

J E F F R O B B

C A P T U R I N G T H E I N V I S I B L E



J E F F R O B B C A P T U R I N G T H E I N V I S I B L E

JEFF ROBB

CAPTURING THE INVISIBLE

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JEFF ROBB

This book brings together the work of British artist Jeff Robb in one volume, for the first time. Since graduating with Distinction from the Royal College of Art in 1992 with a Masters degree in Fine Art Holography and completing his Darwin Scholarship year in 1993, Robb has continually made art, ceaselessly experimenting with three-dimensional imaging. Shortly after graduating, he was invited to submit a landscape work in to the V&A museum's permanent collection and now Robb's work features in many museums and private collections around the world. Robb is currently best known for his lenticular photographic work focusing on the female nude and abstract forms in space, which he makes in series. In this book, cultural historian Matthew Rake, who has been following the development of Robb's art for several years, introduces us to some of the concepts behind each series, placing the work in an art historical and wider cultural context. As the popularity of lenticular imaging as an artistic medium grows, Rake's texts are timely in highlighting the significance of Robb's experimental and groundbreaking work.

Each of Robb's series of lenticular works to date are illustrated in this catalogue of unforgettable images tracing the development of his work on figurative and abstract forms in space and transitions in time and movement. Robb has recently begun to produce bronze sculptures working with the female nude, a subject familiar to him, using cutting edge modelling technology combined with historic casting techniques. This radical development is typical of Robb's open experimental approach in making art, using any combination of tools and technology available to him.

In parallel to developing lines of enquiry around the nude and abstraction in his lenticular work, Robb is beginning to work on projects which investigate how we experience sound, and large-scale kinetic installations for public spaces, museums and galleries. For many, these new directions will at first seem uncharacteristic. Those who are familiar with Robb's approach and what drives him as an artist will understand the significance of each project for him in testing possibilities with the lenticular medium, and creating new immersive experiences using three-dimensional imaging and cutting edge technology. This kind of experimental lenticular installation work is completely uncharted territory for artists.

Robb's latest figurative work and sculptures represent a significant career development for him in realising longstanding personal and artistic ambitions. His forthcoming installation work for public spaces further crystallises an increasing sense of freedom which Robb is beginning to enjoy as his work achieves still wider recognition. I have always thought of Jeff Robb as an artist and a scientist. Both creative and methodical, he is a true innovator and a risk taker who will continue to break new ground for as long as he makes art. Historians and critics will continue to document the work of Jeff Robb against contextual developments in art, though perhaps he will forever remain in a class of his own as his work becomes ever more impossible to classify – or at least for as long as he maintains his current position, one or two steps ahead of the game.

~ Katherine Cockshaw FRSA

T H R E S H O L D

It is said that the Ancient Greeks perfected the nude in sculpture so that man had some sense of what it felt like to be a god. Jeff Robb's two new series of lenticular photographs, Threshold and Juno, seem to have a similar aim. In a spirit of optimism and a search for perfection, Robb shows us the human figure triumph – buoyant, miraculously balanced in mid-air, with unrestrained energy and apparently infinite powers of movement.

In both series, drapery adds to the drama. It emphasizes the stretch or twist of the body. It hides the body – and yet reveals it in beautiful and unanticipated ways. It creates rhythmic lines that carry the eye through the picture. In some images, it generates waves of motion, suggesting an unstable figure struggling against forces of the universe. In most images, though, it seems to give the figure wings, to help it rise above the turbulence to a place of serenity.

Indeed, in the Threshold series, it is hard not to see the references to resurrection and ascension in these images. We sense a liberation from this world, an ecstasy of flight. Each figure seems to rise, transported to the light of the portal. In several images, celestial clouds emanate from the portal, seemingly holding the body in suspension.

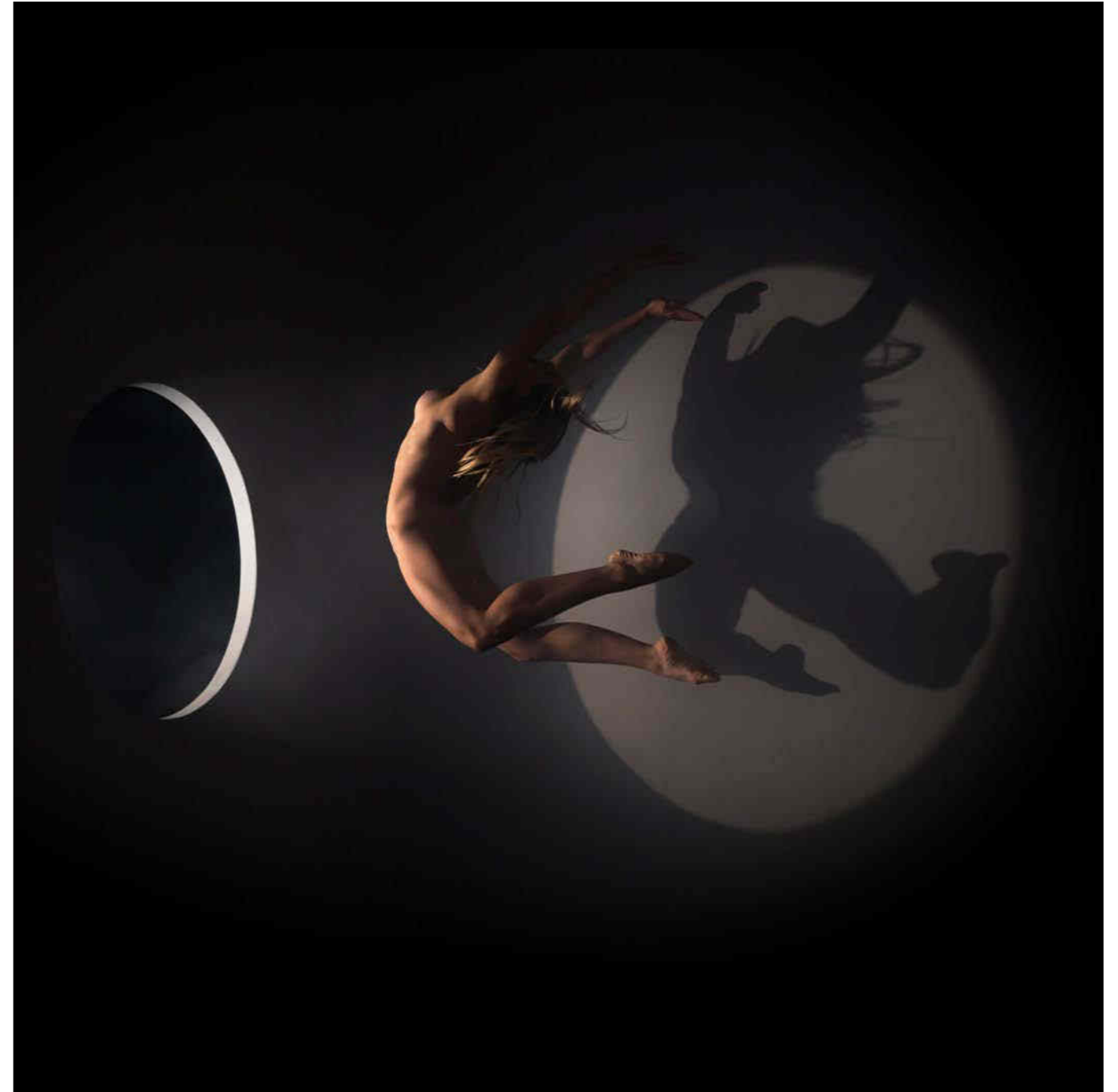
On the right of each image, the shadow of the figure is contained within an ellipse of light thrown through the circular portal. Surely this is a deliberate allusion to the mandorla, the almond-shaped pool of light that surrounds Christ in glory or in ascension in so many medieval paintings.

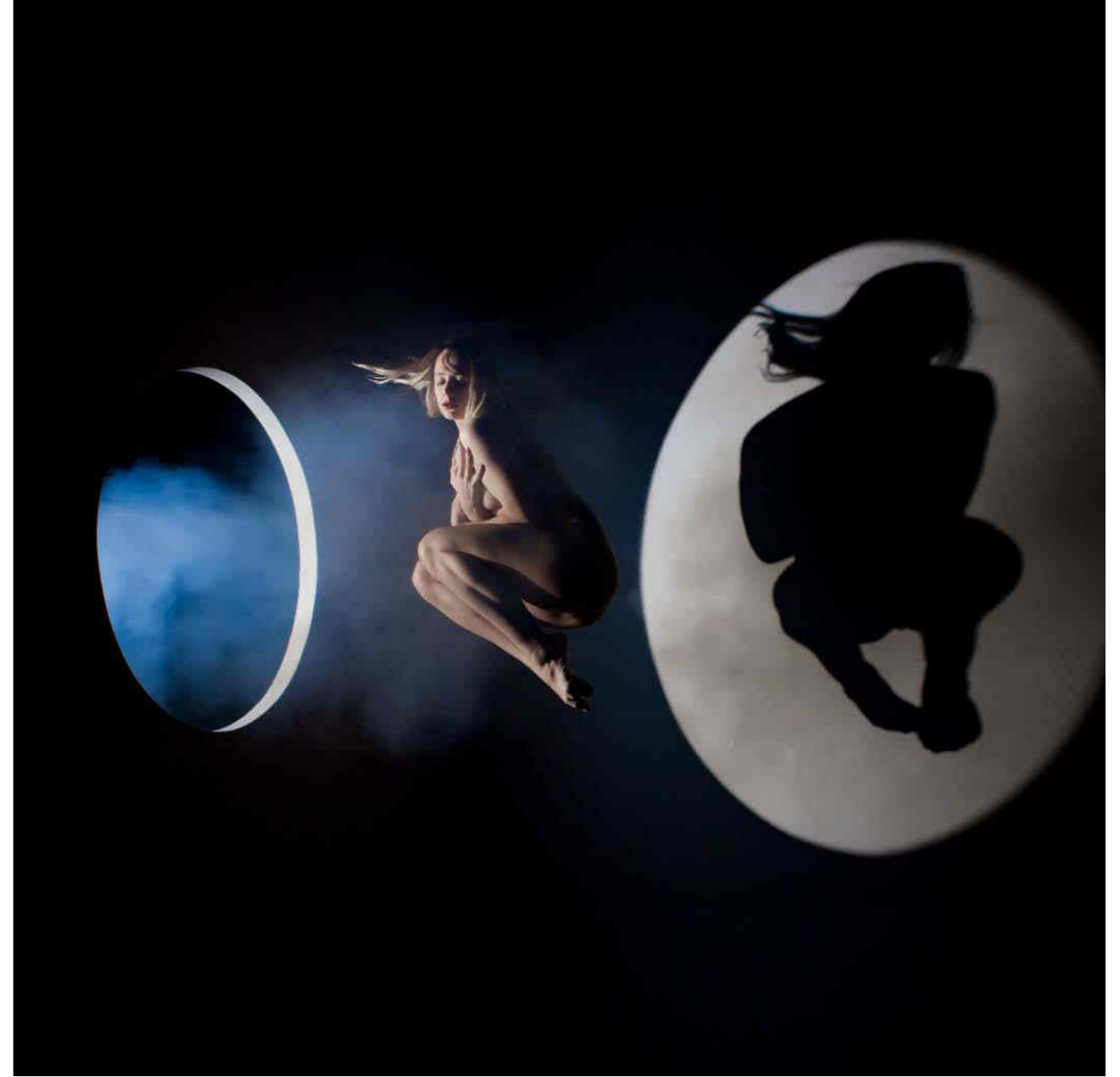
One model has her arms outstretched, as if she is tied to an invisible cross. In two extraordinary images, the models' bodies are pulled back like bows, seemingly in surrender to the greater power beyond the portal. In *Ascent of the Blessed* (c.1505), Hieronymus Bosch depicted rapt human souls being pulled through a dark sky to a disk of light, very similar to Robb's portal.

Threshold seems to be an ascent for modern world. Through the alchemy of art, we are taken to a threshold between the human and the god-like, between liquid motion and solid flesh, between the mutable and the immutable, between the immediate and the eternal.

And if these are images of ascension, is it too fanciful to see the shadow of the figure in the ellipse as an image of the soul awaiting reunion with body in paradise? Perhaps we are actually witnessing metempsychosis? Plato tells how Er miraculously returned from the otherworld, having seen souls transmigrate – including Orpheus's soul changing into a swan and Thamyras becoming a nightingale. In Threshold, in the heavenly light of the portal, are the souls of models also transmigrating? Certainly the elegant, uninhibited flow of the body of each figure suggests an animal grace, strength and beauty.

~ Mathew Rake









J U N O

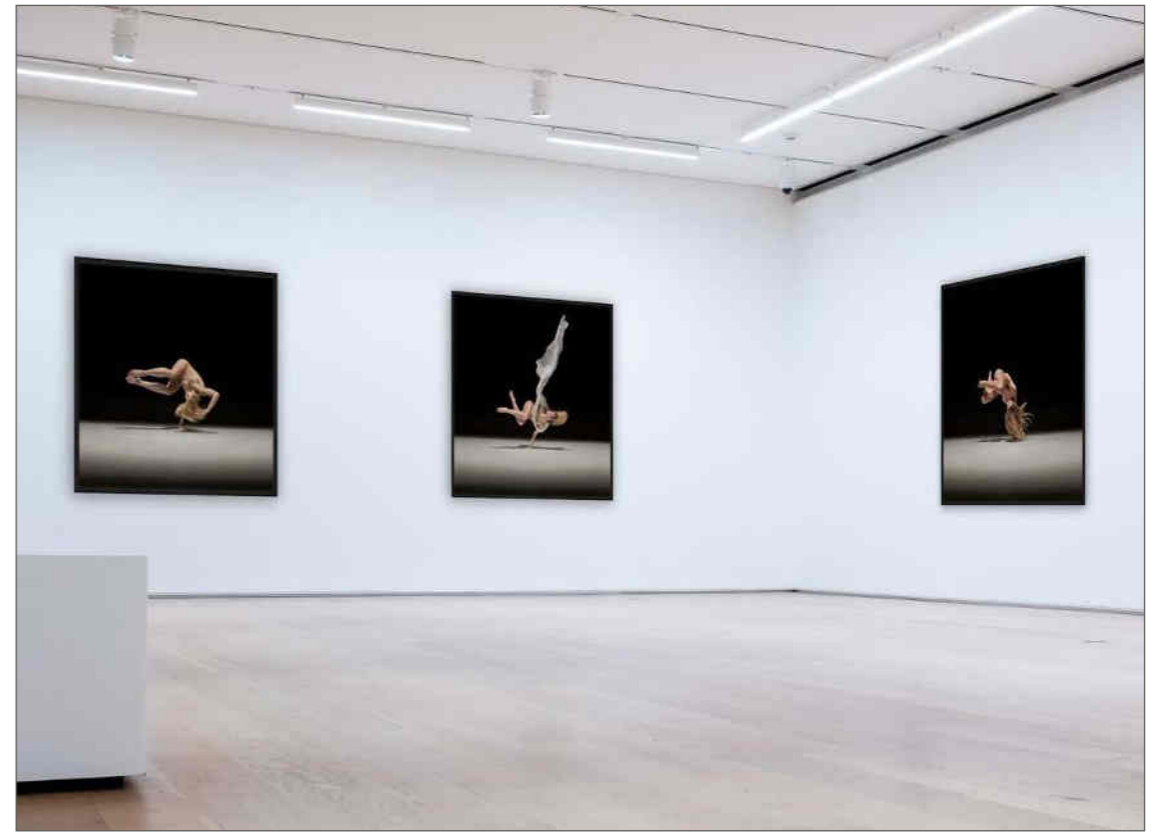
If in the Threshold series the figures seem to be ascending, in the Juno series the opposite seems to be the case. There is a sense of falling, but no sense of the fallen. As in Threshold, the Juno figures are athletes, embodiments of energy. Robb describes them in images full of heroic diagonals, bold sweeping lines, and cascades of drapery. The action is gymnastic, unimpeded, almost violent, and yet the figures still seem calm, relaxed and in control. Every extension of limb or flourish of drapery is balanced by a counter movement, giving each pose an underlying sense of nobility. The images satiate our desire both for liberation and freedom, and for order and harmony.

Maybe this paradox is down to the three-dimensional nature of lenticular photograph –walking around the picture animates the figure, freeing it, yet no matter how hard we look, no matter what angle we take, the figure remains at rest elevated in the air at the centre of an exquisitely balanced composition. And while we are immersed in the three dimensions, Robb also asks us to contemplate the fourth dimension, time. How will these movements unfold? Try as we might, we can't quite believe they will ever fall, or end up on the ground we inhabit. We believe in these figures, in their higher powers, in their dance that appears before us like frozen music.

As the title of the series suggests, the figures are clearly possessed with divine, not mortal, energy. Perhaps then, we know the end of their story. They move under the safeguard of Juno, the Roman goddess who championed women and protected the state, until they are ready to be taken out of their dance and raised to their seats in heaven. In this sense, Juno, like Threshold, is about the ascension of the human soul, about what it is to feel like a god.

