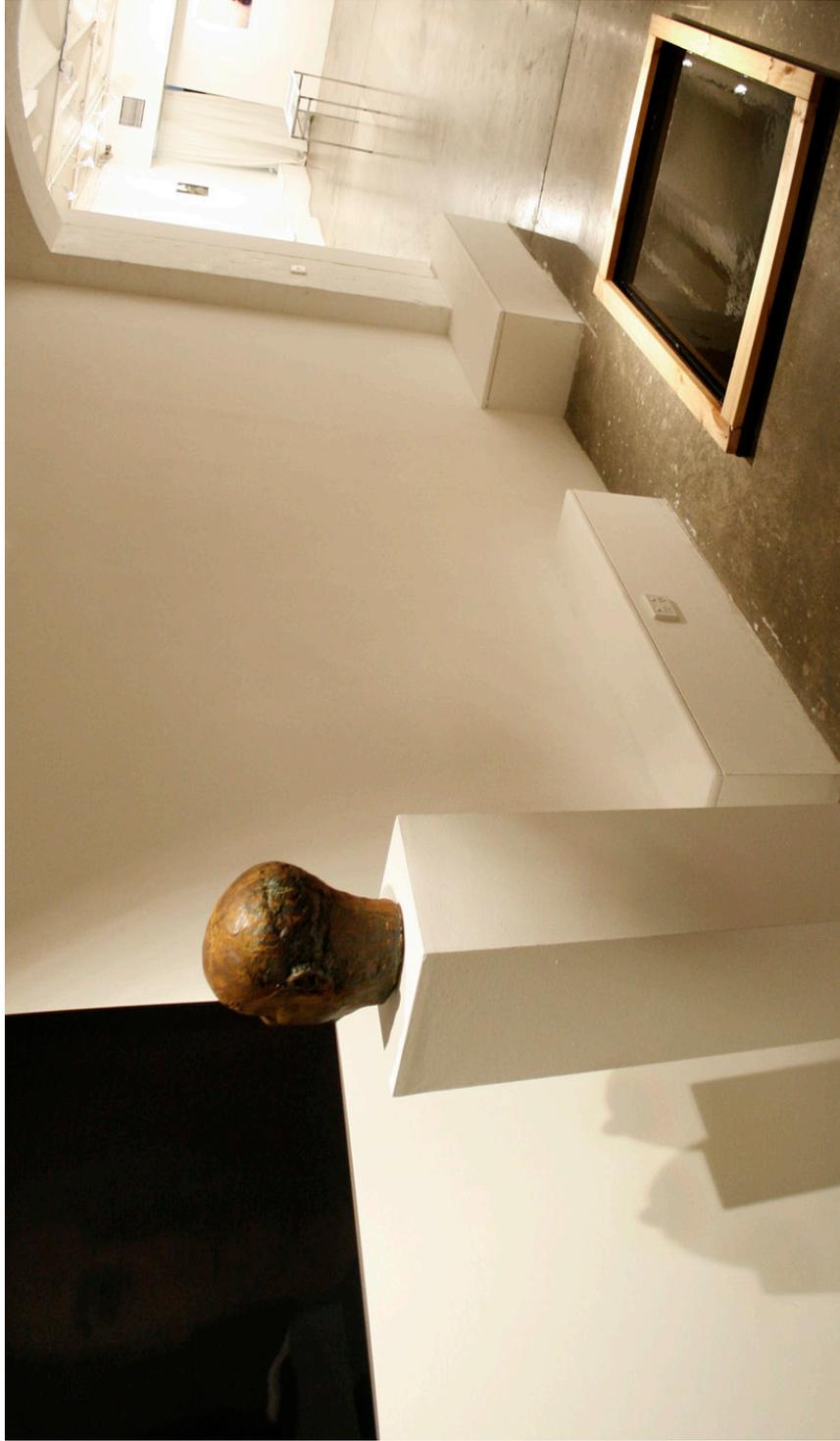


Figure 49. From the installation *Parallels* exhibited at First Site Gallery, dimensions variable, September 2010, plaster, Iron B Metal Coating, Bronze B Metal Coating, Light Green Patina, Fe Nitrate Patina, digital photographic print, timber, water and ink



Figure 50. From the installation *Parallels*, exhibited at First Site Gallery  
150 x 20 x 200 cm, September 2010  
Timber, water and ink



Figure 51. From the installation *(De)Constructed Memory-Constructed Identity*, Dimensions variable, September 2010, Timber, water, plastic and ink