~ Mathew Rake







P O R T A L







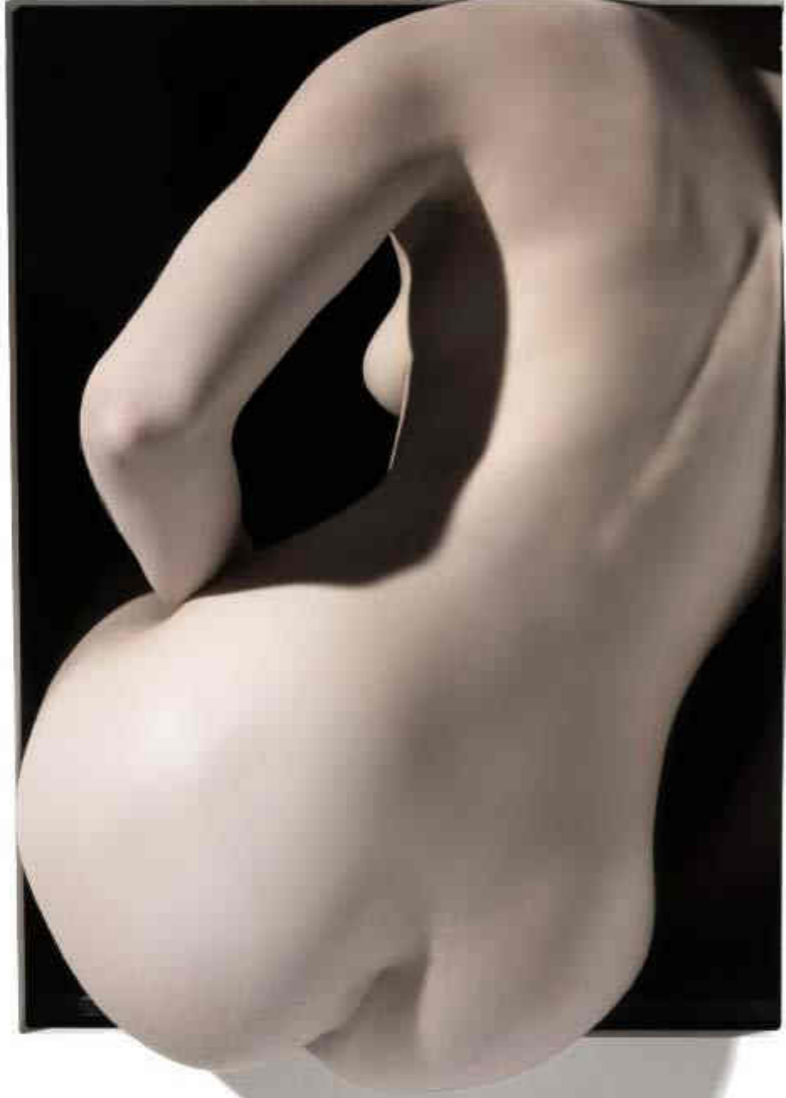


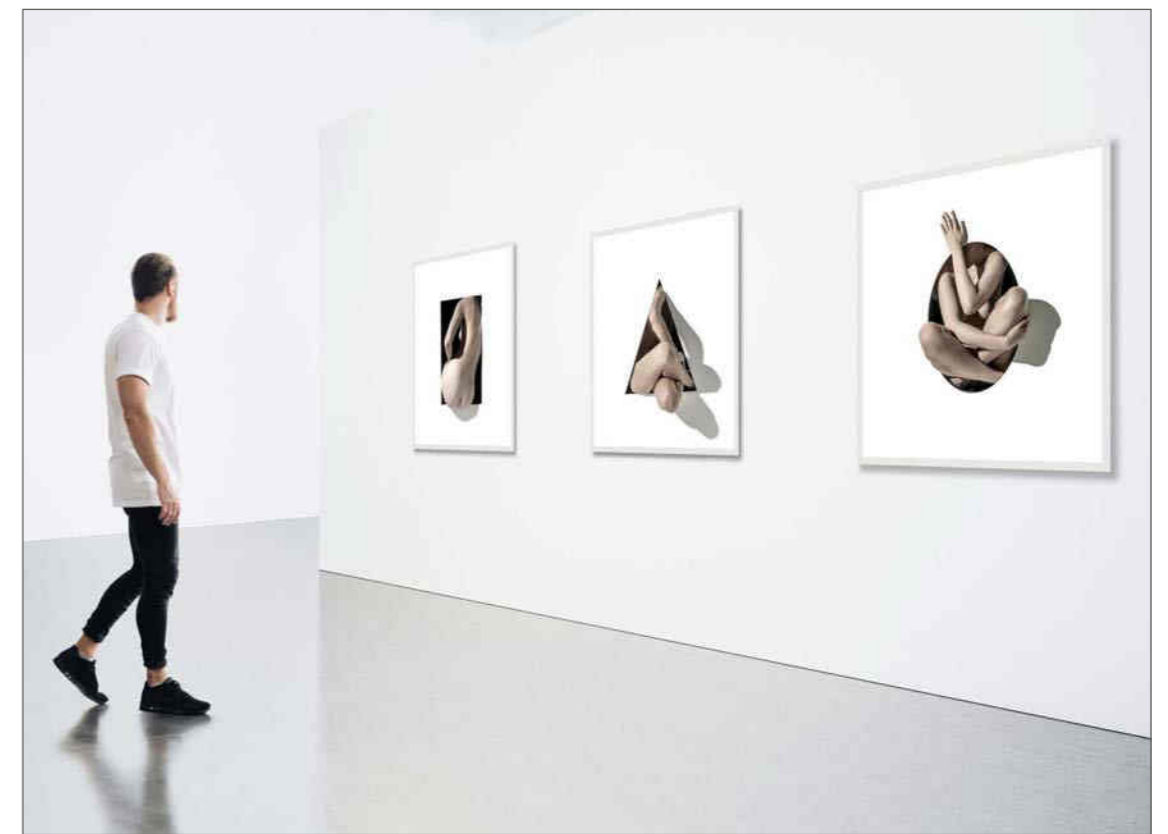




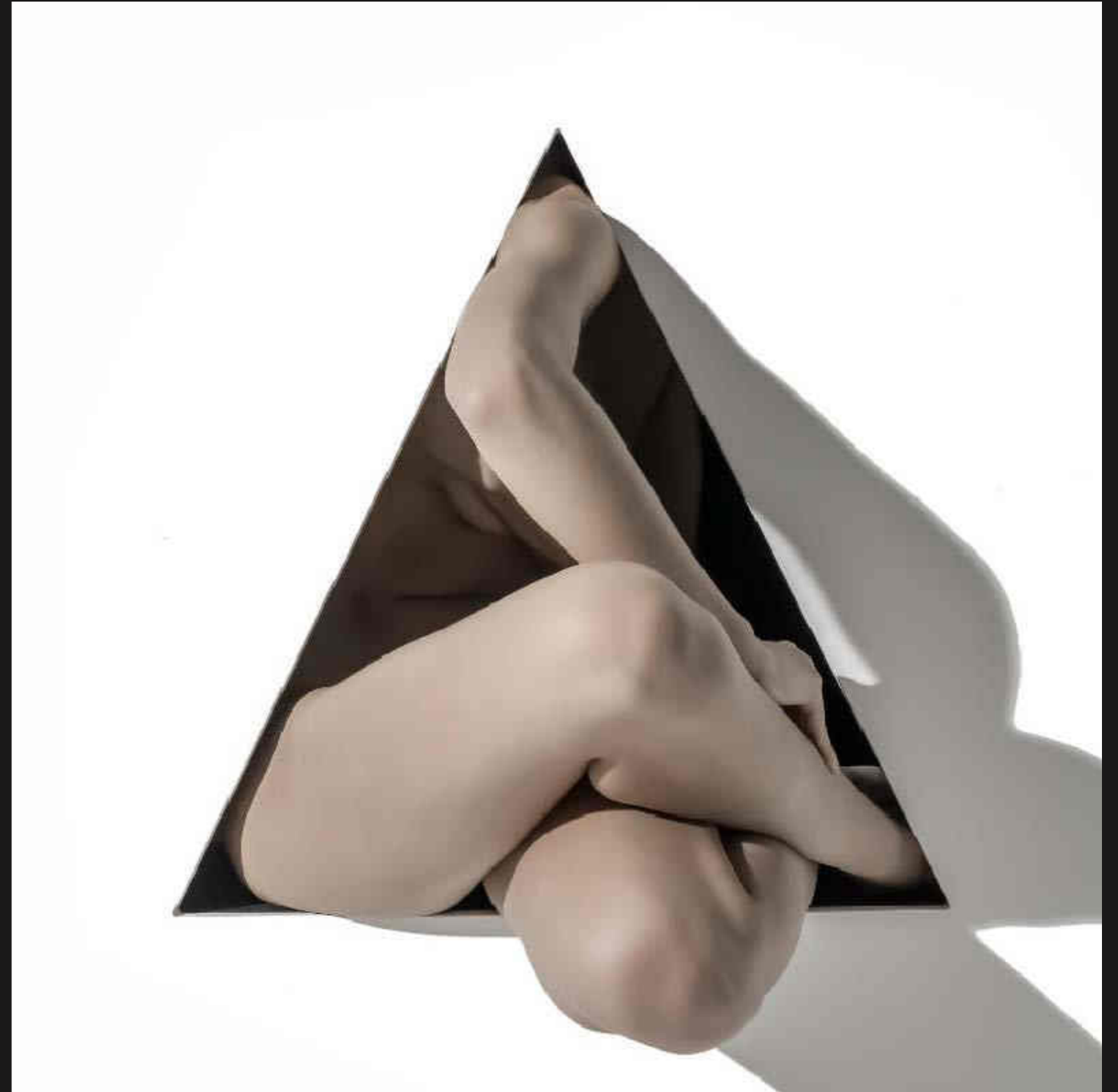
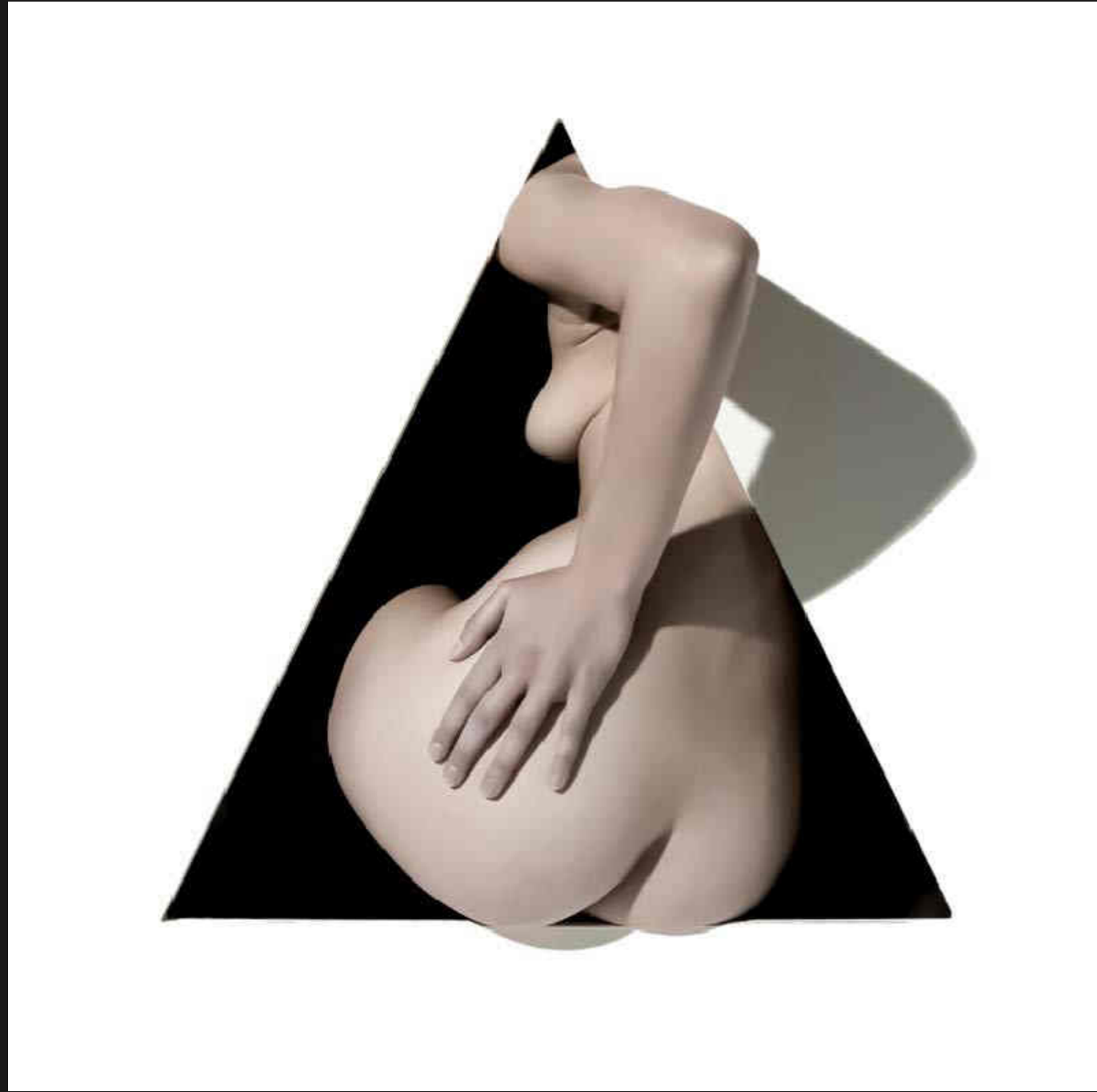
A P E R T U R E











A E R I A L

Robb's Aerial series (2011) develops the themes from his earlier Naked Singularity (2008) and Othersides (2010) work by extending the notion of escaping the forces of nature and the laws of physics, as we perceive them in our everyday existence. Once again, Robb is playing with our pre-conceived perceptions of the world and subtly distorting them to fool us. On first glance the bodies could be jumping, captured in flight. On further inspection there is a calmness and meditative quality to the expressions. They have plunged into the chasm where earthly boundaries are lifted, they mangle, floating serenely. The bodies have achieved an equanimous state.

The water is a viscous medium and acts as a support for the figures that enable them to achieve otherwise impossible body shapes and unique spatial forms that vary infinitely within the aqueous continuum. You won't find the clumsy suspension by ropes and wire or other film effects here.

These bodies are truly in a liminal state, between this world and another, suspended in the void between universes. The black void of the earlier series are replaced by an ethereal abyss of the deepest blue, only visible on close physical inspection of the actual work to which printed reproduction rarely does justice.

The ghostly qualities seen later in his Eidolon series (2012) can trace their genesis back to the Othersides series, but it is in Aerial that the translucency and phantasmagorical spectre-luminosity of skin tone reveal themselves fully to shimmer like silver scales in the darkness. These are revenant beings seen in a state of abeyance.

The viewer is perplexed, first by the lenticular dimensionality of the images then by the impossibility of the positions. These are works that require time to view, time to contemplate the impossibility of the reality presented. These are images that must be witnessed 'in the flesh' and ones that must be seen at a life-like scale. Fortunately Robb obliges with a series of images that are the same size as the bodies they represent. This only adds to their deity-like nature that begs the viewer to pay homage to their serene beauty.

In many of the images the bodies are augmented by coloured fabric. This adds dimension and vibrancy but the textiles also act as a metaphor for the material world, now abandoned. It is perhaps the last vestige, soon to be lost, of physical materiality. In Aerial 12, there are multiple figures that appear to be descending en masse into the chasm. This can be seen as the initial metamorphosis of the ensuing state, though Robb keeps us guessing by his systematic nomenclature.

These images are a technical triumph. Robb has taken his bespoke multi-camera system under water at Pinewood Film Studios (on the outskirts of London, UK) to capture bodies freed from the constraints of gravity. This is very probably the first time an artist has taken such great lengths to achieve truly dimensional photographic sequences in his way.

~ Mathew Rake









U N N A T U R A L C A U S E S

Jeffrey Robb's Unnatural Causes series enchants us by degrees. At first glance, I don't think we discern individual nudes. Instead, we see a shimmering design of two-dimensional shapes created by the figures, negative shapes and the sides of the boxes. The viewer simply enjoys the thrill of the visual stimuli: the vibrating patterns formed in the mind as multiple images of multiple models hide and reveal themselves, in an experience akin to op art. Figures rotate; the boxes widen and narrow; negative shapes appear to recede then loom forward; shadows play on the nudes, like clouds undulating over a landscape. In some images, Robb introduces acid-hued sashes on his models – and this only adds to the sense of the kaleidoscopic animation, as our eye flits from one colour to another.

It is only when we have appreciated this gestalt that we delve deeper – inspect the individual figures and their relationships to the boxes. A lot of the pleasure of these images is derived from the contrast between hard symmetry of the boxes and the elegant, elastic forms created by the figures.

One image is simply composed of four square boxes arranged to create a larger square, and yet together the four figures create a flower-like shape, limbs and bodies emanating from the centre like petals. Maybe the severity of the boxes encourages us to seek the solace of natural forms.

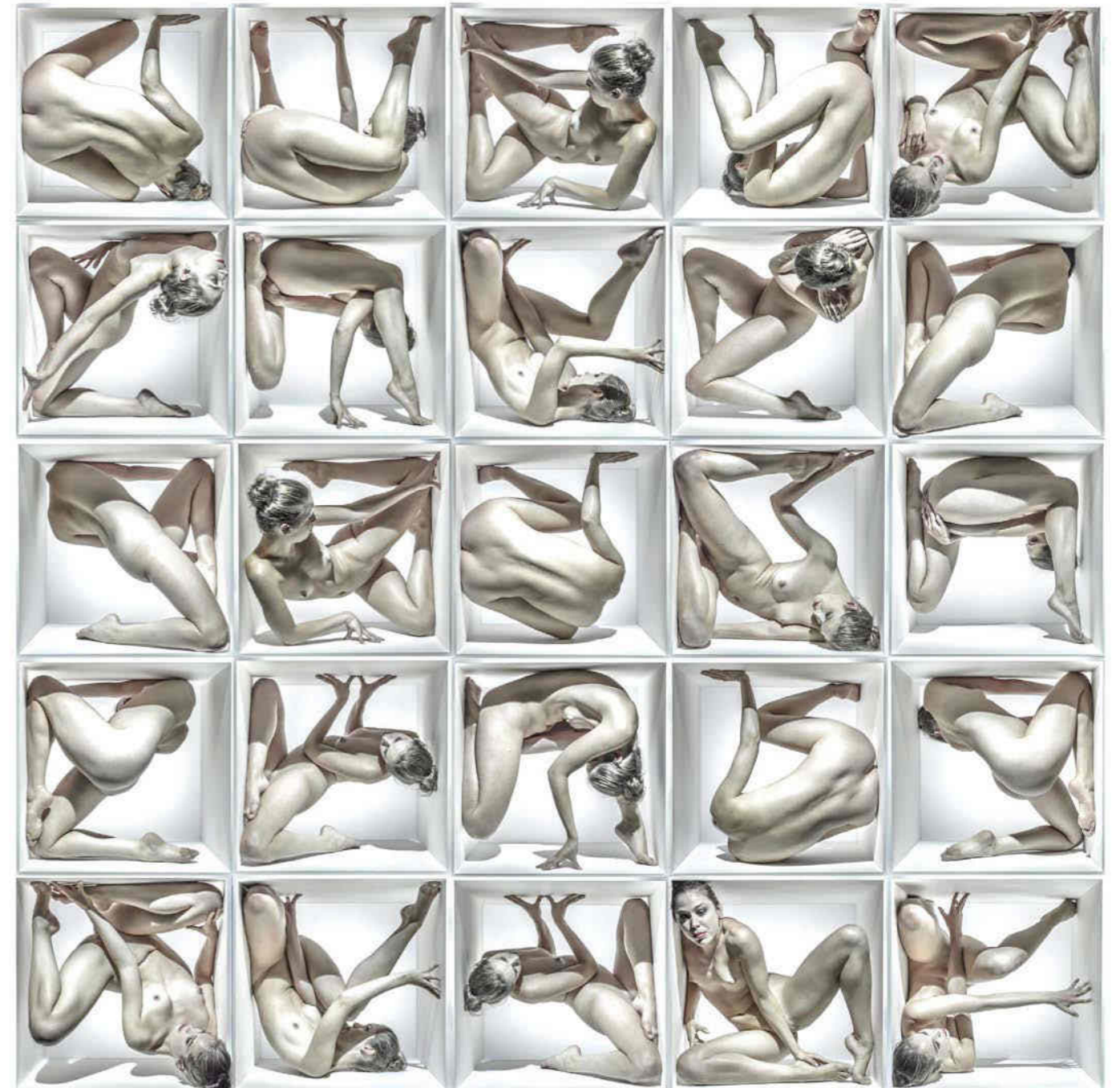
Some figures seem to be supporting their box, some seem to be fighting their box's imprisoning confines. Some seem to be out of control, falling or tumbling and it is only constraints of the box that is saving them. Some defy gravity and float to the top of their box, like helium-inflated balloons. Some appear to be swimming in invisible water, searching for a way out. There is a sense of animation and freedom at odds with the enclosure and cold sterility of the white boxes.

This is most evident in the latest works in this series in which Robb puts two or more figures in many of the boxes – the figures, embracing and apparently dancing, look as if they are ready to burst out of the boxes. The poses are dynamic and tense, with the skin stretched across flexed and well-defined muscles. Our eye alights on a foot on tip toe, a stretched thigh muscle or curve of the back as a figure, face down on the floor, lifts her head.

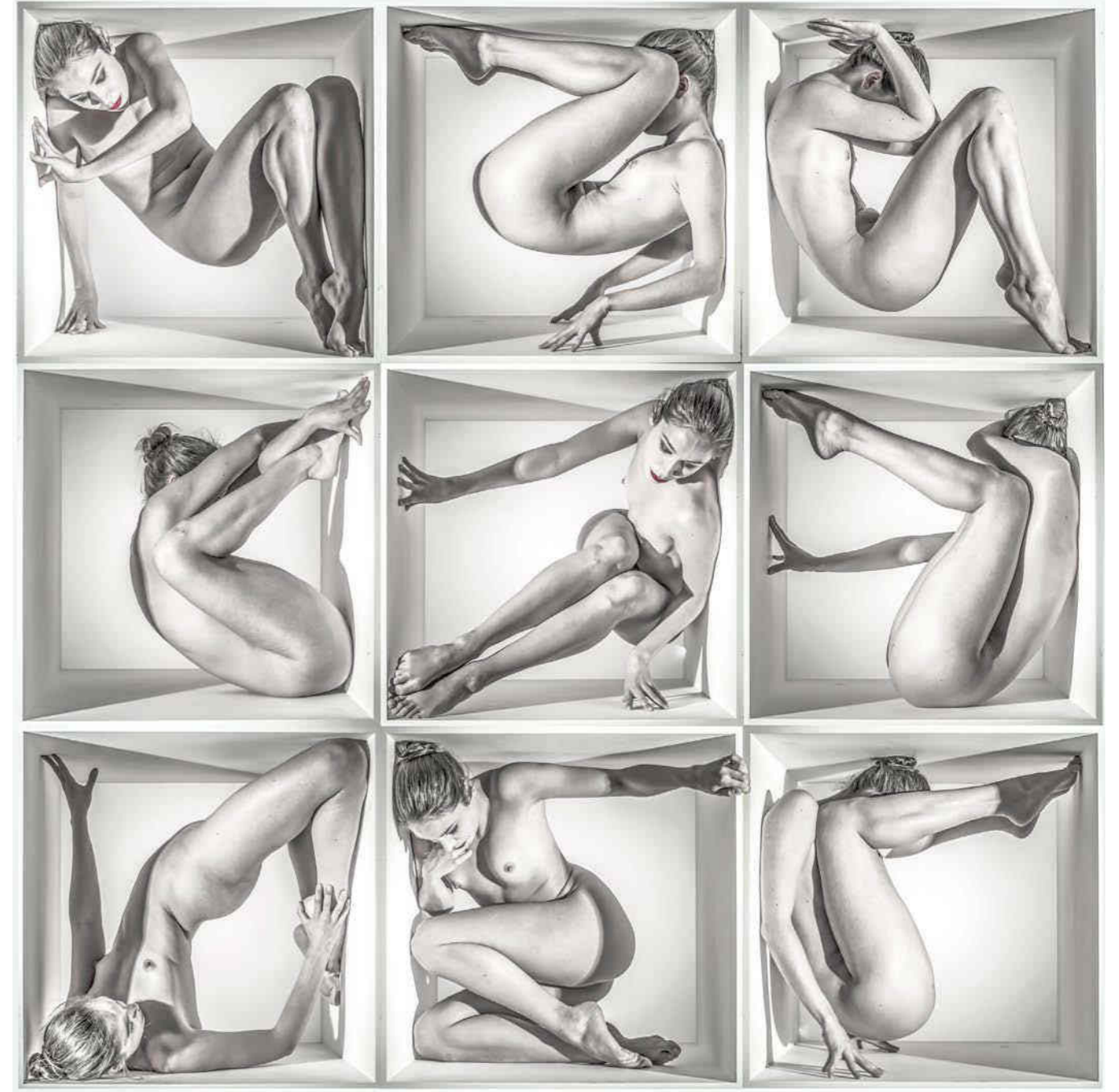
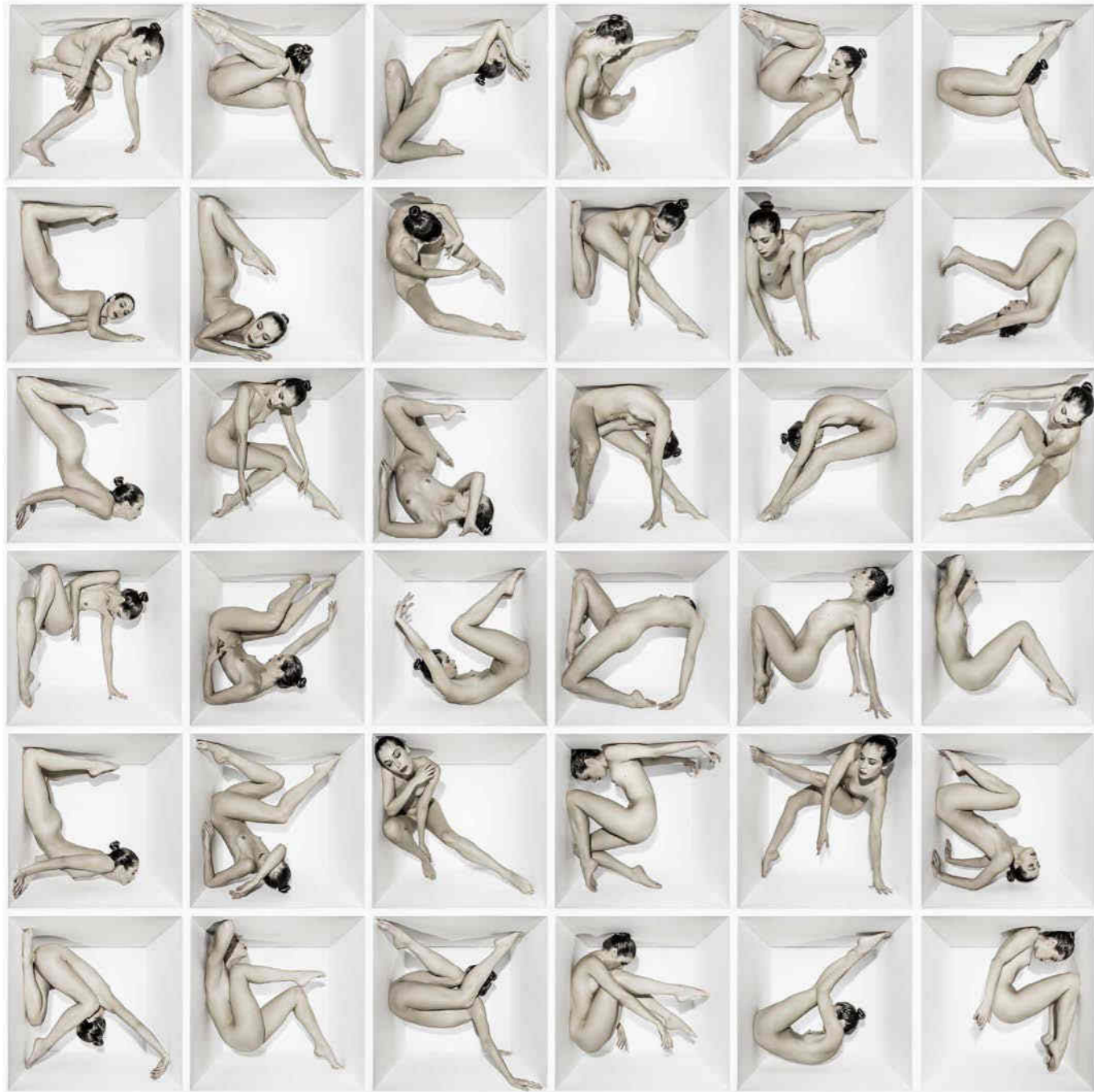
Ultimately, our appreciation of this work moves beyond the gestalt and the individual nudes, and we search for a metaphor to understand what we see. This could, I think, be an anti-feminist metaphor – are these women imprisoned in dolls' houses or bizarre test-tube Brave New World experiments? I'm not sure they are. I think the confines of the boxes only serves to accentuate energy and dynamism of the figures. Enhanced by the animating properties of lenticular photography, the figures become a metaphor of freedom and through them – just as in Ancient Greek depictions of heroes and athletes – we can relive and enjoy the vitality of our own bodies.

~ Mathew Rake



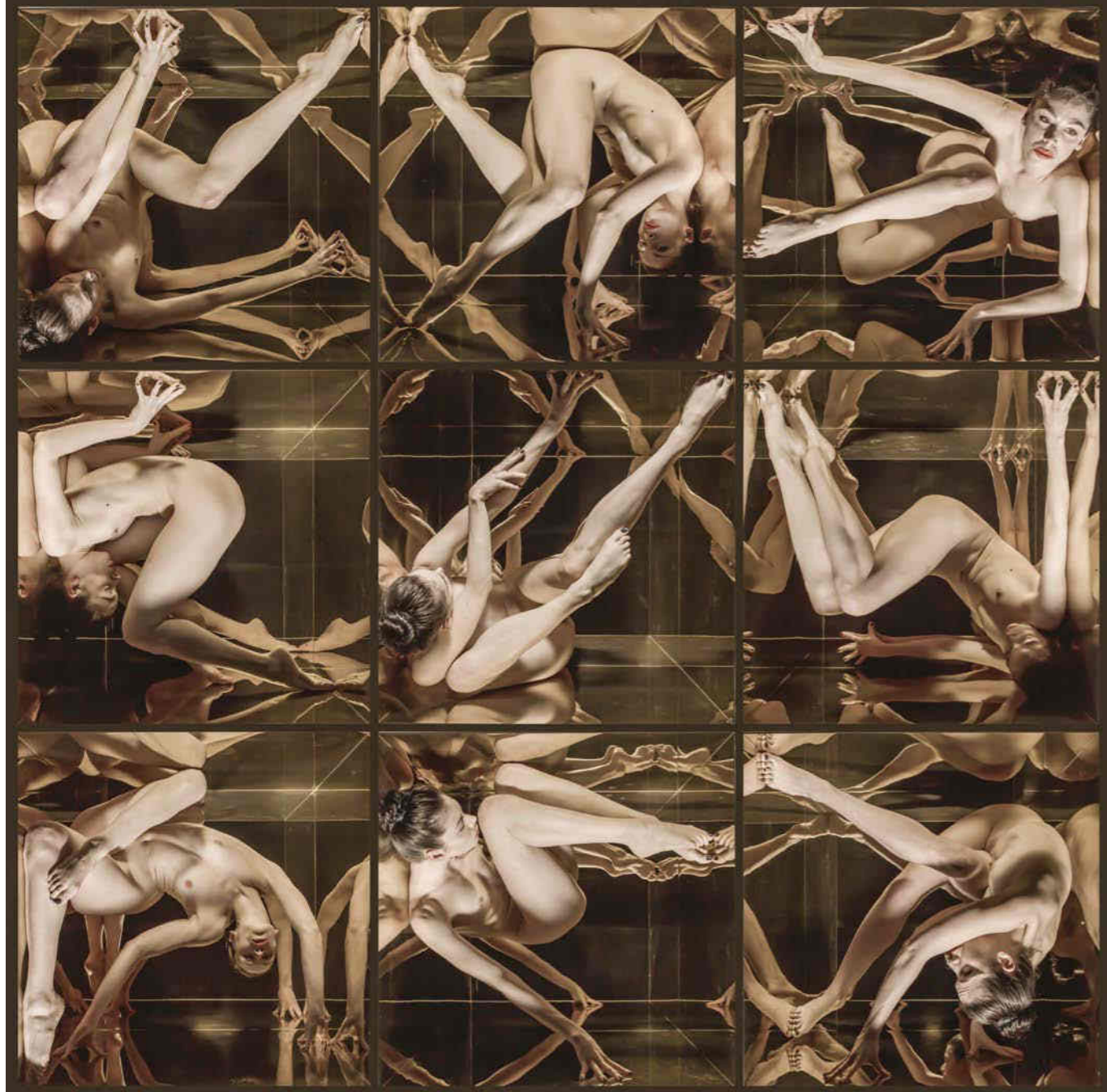


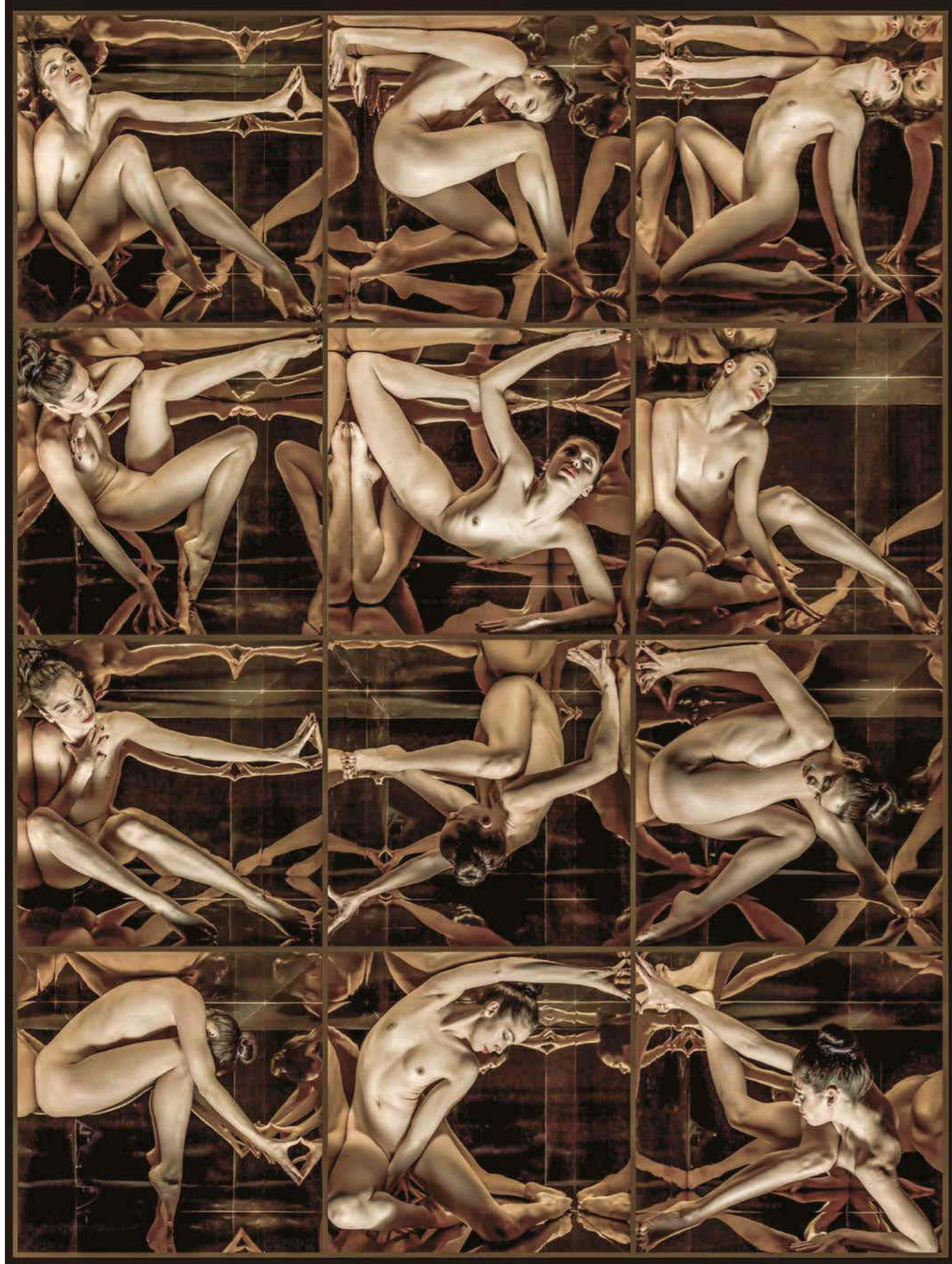






UNNATURAL CAUSES {MIRRORS}





F R E E F A L L

The world arrested, its motion frozen – it fascinated photographer Eadweard Muybridge in the 1870s. He revealed the precise locomotion of horse in a sequence of images, each taken with a different camera, showing what was right in front of our eyes, and yet invisible to us.

Some 140 years later, the same matter is intriguing three-dimensional artist Jeffrey Robb. In his Freefall series of a model apparently in flight, he also takes a scalpel to time – but he doesn't just slice open time, he unwraps it, showing the moment in a xx-degree sweep of vantage points in lenticular photographs. This is not a scientific investigation, like Muybridge's series. What unfolds, here, is poetry.

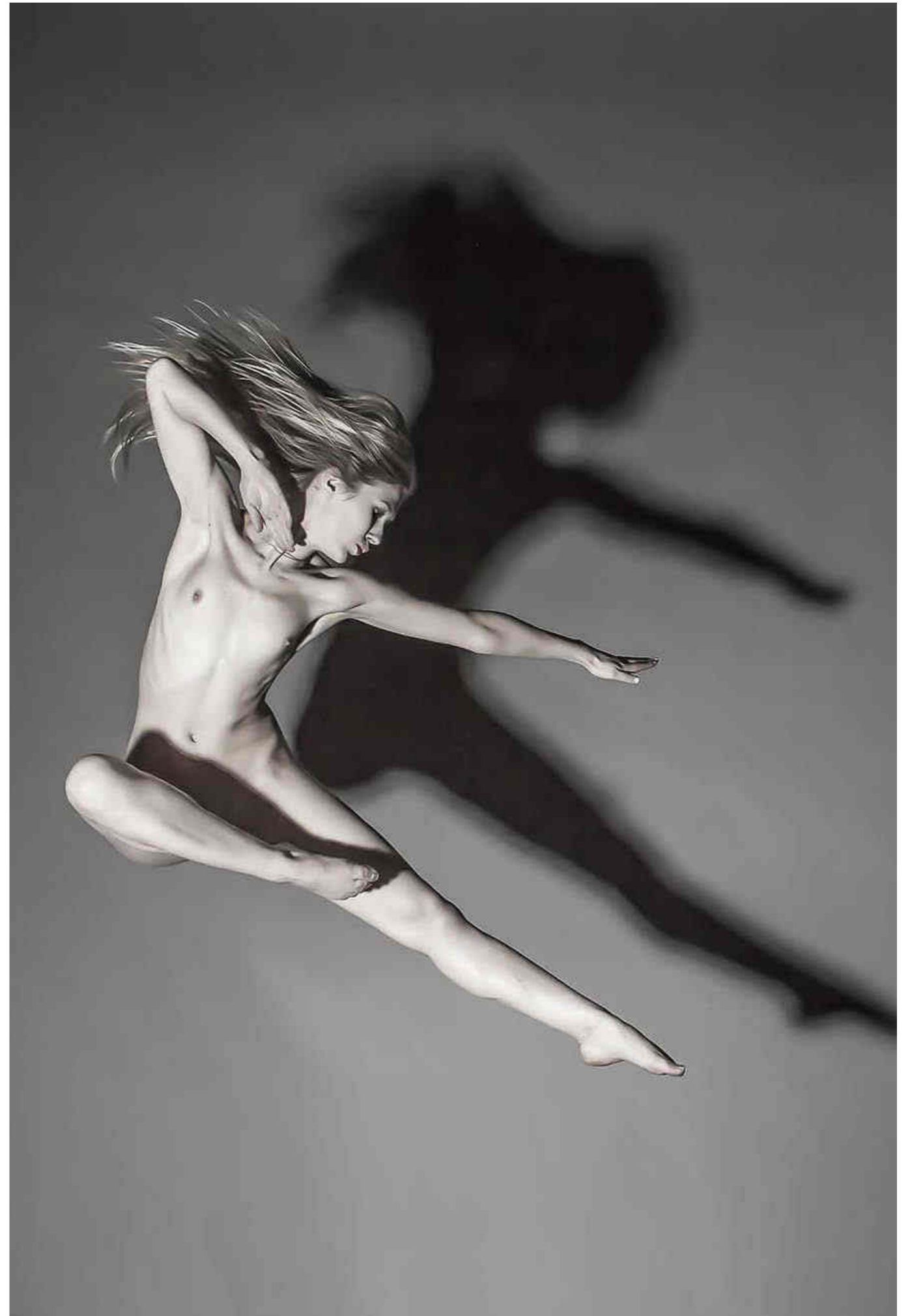
It is a poetry that is rooted in the athletes and dancers of Ancient Greek art. In images of complex and unpredictable beauty, Robb shows us the life-confirming power of movement. We see ballerinas, divers and swimmers and runners. The figure is robust and vigorous, always an incarnation of energy. And yet from the restless energy come compositions of clarity and coherence.

Many poses are light, graceful and elastic. Others are bold, emphatic, as tightly drawn as a bow. In both cases, though, we envisage how the pose will unfurl. The images show us a three-dimensional space, yet they challenge us to see the world in four dimensions. How does the freefall finish? How, indeed, did it start? Robb might have stopped time dead, but we can't help but recreate its passing in our minds. We complete the images. In Ancient Greek reliefs and vase painting, we follow the rise and fall of movement around a pot or along a wall. Here, the sweep of the movement – its lively, spirited articulation – is impressed on our imaginations.

And above all what impresses us in these images is their raw, physical power – a head thrown back in apparent ecstasy; muscled arms pulled apart, thrown passionately or stretching out in a search for something we cannot see. Practised mask-like facial expressions and poses no longer pertain – nor apparently do the forces of gravity. Everything is in flux. In this series, perhaps we are reconnected not just to the art of Ancient Greece, but further back to the primal origins of art, to the hunters and dancers of prehistoric cave painting.

~ Mathew Rake



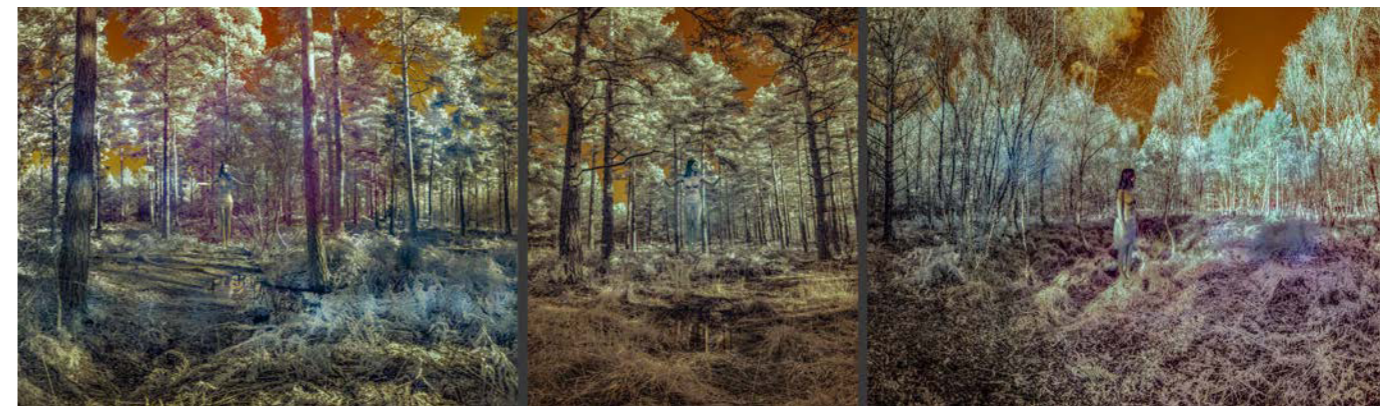


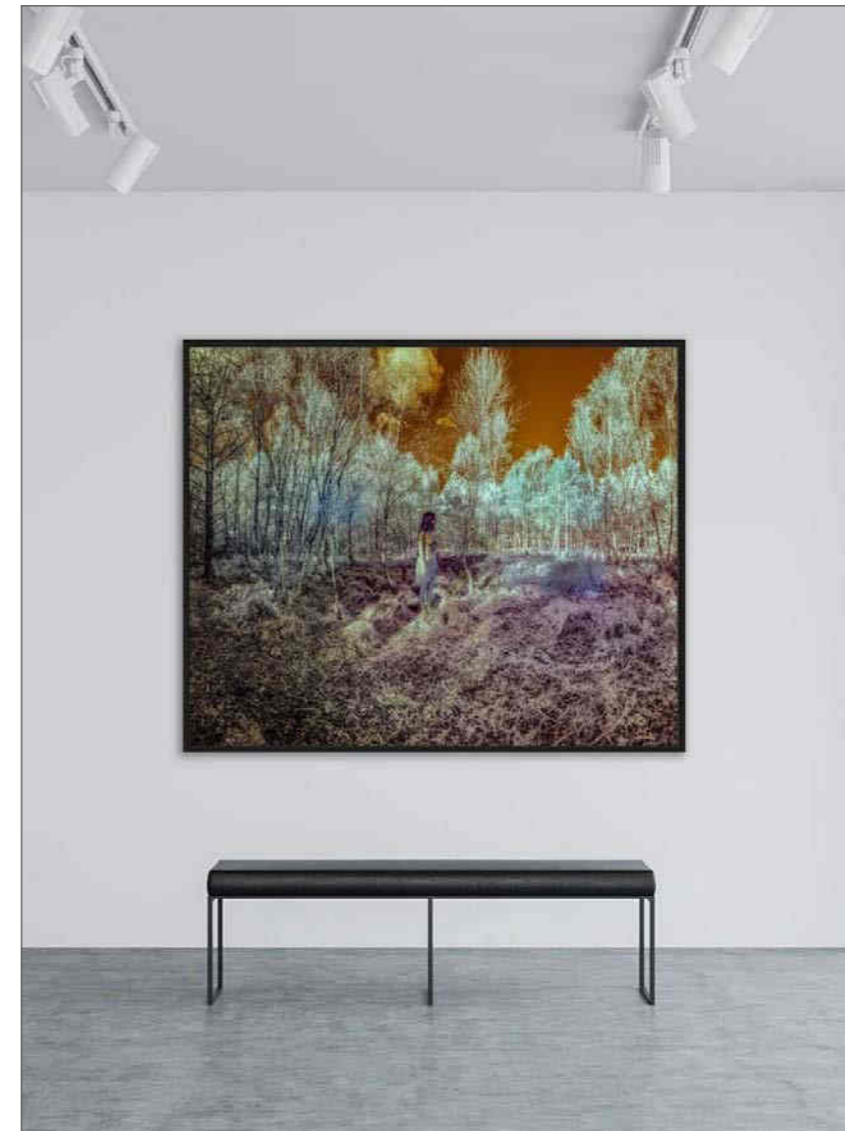
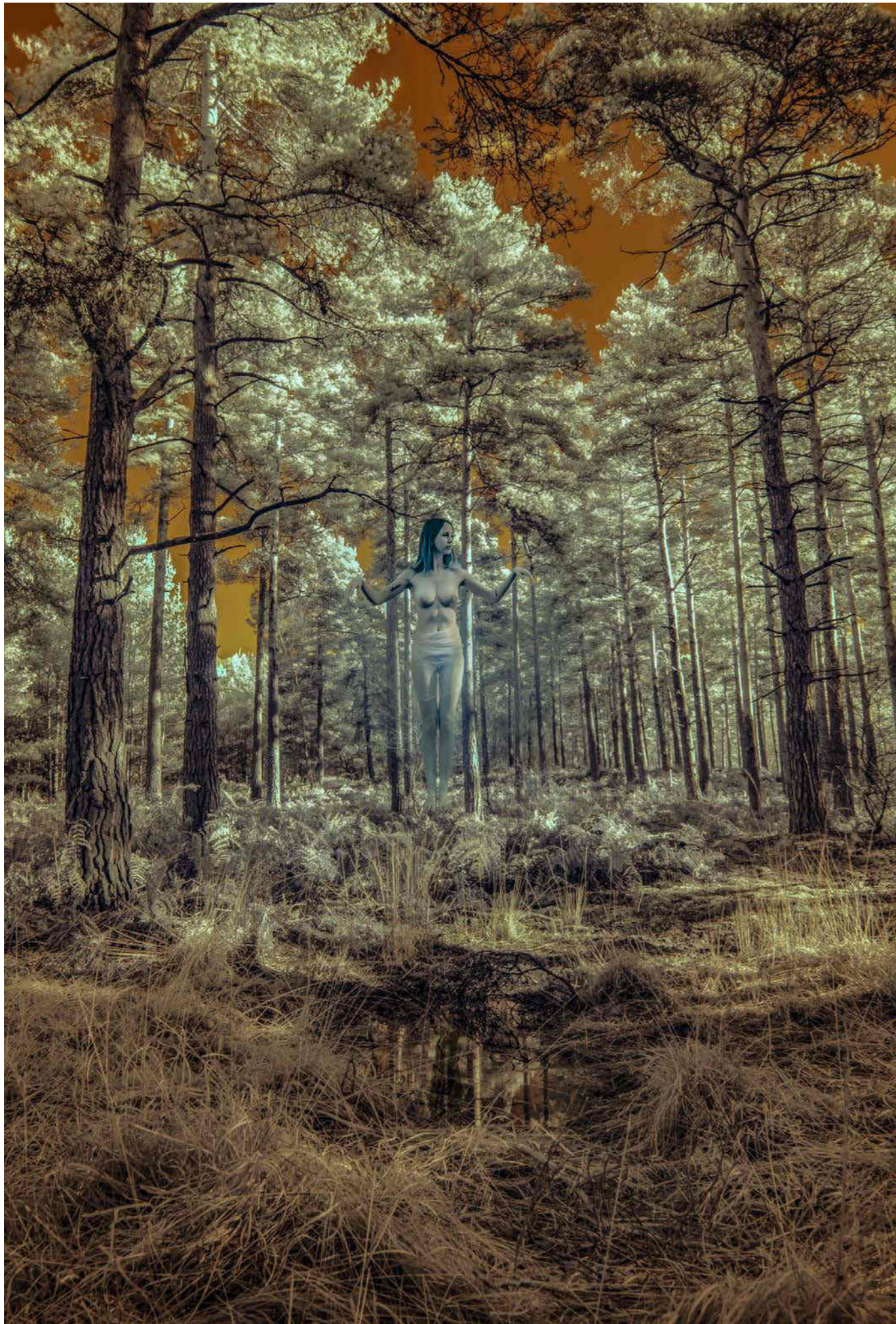






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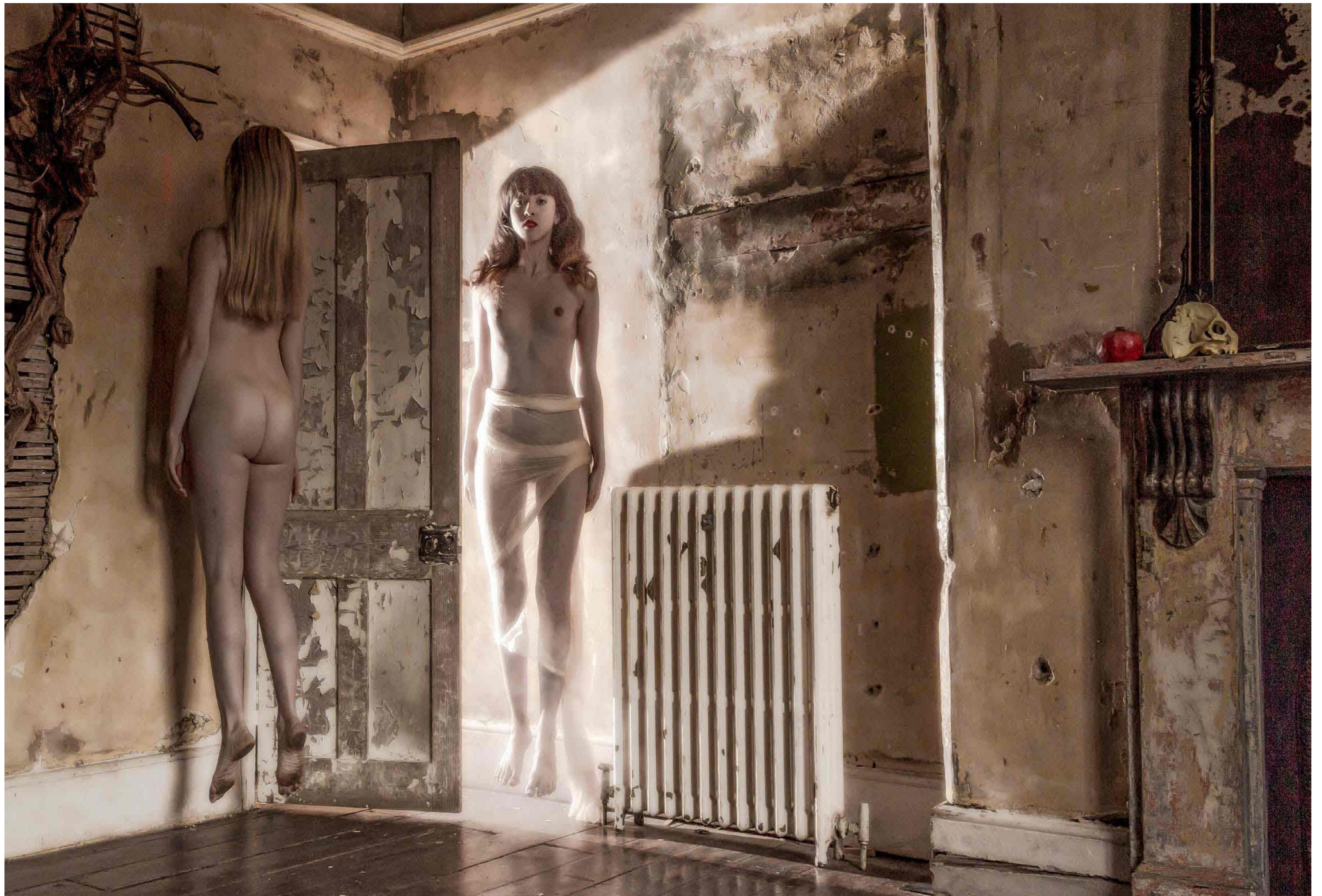