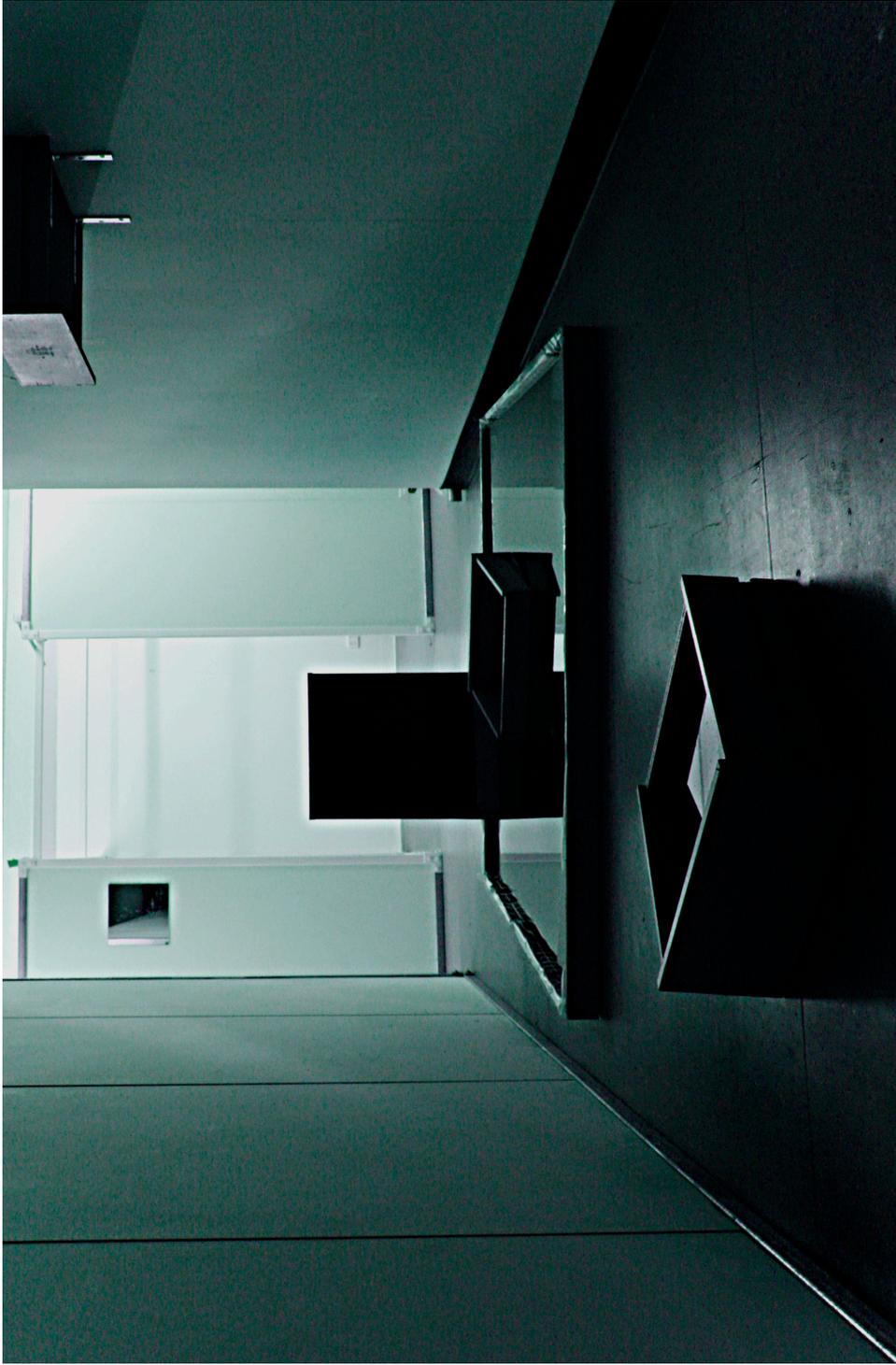


Figure 52. From the installation *(De)Constructed Memory-Constructed Identity*, Dimensions variable, September 2010, Timber, water, plastic and ink



Figure 53. From the installation *(De)Constructed Memory-Constructed Identity*, exhibited at the RMIT Brunswick as part of public art *Artland*, Dimensions variable, September 2010, Found objects, water, plastic and ink



Figure 54. From the installation *(De)Constructed Memory-Constructed Identity*, exhibited at the RMIT Brunswick as part of public art *Artland*, Dimensions variable, September 2010, Found objects, water, plastic and ink

# C U R R I C U L U M V I T A E

ELMEDIN ŽUNIĆ

## Biography:

Born 1979 in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Moved to Norway in 1993

Email: zunic.elmedin@gmail.com

## Education:

2010 - Master of Fine Art, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

2007 - 2009 Bachelor of Fine Art, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

2002 - 2006 Bachelor of Administration and Organisation Science, University of Bergen (Norway)

## Solo Exhibitions:

2010 First Site Gallery, Cynical Smile, September

## Selected Group Exhibitions:

2010 RMIT Master Graduation Show (to happen in Nov-Dec),

2010 RMIT Brunswick, Artland (to happen in October)

2010 1000 £ Bend, Scan Art 2010, Sept- Oct

2010 Collingwood Gallery, From the Jungle to the Desert and Everything in Between,

2009 RMIT Bachelor Graduation Show,

2009 Brunswick Street Gallery Picture This 2009 (photography show)

2009 First Site Gallery Scan Art 2009,

2009 Gasworks Arts Park Nordic Ecology: Steps into the North,

2009 Gasworks Arts Park The South - North Exchange,

2008 Domain Hill Property Group, Entrepreneur Motivator Series,

2008 C3 Contemporary Art Space, Abbotsford, Scan Art 2008t,

2007 Korumburra Federation Art Gallery, ART-Y-FYS,

2006 Gallery Lokal, Bergen (Norway),

2006 Youth Institution, Bergen (Norway).

Selected Publications/ Catalogues/ Reviews:

- 2010 RMIT Union, Look At Yourself [electronic source],
- 2010 Art Gallery Guide, Australia [electronic source],
- 2010 Art Almanac, July,
- 2009 Artist profiles at Scan Art 2009 Melbourne
- 2009 Art inspires a new generation of creatives, accessed through RMIT News,
- 2009 Biosphere News, March,
- 2009 ABC TV – Sunday Arts, March,
- 2009 About ScanArt in ANSAnytt Magazine
- 2008 Lofty Ambitions, The Sunday Age, December 7,
- 2006 Bergens Avis BA 14 July [Norwegian News Paper]

Awards:

- 2008 Prize winner in the Domain Hill Property Group's Entrepreneur Motivator Series.

Collections:

- 2008 Domain Hill Property Group standing collection for its Smith Street Lofts residential and business property development.
- 2008 RMIT University, School of Business.
- 2006 – Also have works and commissions in various private collections in Australia and Europe

THE END.