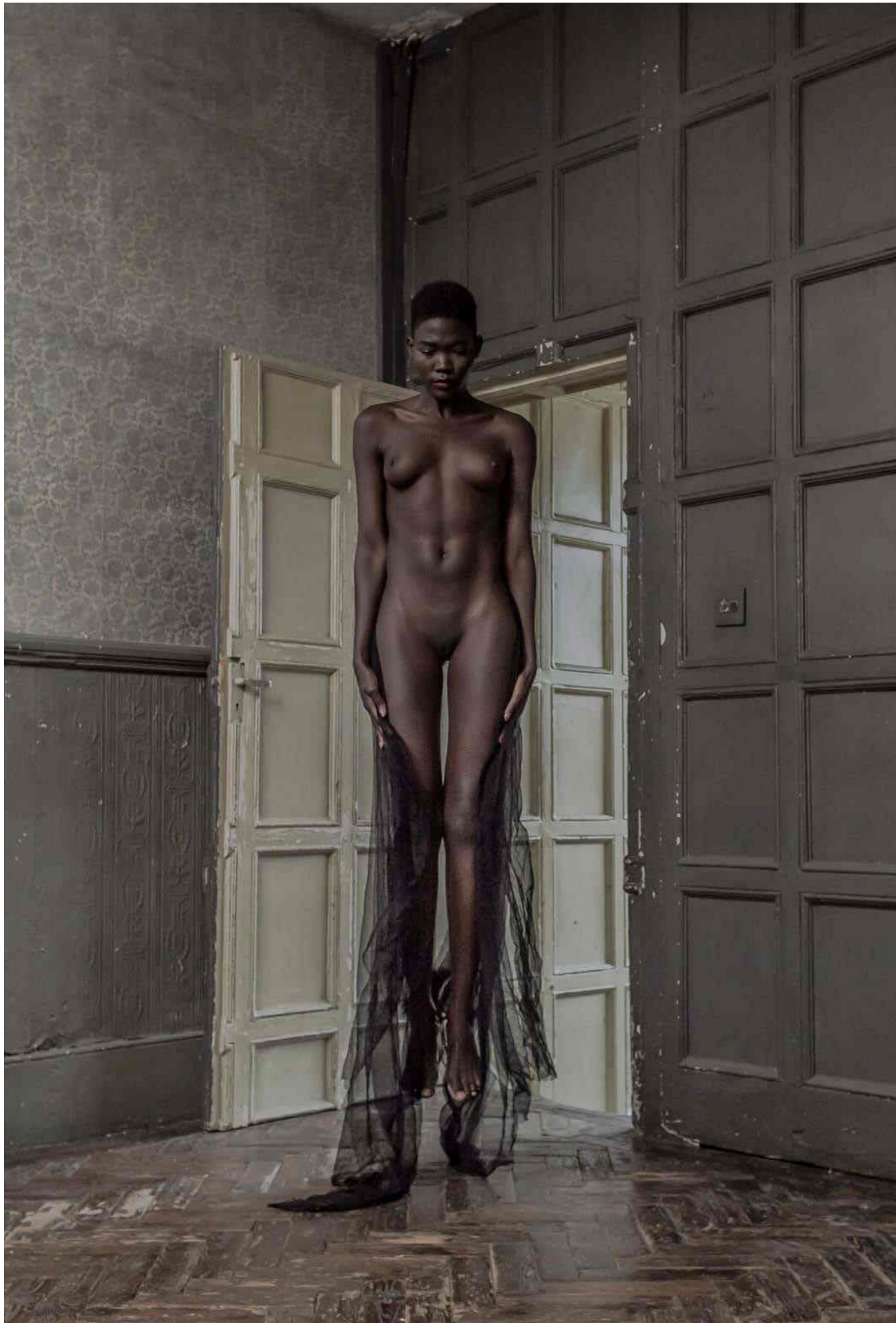


COVEN









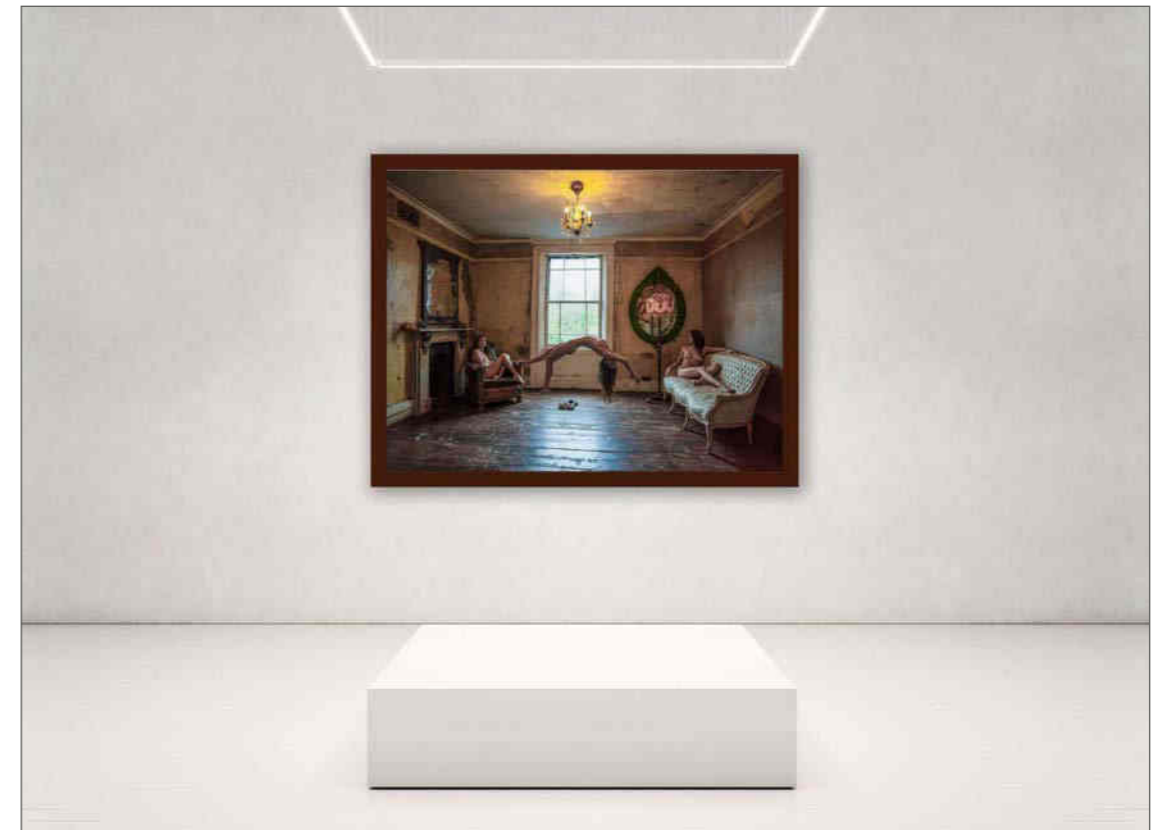




DRAWING DOWN THE MOON

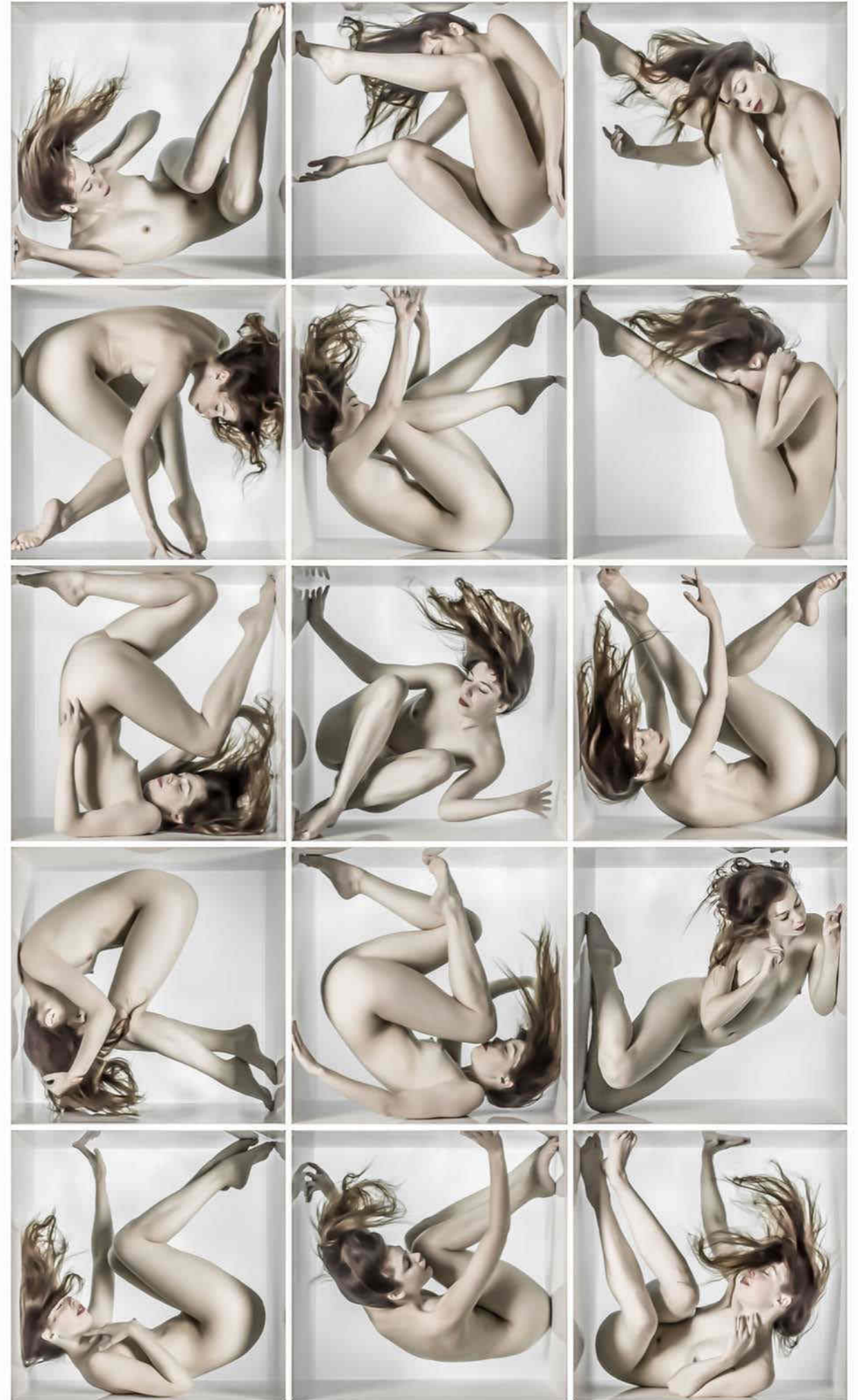








F L O W





O T H E R S I D E S

There is something disarmingly beautiful and mysterious about Robb's series Other Sides. The figures loom out of darkness like ghosts. The bodies, painted white, seem remote and untouchable, like ghostly apparitions floating in velvety emptiness; and yet, they have a stillness and solidity reminiscent of stone or marble sculpture. Only when you move in front of these images, do you see them in all their elaborate beauty and mystery. Figures disappear and reform in a different guise. In one moment, the extended hand or foot seems to be tangible, within your grasp; in the next, it has been withdrawn. In one moment, a face is staring directly at you; in the next, it hides behind the body. In one moment, the figure appears to be a consequential, flesh-and-blood body; in the next, an evanescent and illusory form.

The sheer variety of poses in Robb's work is enthralling. There are poses that seem inexplicable – the impossible angle of a limb, the gravity-defying body. In one case, a lower leg appears to have been detached from the body and then hooked over an arm. Then there are poses of simplicity and clarity. A model sits with her head on her knee – the graceful arch of her back in stark contrast with the diagonals of her bent leg. In an image of extraordinary harmony, a model has one forearm lying on the other, one leg lying on the other.

There are also poses of great complexity, especially when two figures are shown together. These figures seem to grow around each other almost organically, twisting together like vines. Claspings or caressing each other, they create circular and sinuous rhythms. As we move in front of the image, the figures appear to merge, as if they are searching for one perfect form.

The gaze of the models also seems important. In some of the most striking images, the model looks directly at us. We see personality, human traits – confidence, serenity, self-containment – in the disarmingly frank gaze. The models seem to challenge us – are we as assured as they are? In some images, however, we cannot even see the eyes.

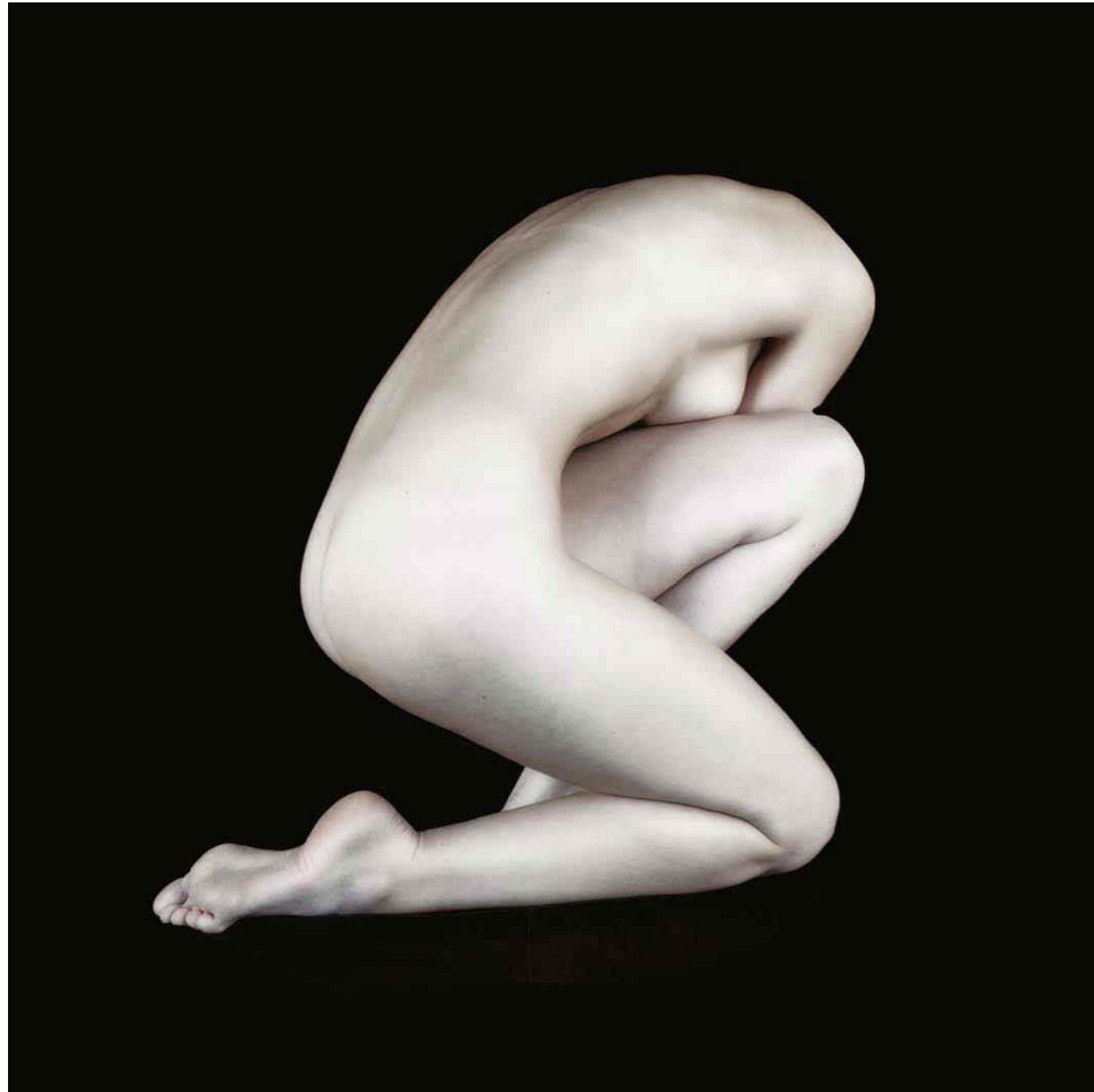
Denied direct contact with the subject, we begin to see poetry, not personality. A back resembles the form of a sea shell, skin resembles the surface of a sea-smoothed stone. In many images, the eyes are visible but downcast or turned away. These are some of the most intriguing images. The figures seem truly otherworldly, absorbed by something we are ignorant of. They deflect our gaze away, into the mysterious darkness that surrounds them.

Robb's use of colour enhances this sense of otherworld mystery. We are arrested by the startling red of the lips and the wonderfully rich oranges, browns and yellows in the hair. And yet in the predominantly black-and-white world that these figures exist, this colour seems vestigial – almost as if it were evidence of a previous existence. Indeed, the figures seem to be in a liminal state – between this world and the next. Before our eyes, they appear to be turning into wraiths – gradually drained of colour, gradually released from the forces of gravity. And we are at a gateway, a threshold – witnessing this magical metamorphosis.

~ Mathew Rake











NAKED SINGULARITY

In many ways, Jeff Robb's Naked Singularity can be seen as a three-dimensional response to the history of the photographic nude. American photographers Edward Weston and Alfred Stieglitz sought formal perfection in the nude, European-based photographers Bill Brandt and Man Ray sought innovative abstract designs. Robb's work borrows from both traditions, but it is uniquely his own. Perhaps the most salient aspect of Robb's nudes is their sensuousness – the lighting both nuanced and beautiful. In velvety darkness, his nudes emerge like marble sculpture – supple, sentient flesh, given the implacable hardness of stone. Skin tones have few deep shadows or harsh highlights, so our eye is encouraged to move slowly across soft transitions of tone.

This movement is aided by fluid, yet contained, compositions: a hand holds a foot, leading the eye from arm to leg; the curve of a back echoes the curve of a breast. Our eye is encouraged onward, yet it always has a place to rest. And of course, as these are three-dimensional images, the body also moves. It does so like our eye – slowly, so the three-dimensional form of each model reveals itself gradually. Robb's figurative series can broadly be divided into two: the full-length figures and those which are cropped. The cropped figures encourage metaphorical interpretation. You begin to see natural and organic forms – seashells and sea-smoothed stones; the curve of a pepper or a pear or a peach. Whilst in the full-length figures, the body is simplified into pattern: arms form a cross before the body; a breast is framed by torso, arm and leg. Here is both the aesthetic beauty of a Weston or a Stieglitz and the exquisite abstract design of a Man Ray or a Brandt.

The full-length figures perhaps do not have such poetic resonances. They seem to remain defiantly human. Certainly at first, you notice the particularities of the human body rather than metaphor – the taut skin over bone juxtaposed against folds of flesh; the smoothness of skin against the texture of hair; a hard, tense, weight-bearing limb against one that bends, leaf-like, towards the ground.

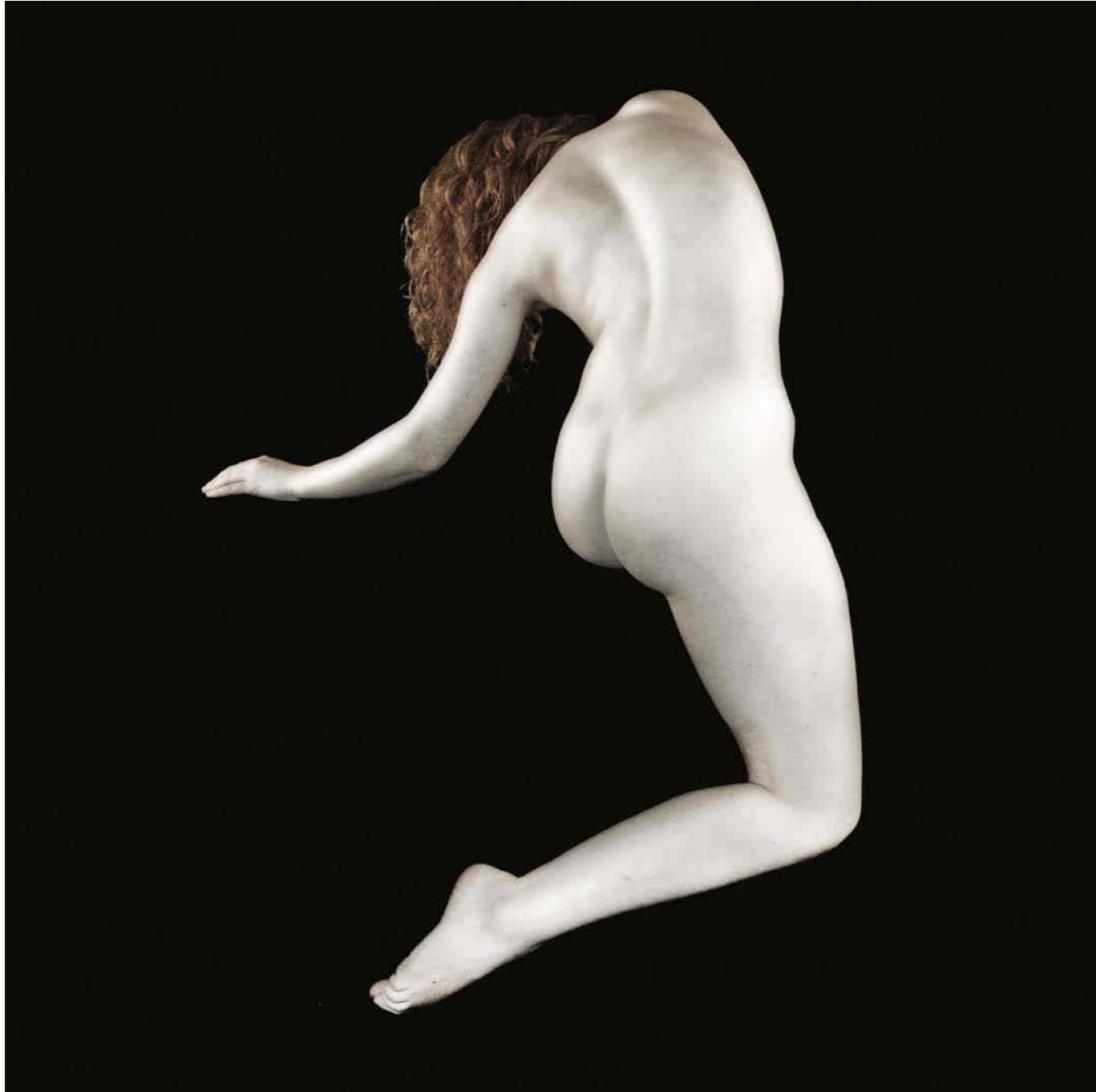
If there is metaphorical element in the full-length figures, maybe it is because they represent psychological states of mind. The figures in repose appear to float like feathers in black space. The models seem lost in another world, mindful of nothing. Sitting, standing or kneeling however, the figures seem to be very much in this world – contemplative or concerned. Perhaps we see our moods in these models.

'Contemplative' and 'concerned' are, in fact, good descriptions of Robb's images, not just his models. Think of the work of many modern 'masters' of the nude, Robert Mapplethorpe, Herb Ritts or Patrick Demarchelier. In their images, there is melodrama: every muscle is fixed and flexed, sexuality is blatantly exalted. Robb's work is quieter, more demanding, probably more beautiful – it shows he is an heir to older, greater masters of the nude.

~ Matthew Rake











N I G H T F A L L

Robb's Nightfall series is clearly a successor to his Freefall series, but how do the two series differ? Both assert the life-affirming power of movement in graceful, gravity-defying poses, but in the new series drapery and colour seem to play a more important part. Moreover, two of the pieces, entitled Seduction of Io and the Messenger, suggest that Nightfall contains mythological and perhaps Biblical allusions.

Perhaps we are looking at angels. After all, the figures are luminous, serene and unearthly, apparently without sin or grief. And they cast the merest shadow on the background - as if they are not really rooted to this world.

And yet if the figures are angels, they do not come to greet, bless or command. There is no sense of mission, no sense of their intermediary role between heaven and earth. They are not instruments of revelation.

Perhaps then they are maenads – the women sacred to Dionysius and maddened by his inspiring power. Greek and Roman artists often showed maenads abandoned to ecstatic frenzy - head thrown back, arms loft - on urns, cisterns and pedestals. Certainly Robb's dramatic use of drapery seems to borrow from the Classical depiction of the maenads. Robb creates pools of movement in which the figures seem to swim. We are mesmerised by this movement, as we are by swirling water. And like the figures themselves, we are absorbed, temporarily removed from the rest of the world.

And yet while the maenads surrendered to revelry, there is a sense of control in Robb's work. Each figure seems to master her movement rather than surrender to it. We are conscious of strength and purpose.

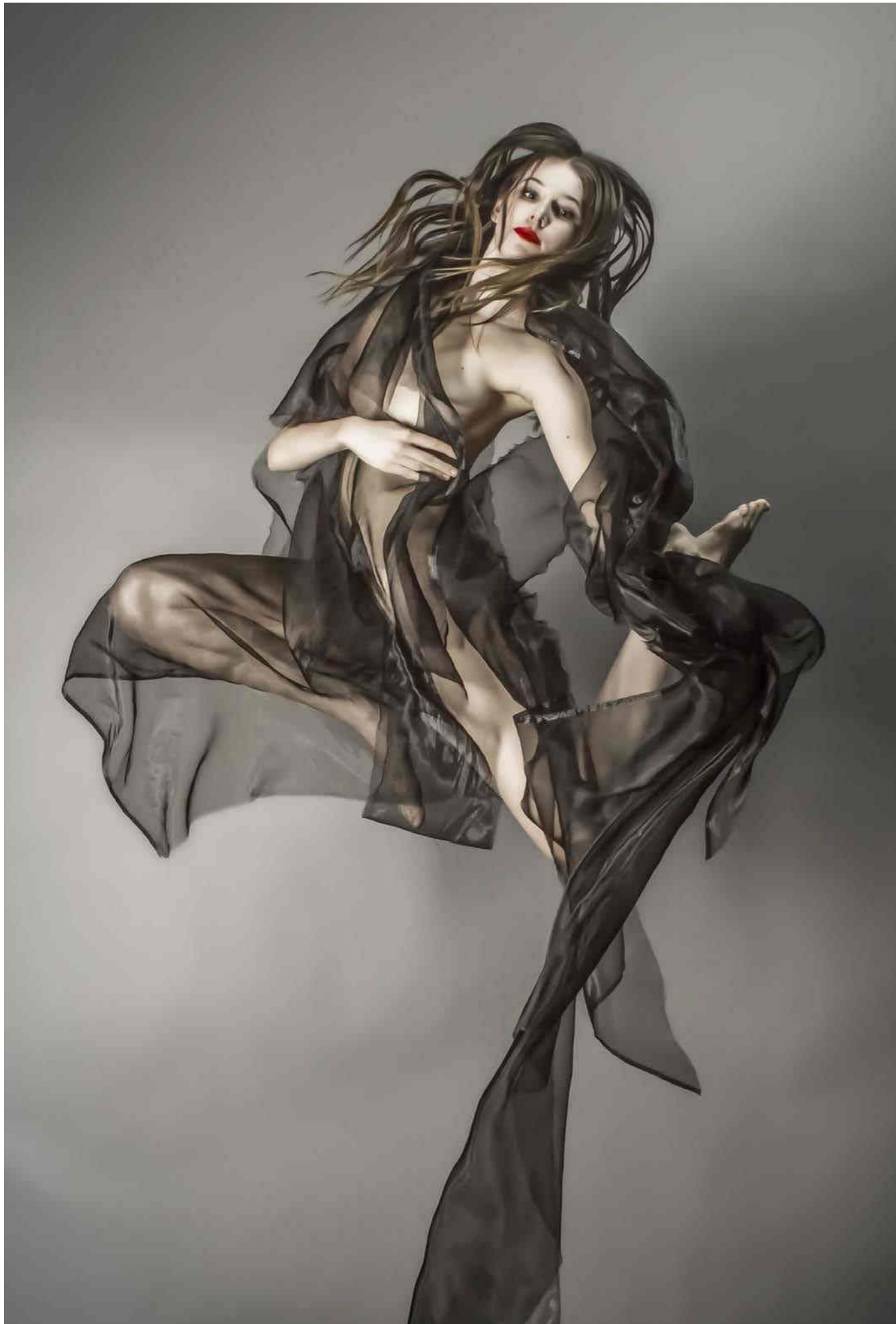
Certainly Robb's figures refer to the angels and maenads of Classical, medieval and Renaissance art, but there is no didactic teaching here. Robb doesn't have a specific story to tell or message to proclaim. Instead he uses acts of levitation, the sweep and flow of the drapery, and the invigorating power of the human body to instil a sense of liberation and freedom. It is a profoundly positive 21st-century vision.

~ Matthew Rake















E I D O L O N S

In 1912, Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) painted *Nude Descending a Staircase No.2*. A seminal work of modern painting – part Cubist, part Futurist – it was a response to the pace of a modern mechanised world. In particular, Duchamp drew inspiration from the stop-motion photography of Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) and Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904).

Exactly one hundred years later, Robb, almost in answer to Duchamp, has created his *Eidolon* images, a series of nudes in motion named after the spirit images of Ancient Greek literature. Ironically, although Robb's medium is lenticular photography, his approach in many ways is more 'painterly' than that of Duchamp. Duchamp's nude is depicted as a sequence of angular, interlocking and outlined planes – she could almost be marching off to war. Robb, by contrast, wants to show the fluid, unfolding beauty of movement.

Using a series of cameras like Muybridge and long exposures, he captures his models 'painting' with their flesh and the fabric they carry. They paint with ravishing, impassioned brushstrokes – inviting our eye to travel along dramatic paths of movement that rise and fall, double back, turn in on themselves, and spill out into the black void that surrounds them.

As they dance, they seem to undergo magical transformations – we watch them shed their previous forms and embrace their future selves. Occasionally they appear to be engulfed in the maelstrom they have created, like figures in the flames of a fire or swimmers at sea, struggling in ceaseless, eddying currents. In one image, *Eidolon 14*, four figures (actually one) seem to be sucked into a vortex of fire. In *Eidolon 19*, a woman's face, modelled by a hard uncompromising light, looks out at us as her body appears to fragment. More often, however, the figures are borne triumphantly out of the maelstrom. Whatever their fate, they have a serenity about them.

In many ways, Robb's smeared, dynamic 'brushwork' recalls the painting of Francis Bacon (1909–1992), and the way he bent, twisted and eviscerated his figures. Yet the emotions Bacon evinced – shock, terror and seething anger – are the exact opposite of those of the *Eidolon* series. Robb uses the energy of his 'brushwork' to create lyrical compositions of grace and harmony, totally at odds with Bacon's unhinged universe. If we are looking for painting that approximates the *Eidolon* series, it may be better to look at the action paintings of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) – images that originate from both choreography and chance; images full of sensual, sinuous movement; images that perhaps afford us a glimpse of the sublime.

Duchamp quickly lost interest in painting after completing *Nude Descending a Staircase*. He began to exhibit his 'Readymades', industrially manufactured objects (including, famously, a urinal) that he decided were works of art. If he had lived long enough to see the emergence of lenticular art, he might have once again embraced the beauty of the unique art object, conceived and crafted by an artist. And, you never know, if he had lived long enough to see Robb's work, he might have also once again believed in the possibilities of painting.

~ Matthew Rake











THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Are the figures in Jeff Robb's Thought Experiments series flying or floating? Are they creatures of the air or creatures of the water? At first glance, I would say the latter. In front of the images, I feel as if I am standing in front of an aquarium.

Beyond the plate glass is a strange, silent, self-contained world where figures – oblivious to our existence – move serenely before us. They appear at peace in their sea-green world and, for as long as we look at them, they make us feel at peace in ours. Yet, no matter how hard you look, there is no water visible. The miracle of these images is that the figures are suspended in light – weightless and divine, perhaps, like the hordes of soaring heavenly figures in Baroque paintings.

But Robb's figures are not exactly soaring – yes, some glide and hover, in acts of effortless levitation, but others appear to tumble and fall. They are not completely triumphant over the forces of gravity – hair cascades to the floor; a leg droops so that the foot almost, but not quite, grazes the ground.

These are figures for the twenty-first century – twisting, turning, falling backwards, not ascending to heaven but pulled back down to their dark earth bound shadow. In this interpretation, the aquarium, with its formal beauty and air of peace and calm, has gone, and we begin to think of the struggles of our world.

The dichotomy between struggle and serenity is amplified by each figure's relationship to its shadow. In one image, a woman face down, with arms spread out, seems at peace with herself, but she becomes a sinister monster-like apparition in her shadow.

In contrast, a figure falling backwards, almost assuming a crucifixion pose, has a shadow that serenely slides across the floor with wing-like arms. A third figure, also falling backwards, becomes an amphibian in her shadow, with forelegs spread out at right angles before her. Each figure seems to be reincarnated in its earth-bound shadow and it is difficult to stop yourself looking at the way the shadows elongate and distort in a strange, surrealist drama.

In truth, we are always led back to the wonder of the figures. They appear before us in three dimensions, dramatically described by bold lighting – and as a result, their volume and solidity seem palpable. We can sense the weight of figures pressing down, and yet we witness only empty air holding them up.

~ Matthew Rake







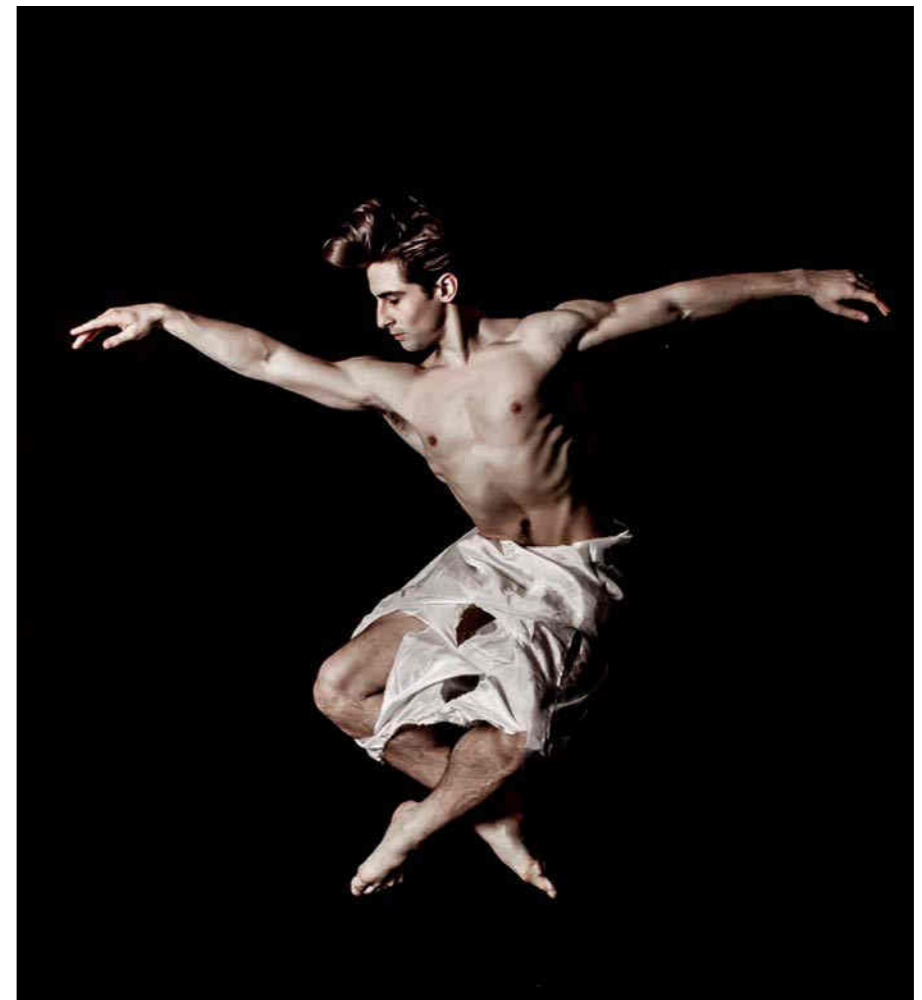
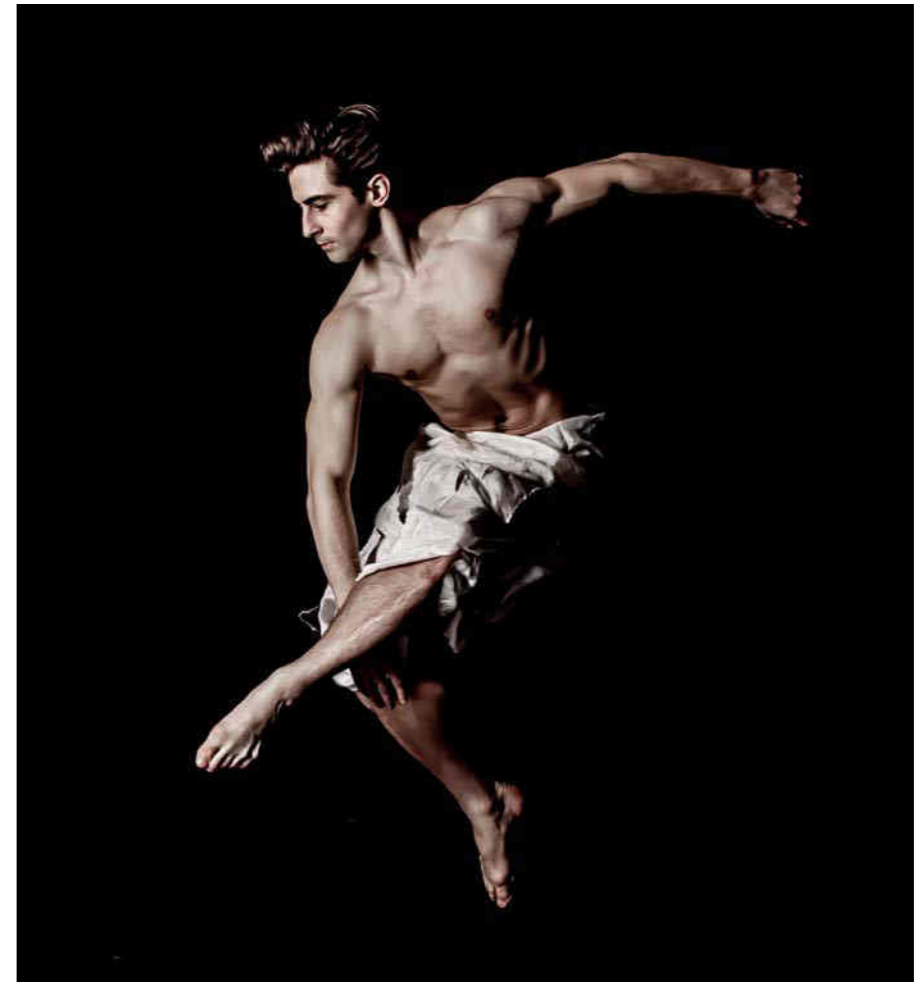
A R I A





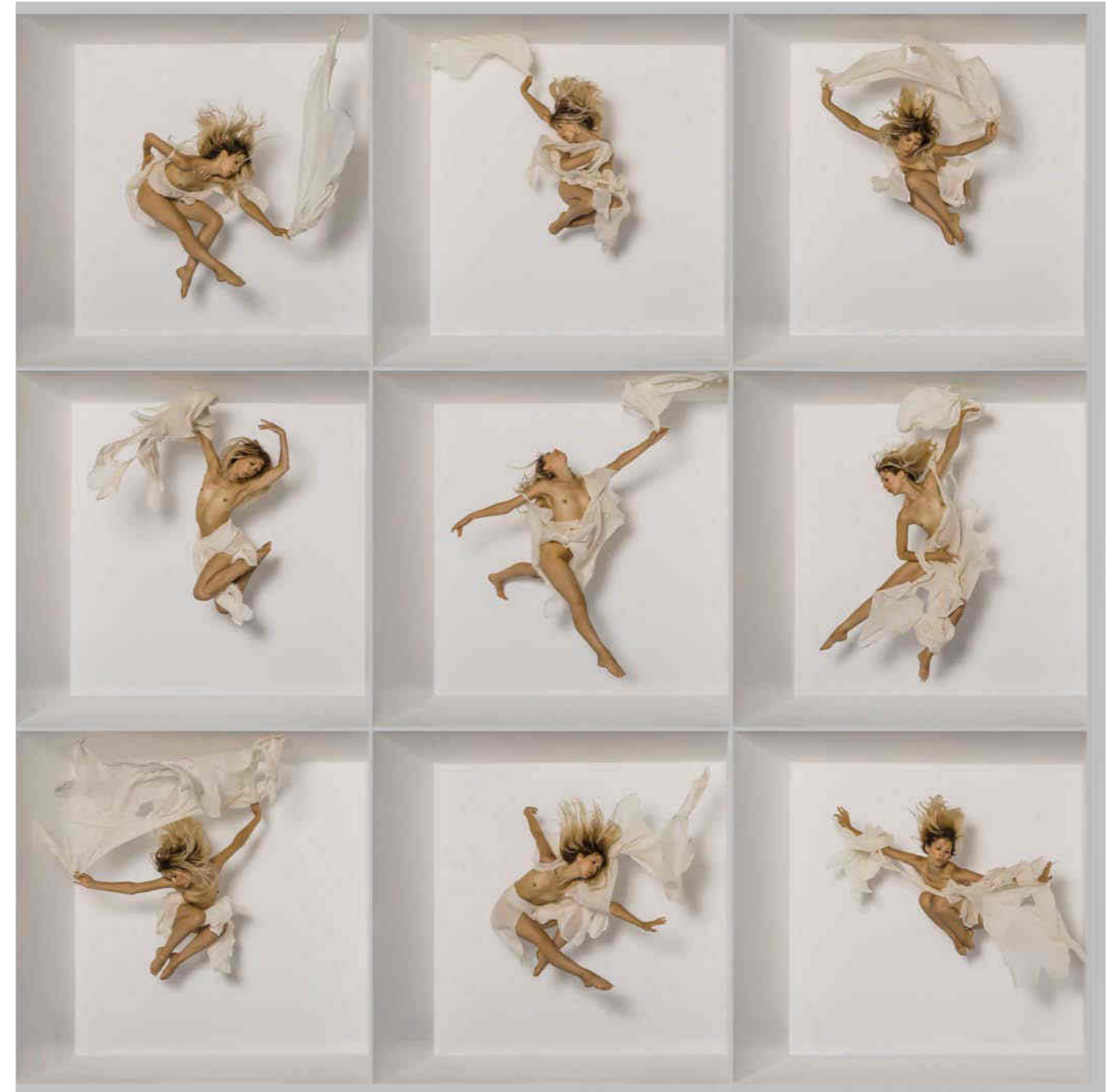
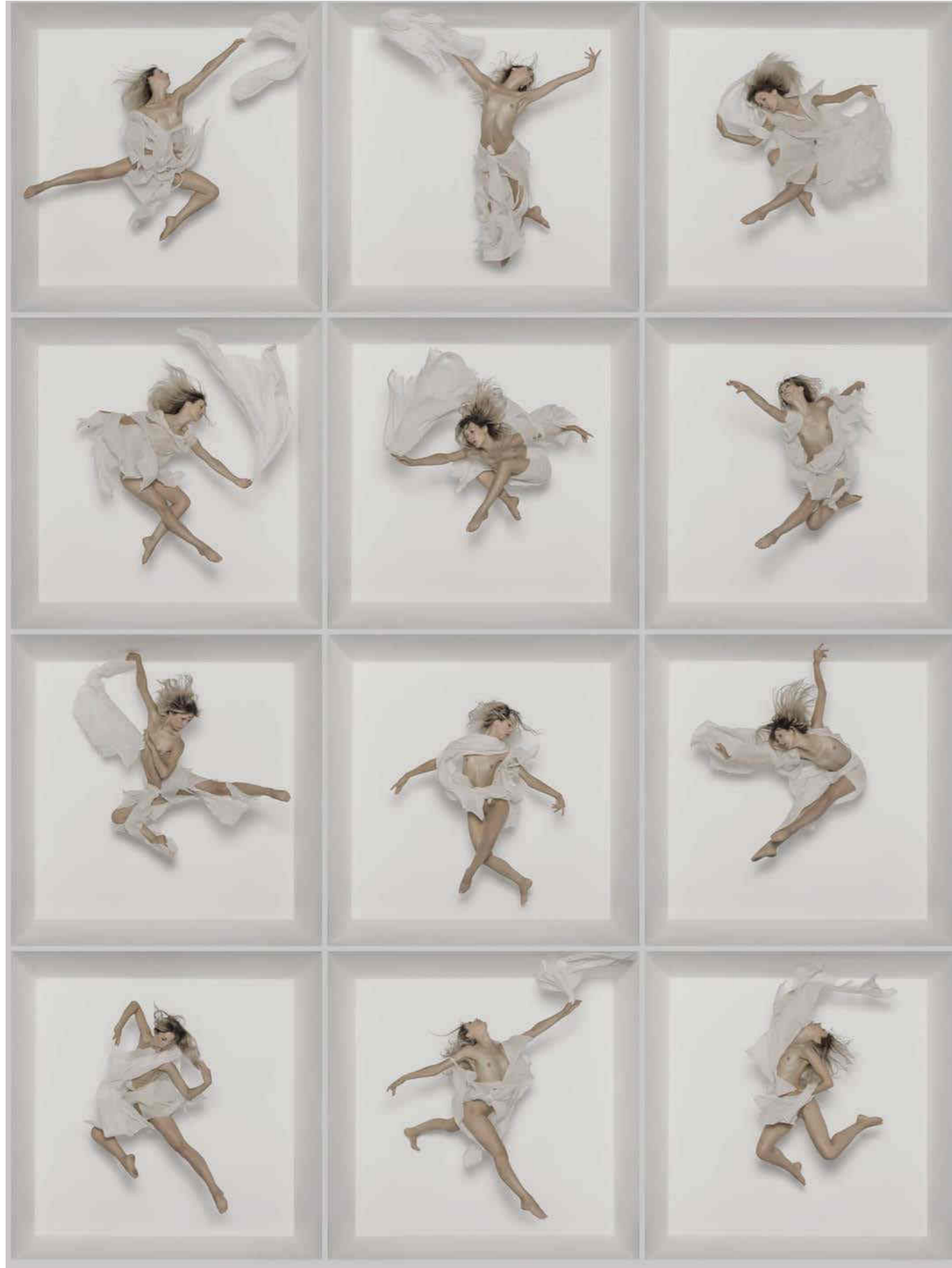






CLOTH





M A C R O L A N D

It is often said that great art cannot be fully appreciated in reproduction. This is certainly the case with Jeff Robb's work, *Macroland*, in which he combines skills in painting, photography, video and computer graphics to create a series of stunning cast optical structures. So what exactly do you see when you approach an original *Macroland* piece? First, as in the best abstract painting, you are excited by the expressive possibilities of brushwork and the emotive power of colour. Robb applies paint in myriad ways – in urgent, impassioned flourishes; in sensuous, liquid strokes and in broken, scumbled textures. The work demonstrates a lyrical, almost playful, enjoyment of paint. And yet, there is much more.

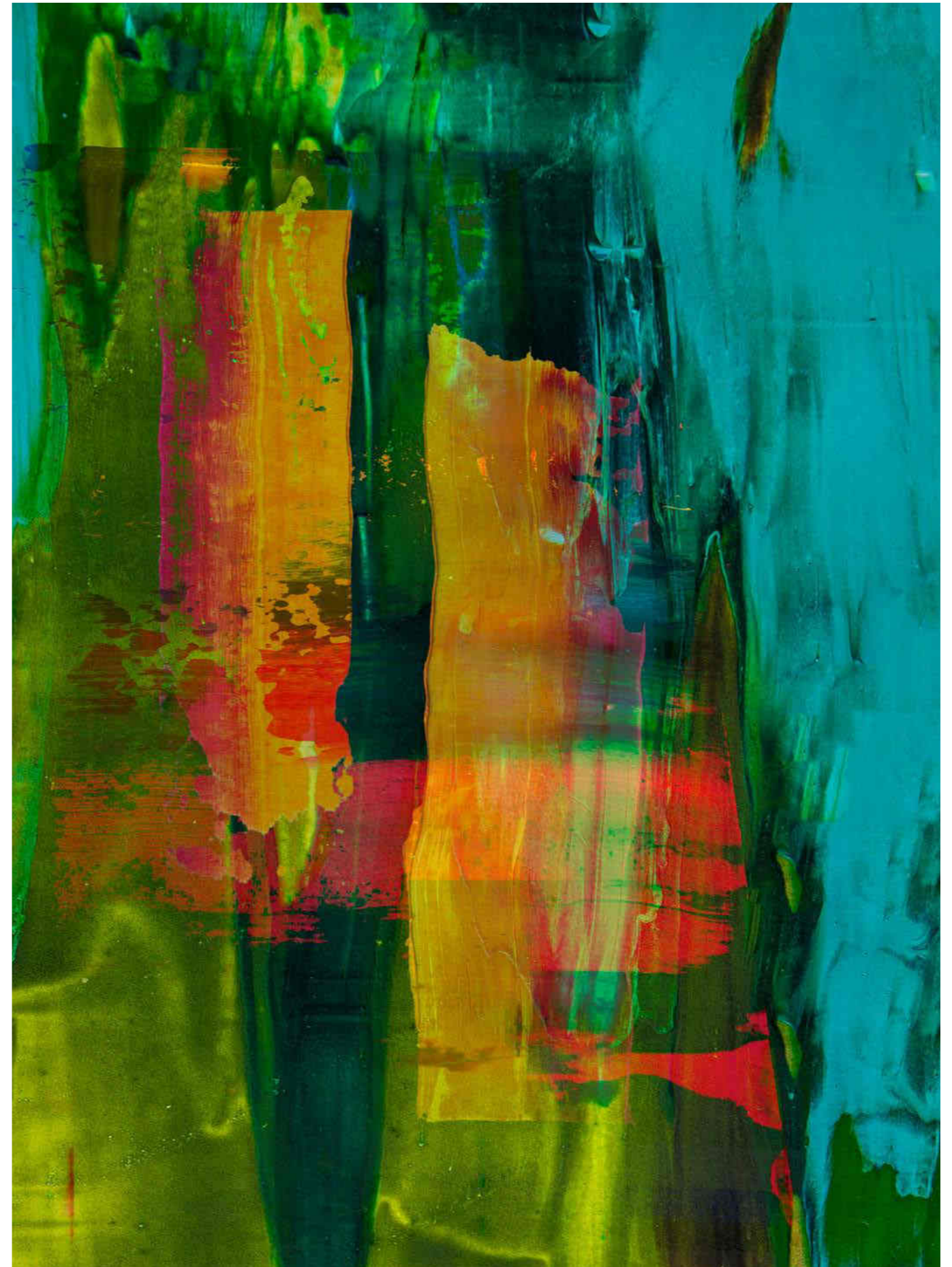
These images are not abstract paintings, in fact they are more akin to sculpture. The brushstrokes inhabit a three-dimensional space that is entirely lost in photographic reproduction. Some strokes lie flat in this space while others twist and turn, bend and undulate. There is a sense of animation; as you change your viewpoint in front of the artworks, the strokes recede and advance, grow and diminish. From one viewpoint, two brushmarks compete with each other; from another, they complete each other. Viewers, it seems to me, are invited to move and compose their own images – to become the artist, if you like. You can glaze one transparent foreground colour over a background colour. Some strokes appear to blur seamlessly together, while others pulse stridently against one another. The result is unique – a restless, vibrant, aesthetic experience. The visual qualities that two-dimensional abstract paintings often hint at – the illusion of receding and advancing planes, the shimmering and dynamic quality of juxtaposed colour – are fully realised in Robb's *Macroland*. It is wrong to see Robb's work as entirely non-representational; there are suggestions of the natural world in every piece. Robb has had a longstanding interest in the landscape. As long ago as 1994, Robb showed his groundbreaking *Landscape* and *Metamorphosis* holograms at Smith's Gallery, Covent Garden. *Macroland* has evolved from these earlier holograms.

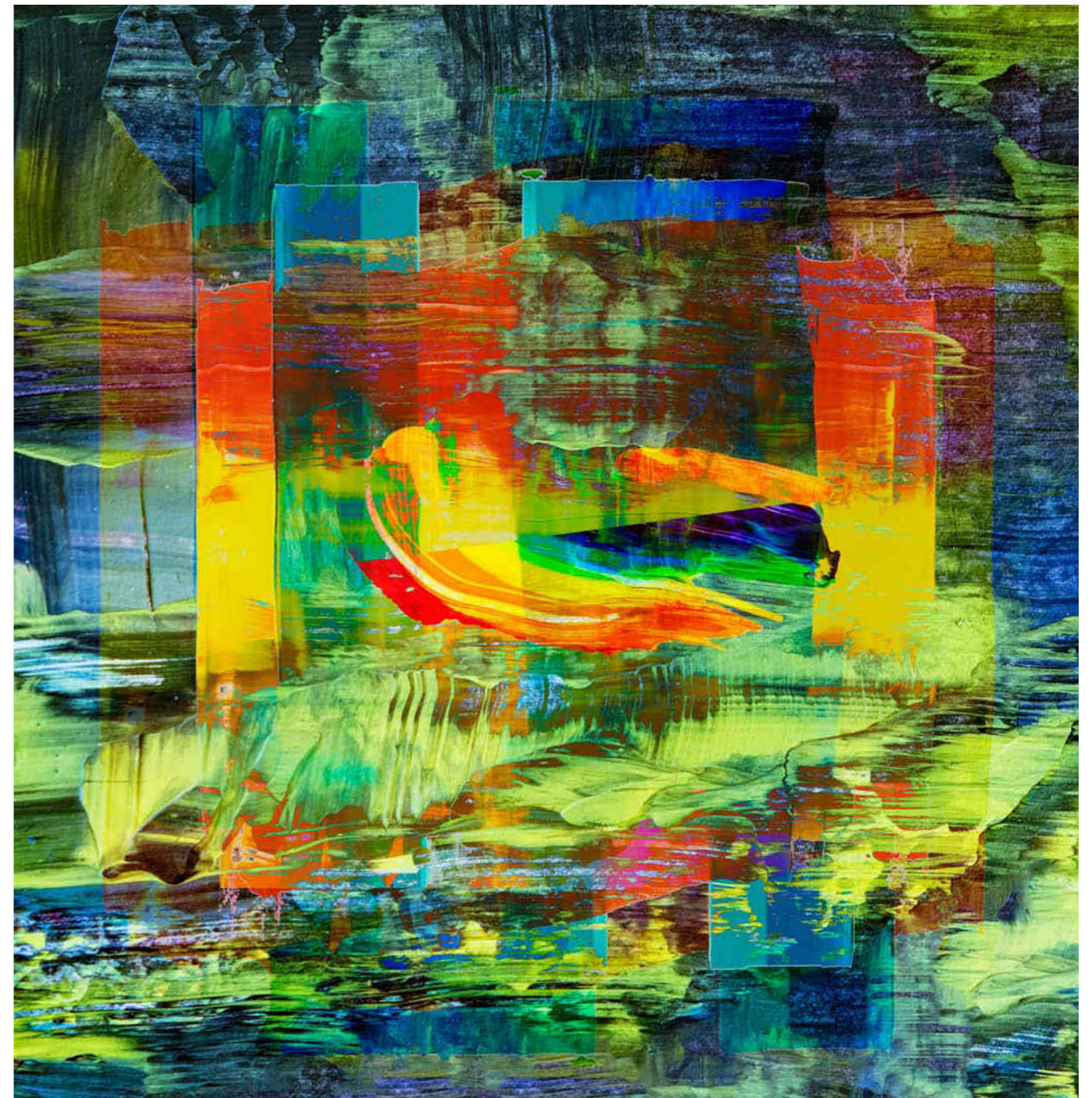
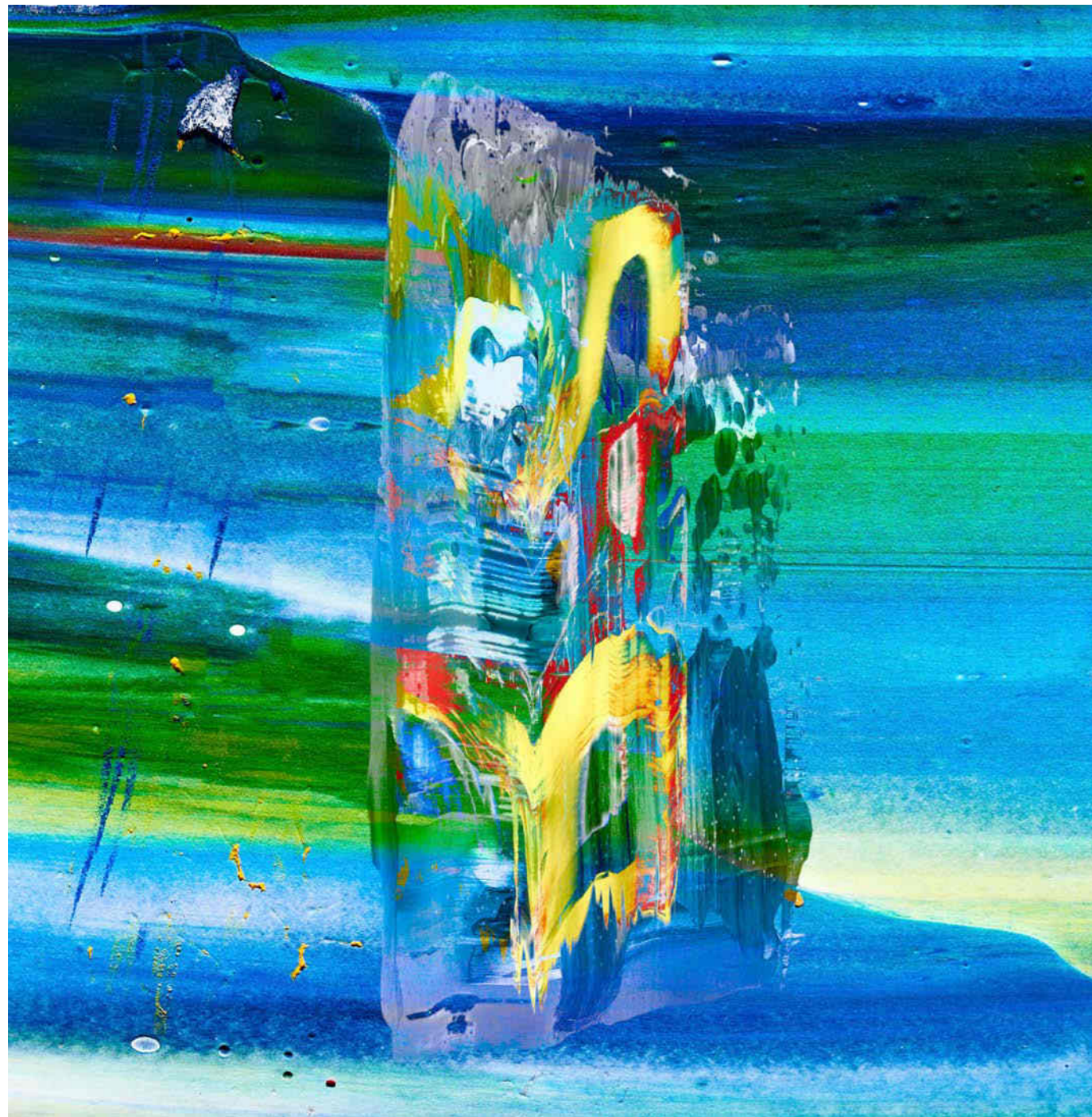
In the series, it appears that a photographer's macro lens has been focused on the landscape and reduced it to essential geometric forms. Look long enough at the series and you begin to associate colours with nature: the yellows and oranges suggest desert; the greens, vegetation; the blues, sky. Likewise, the character of the marks evokes the landscape. Thick, textured brushwork reminds us of fields seen from afar; smeared or smudged marks remind us of water. But perhaps Robb's work looks back beyond Lanyon and Hitchens to the pioneer of abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944). Kandinsky wanted his paintings to have the emotional resonance of music. He famously said, "Colour is a means of exerting direct influence upon the soul. Colour is a keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul."

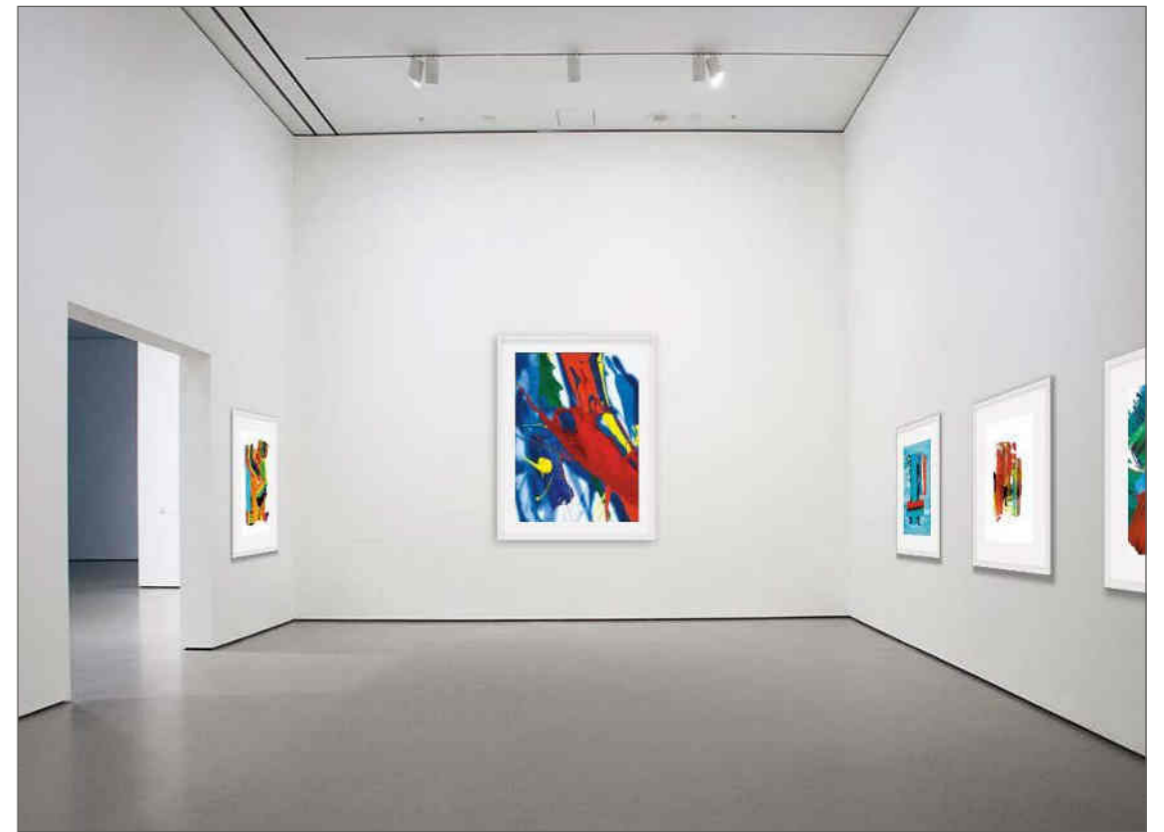
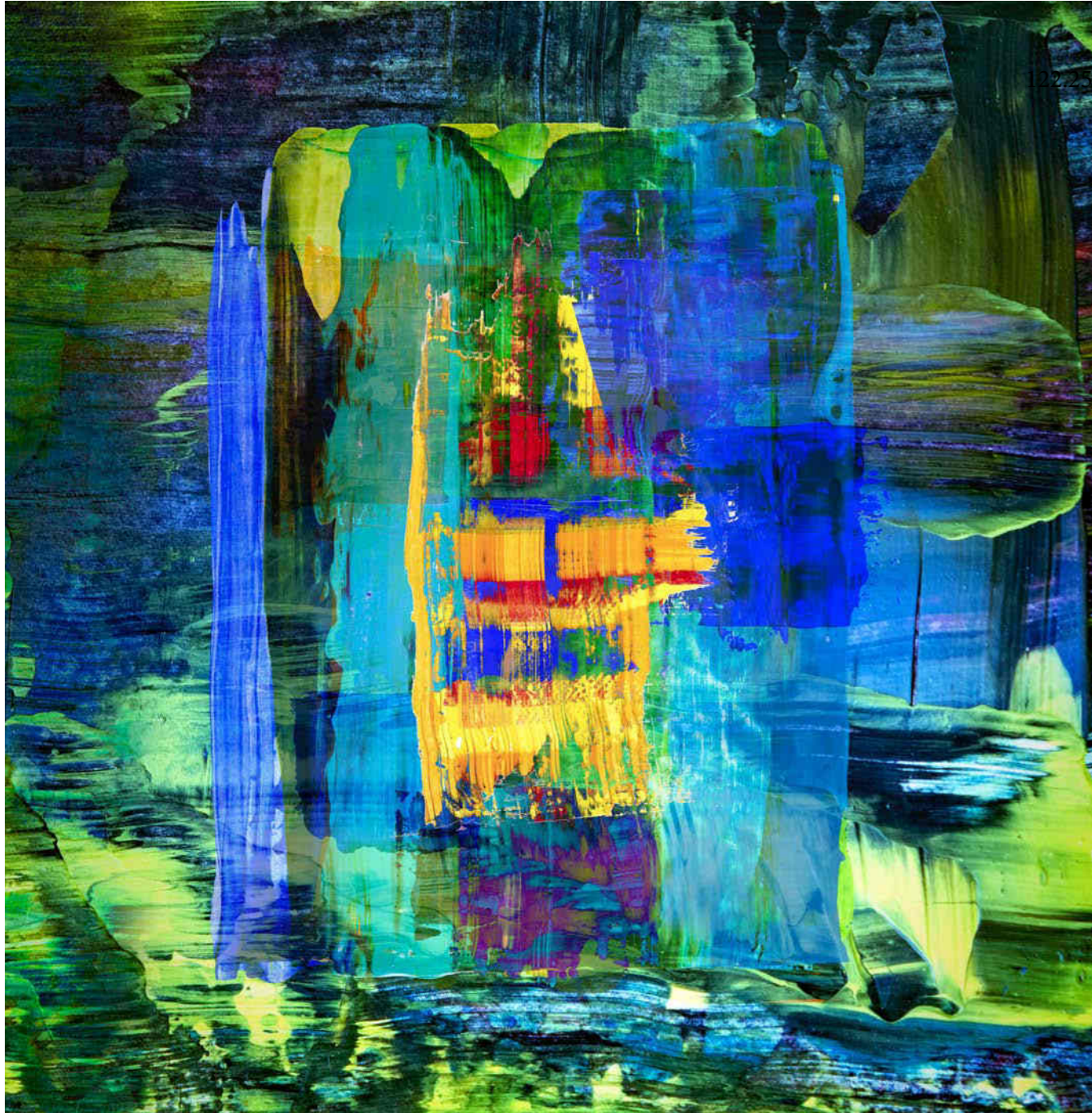
When you look at the Robb's *Macroland* work, the freshness of his palette, the way his colours sing in the silence of empty space, the way he orchestrates these colours in engaging three-dimensional compositions, we perhaps have visual art that is tantamount to music.

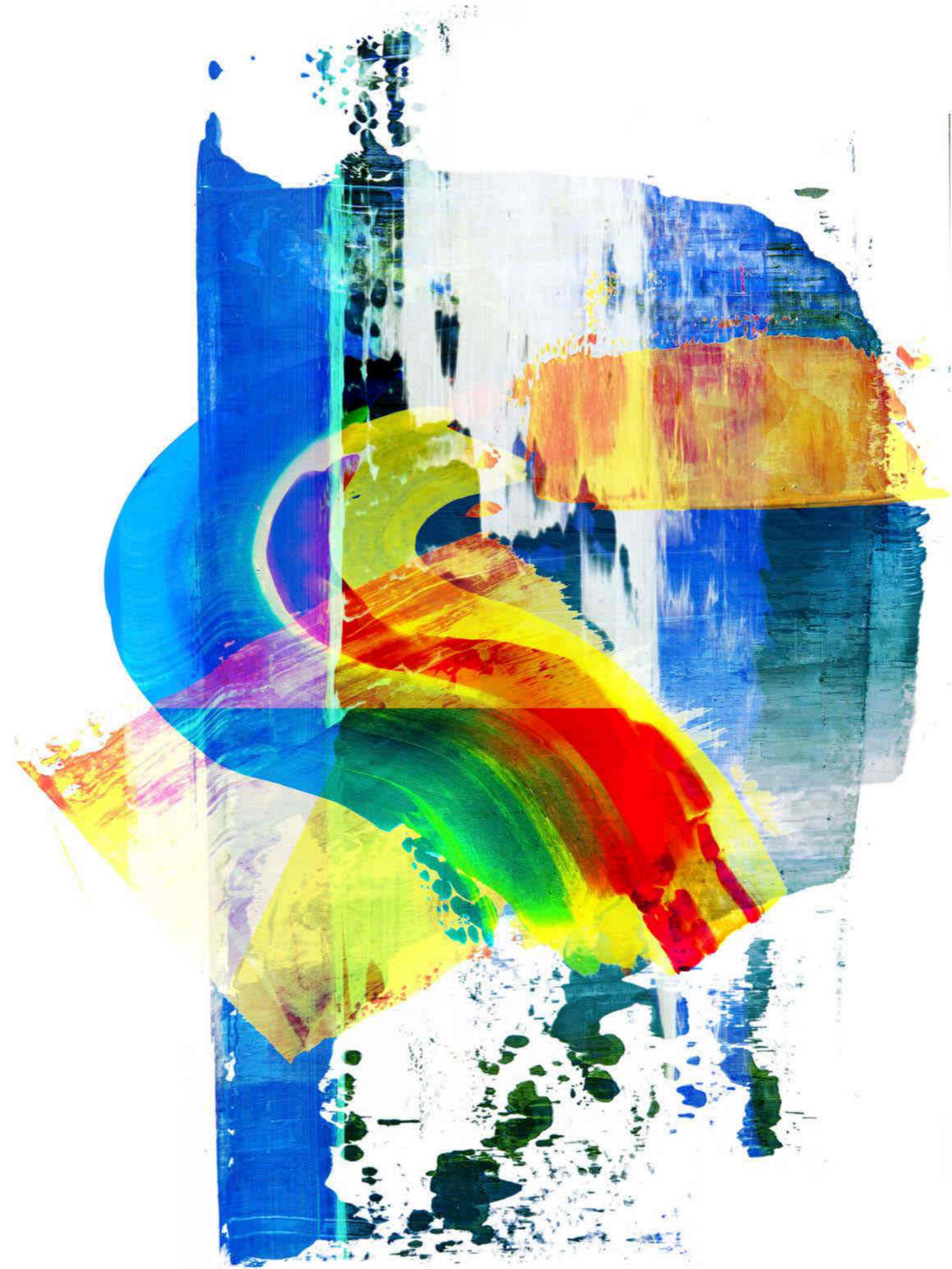
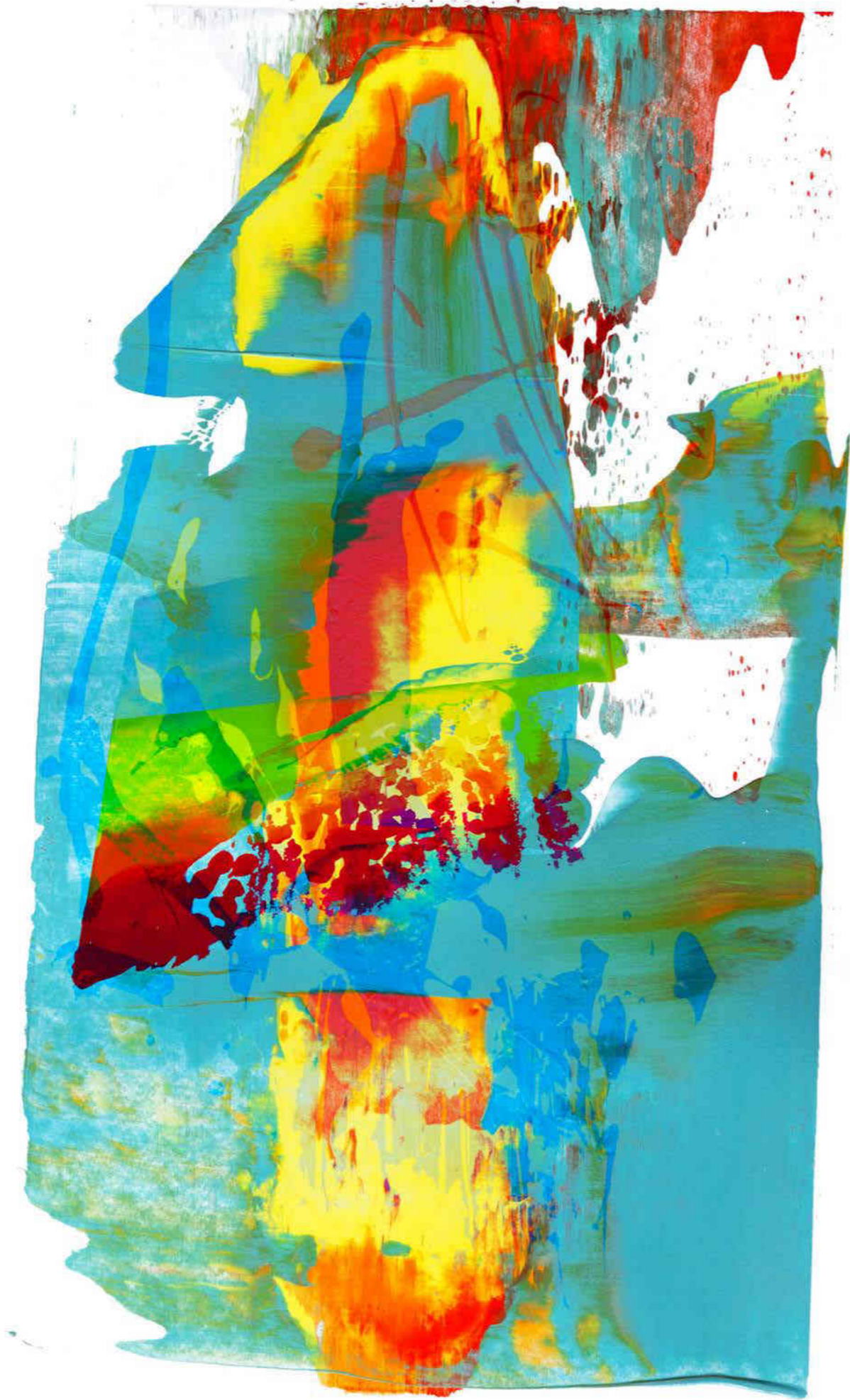
~ Matthew Rake



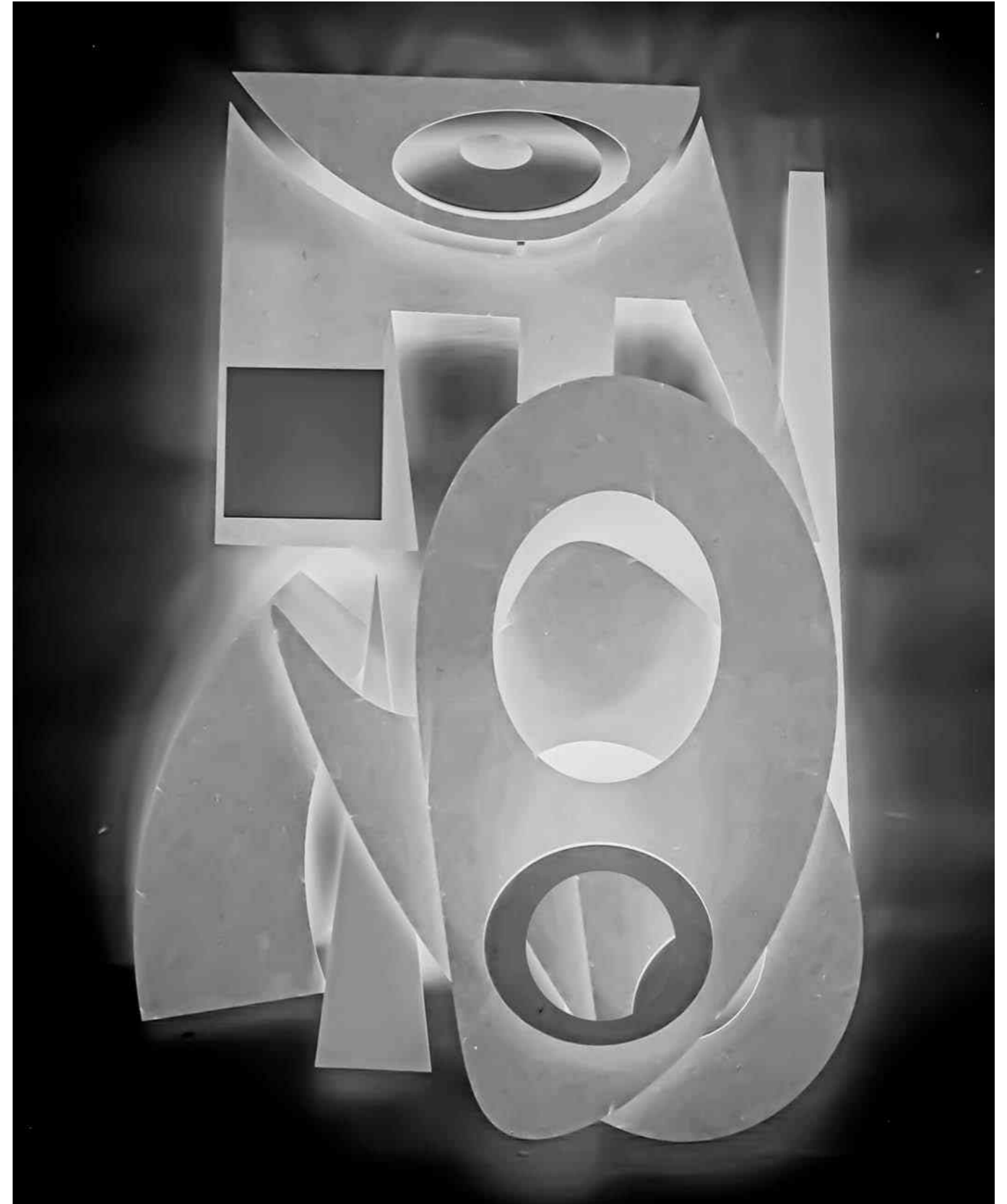


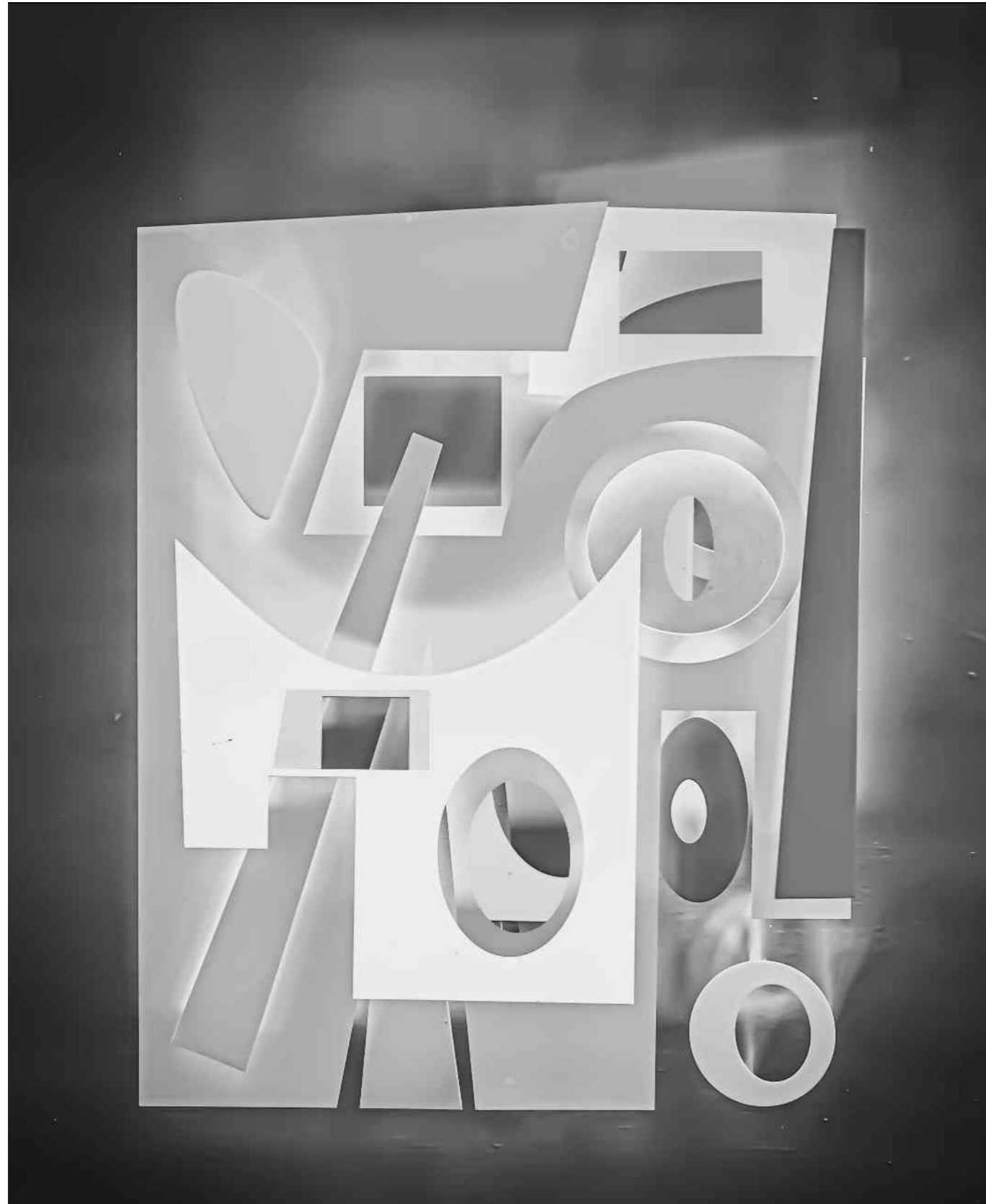


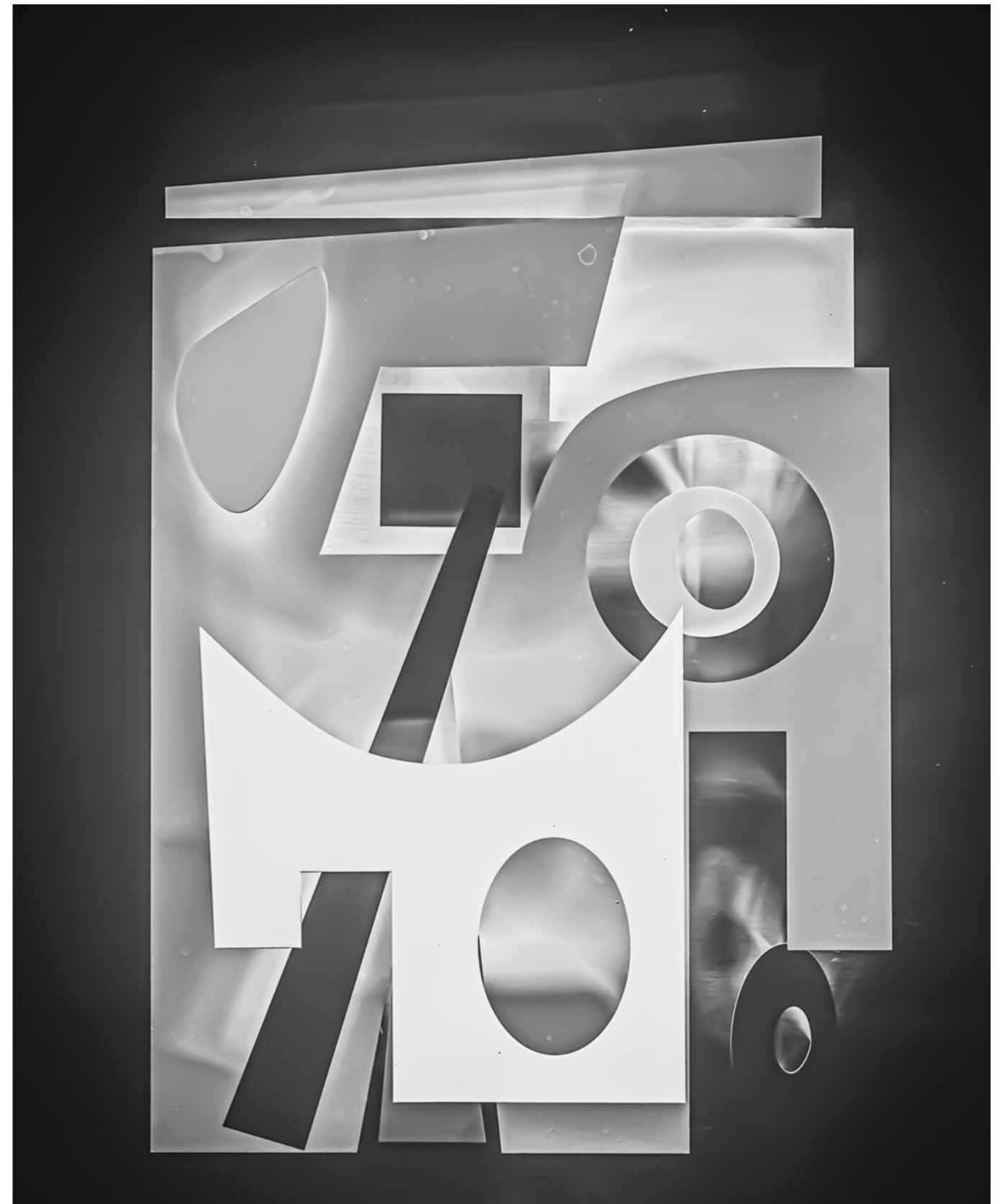




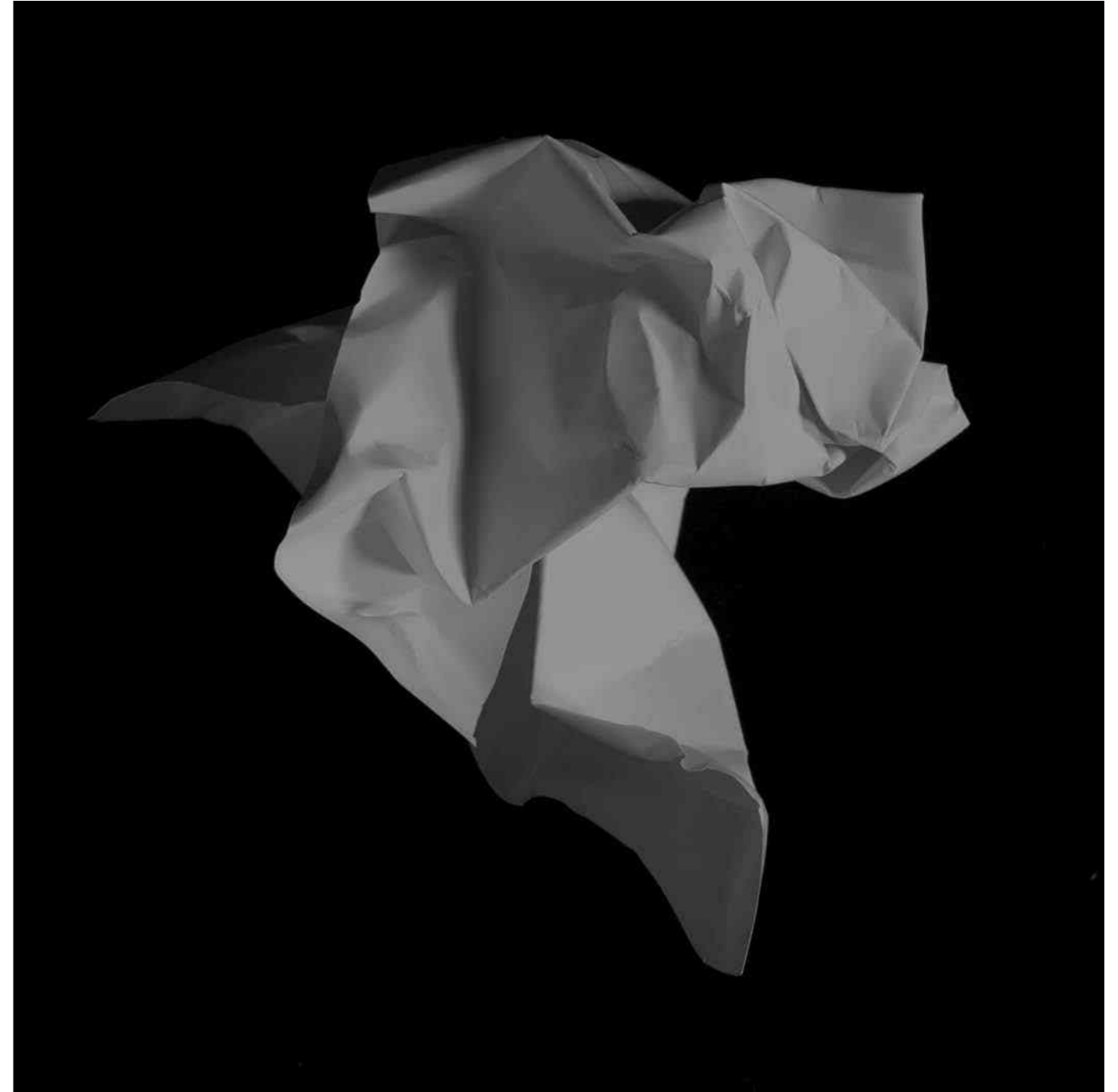
NEW TERRITORY

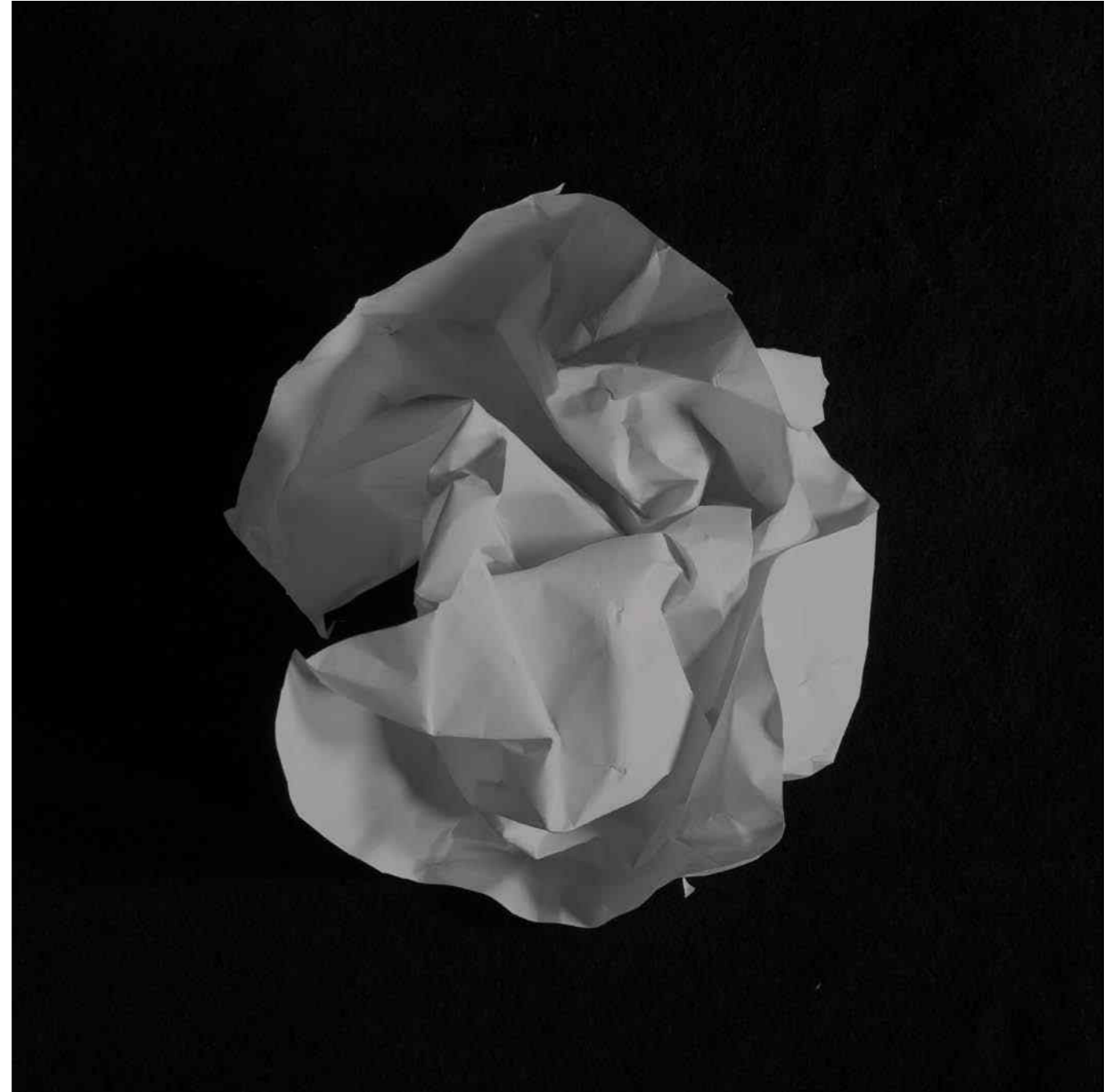
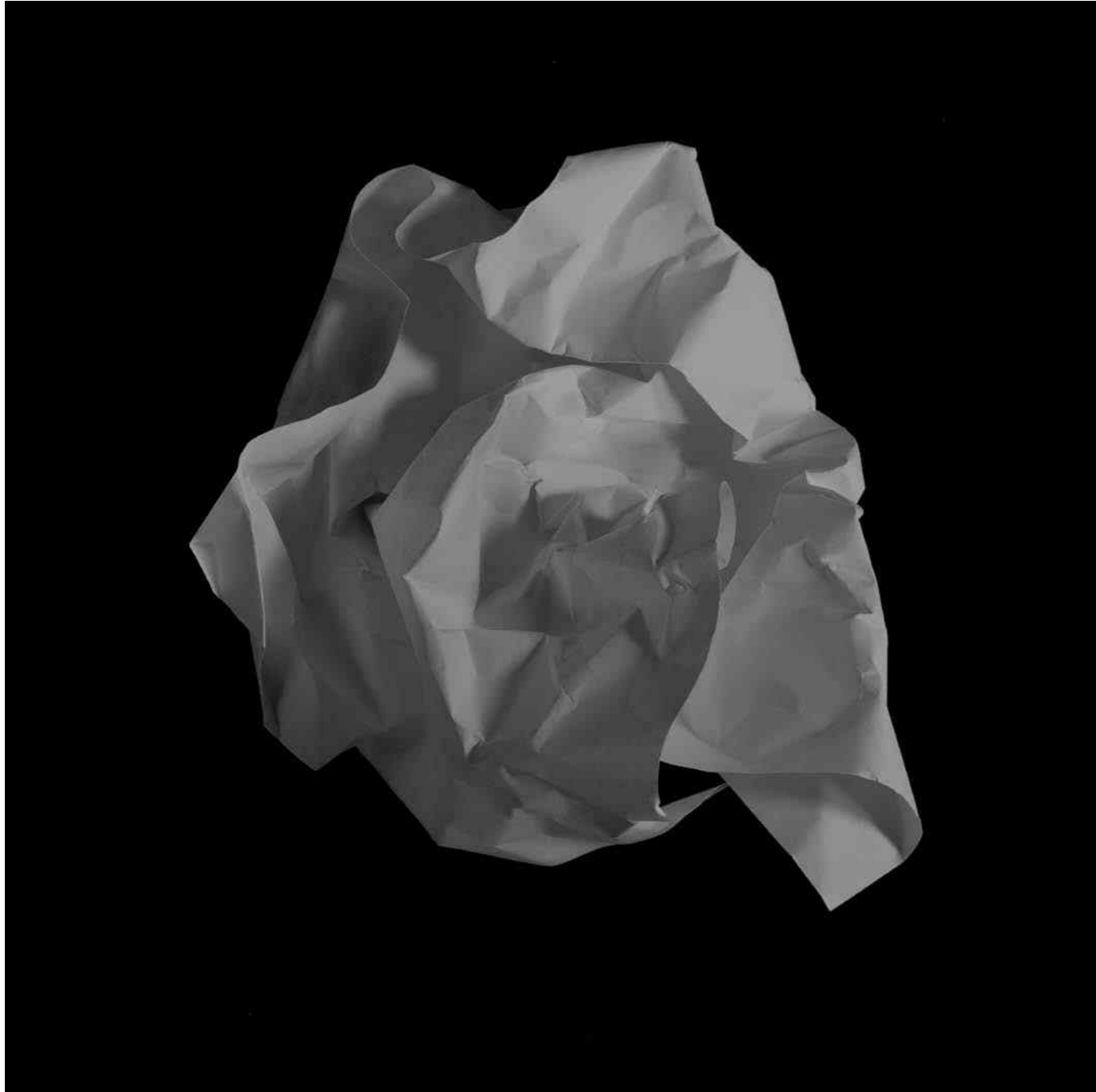




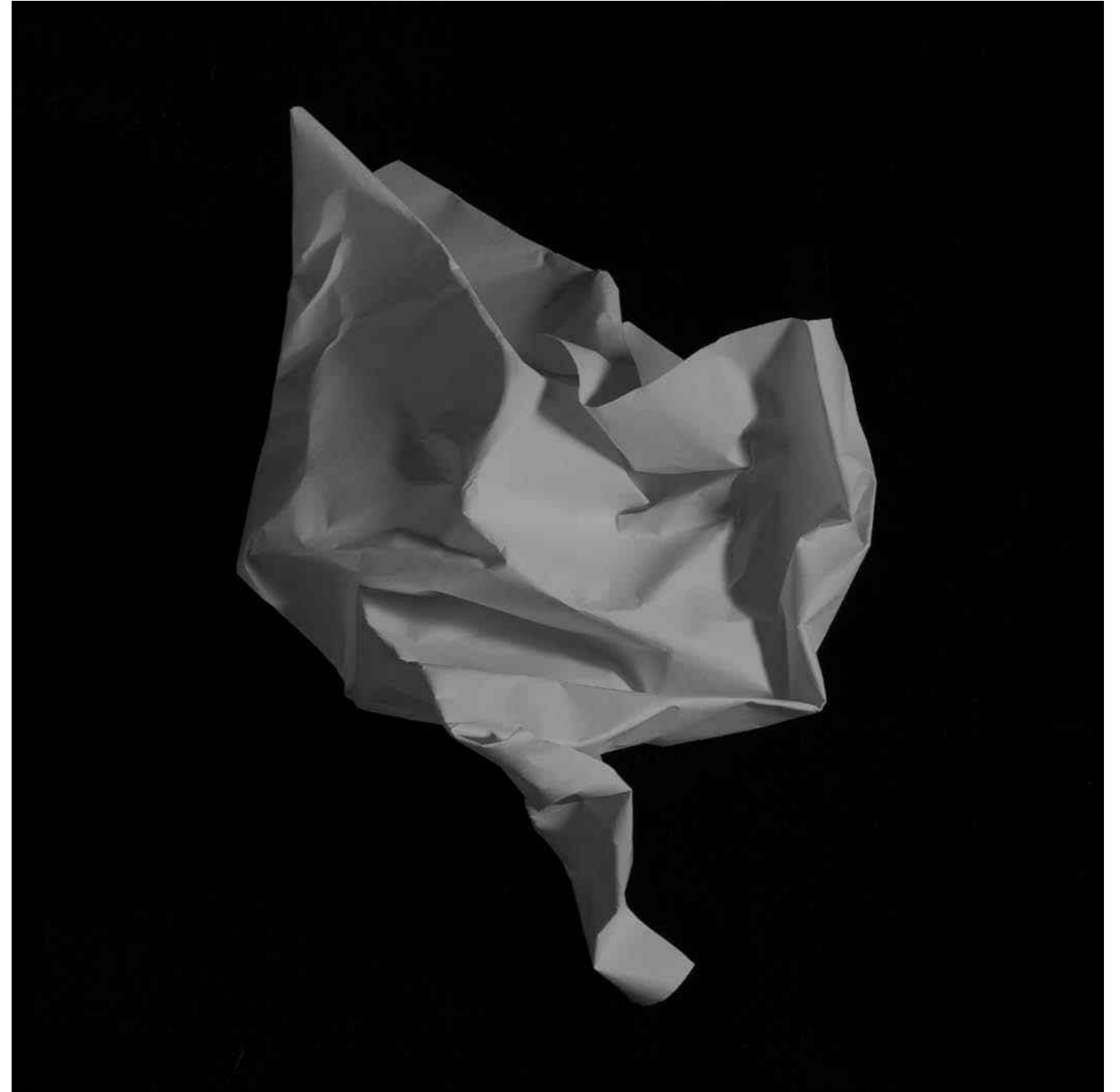
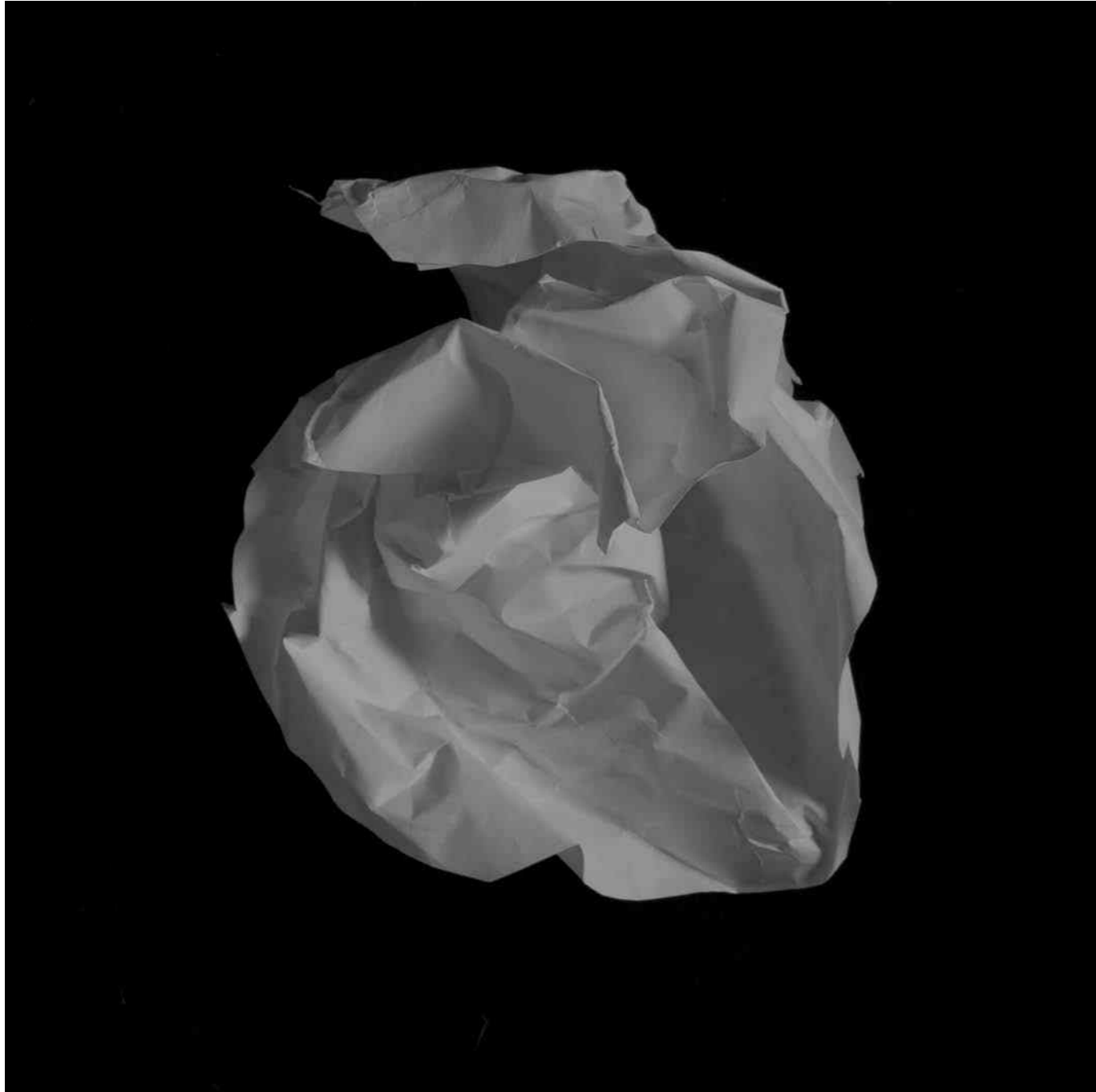


ALTERED PLANES









G R A V I T Y

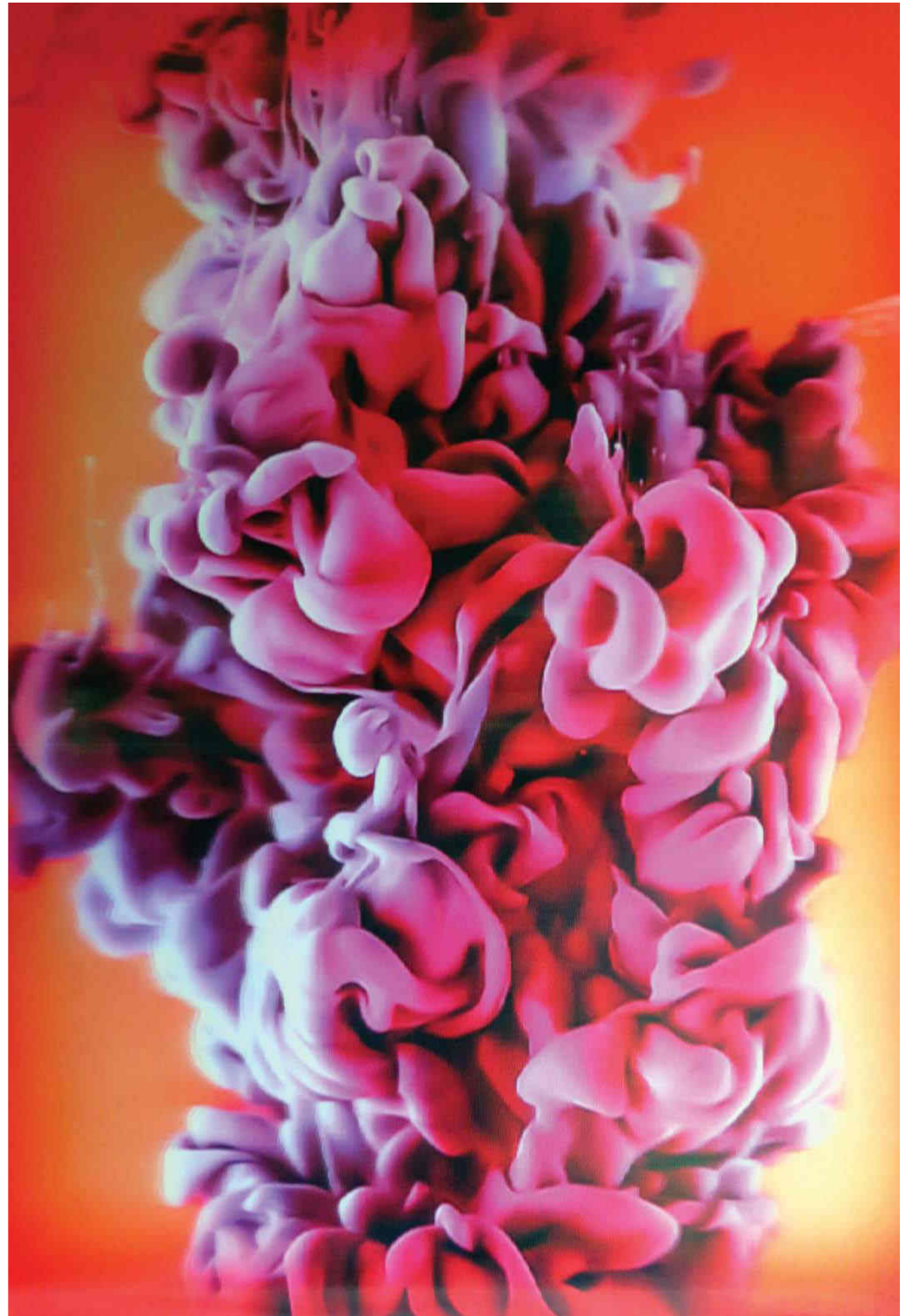
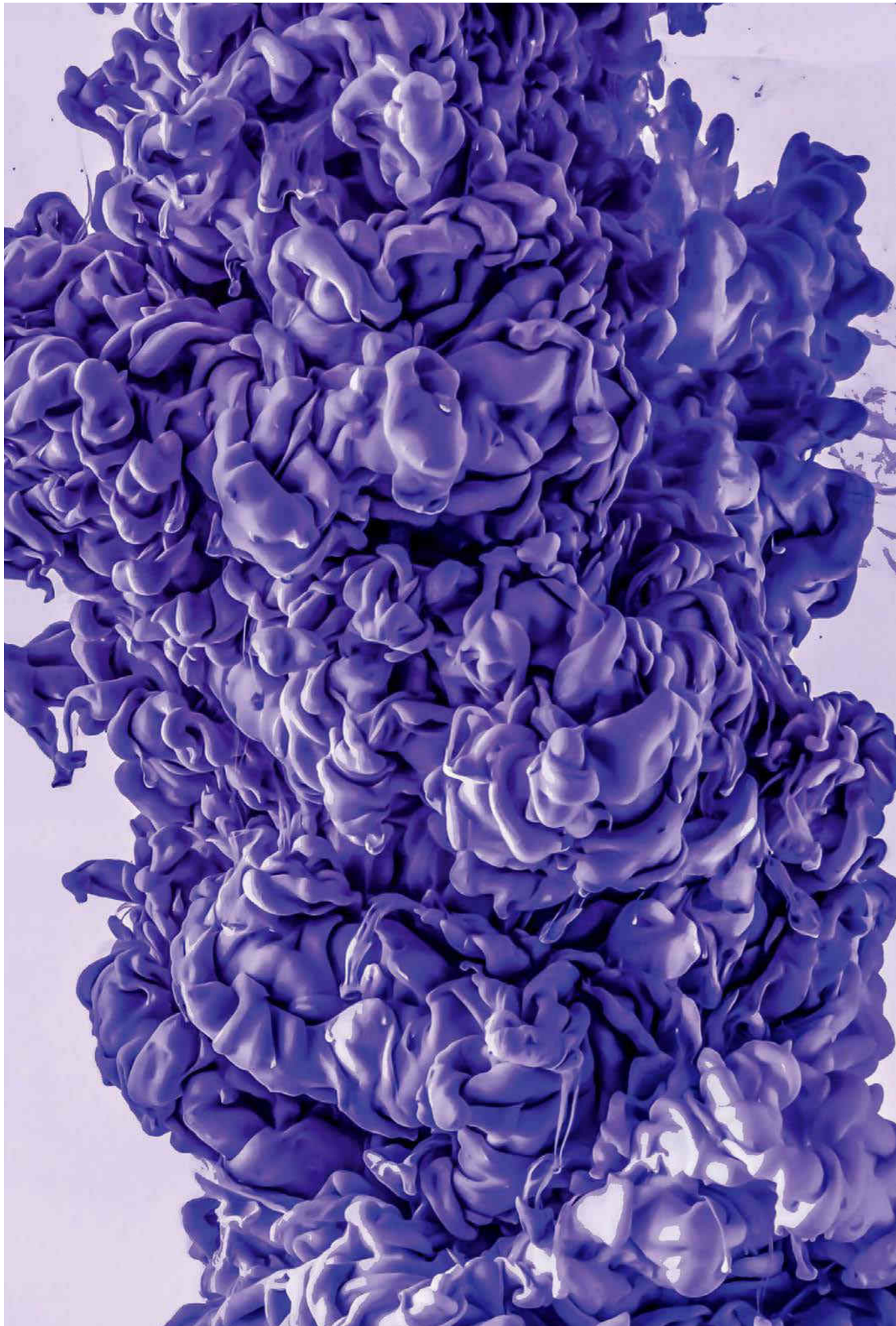
For the last 10 years, Jeff Robb's work has been concerned with the human figure. It has become his obsession – so much so that now, when he produces a series (entitled Gravity) of close-up shots of pigment in oil, you begin to see the human body. Instead of squidgy trails of paint, you discern figures, their musculature twisted, contorted, and foreshortened. You see fetuses in the womb trapped in the pigment and fully formed bodies reaching out and struggling to escape, like tree roots pushing up through the earth.

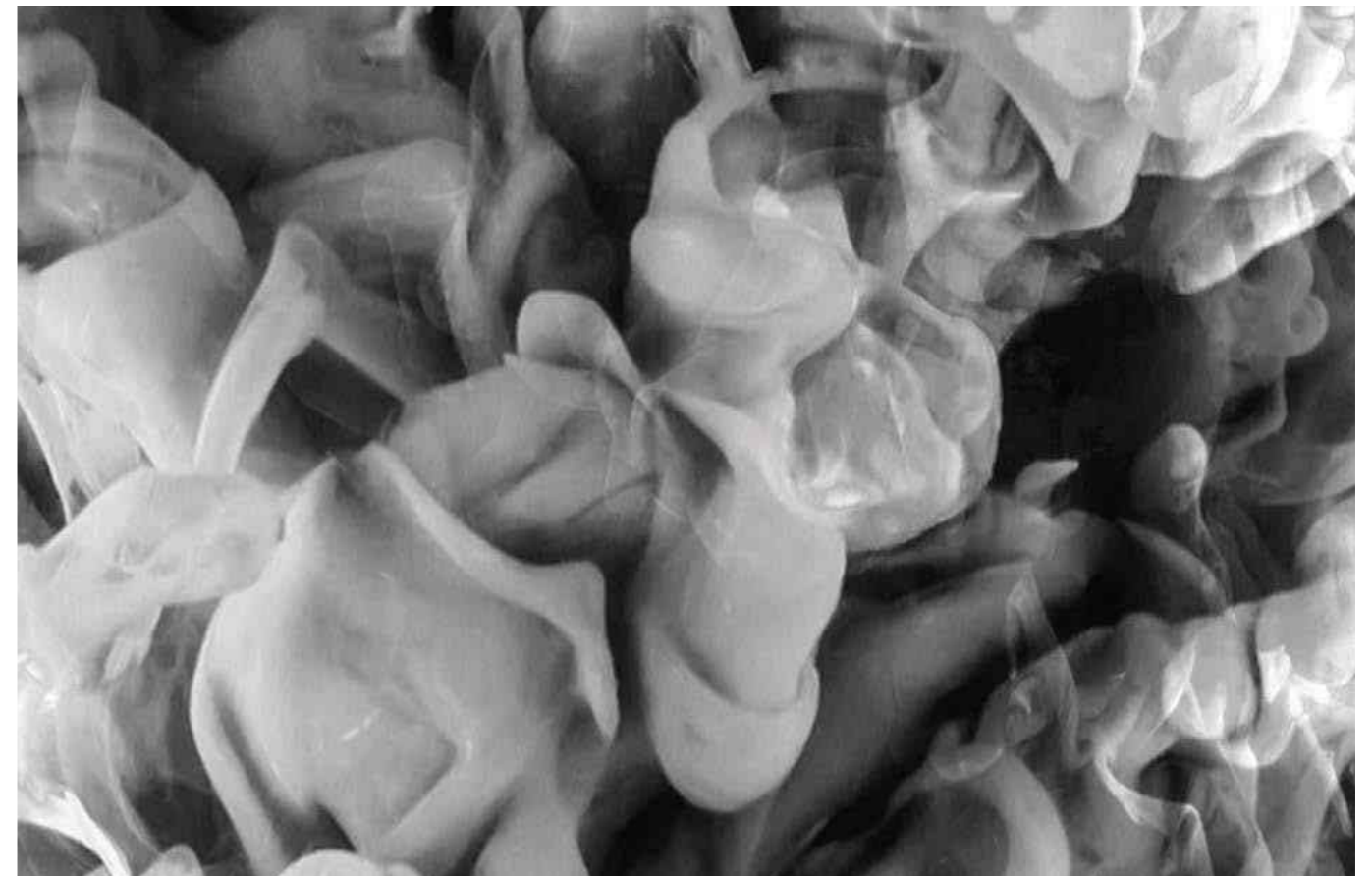
The black and white images in the Gravity series are particularly resonant. They recall Gustav Vigeland's sculpture *Monolith* (1929-43), a column of figures carved from one block of granite. The figures seem to cradle and support each other while they climb, as if humanity is ascending to heaven through co-operation, unity and love.

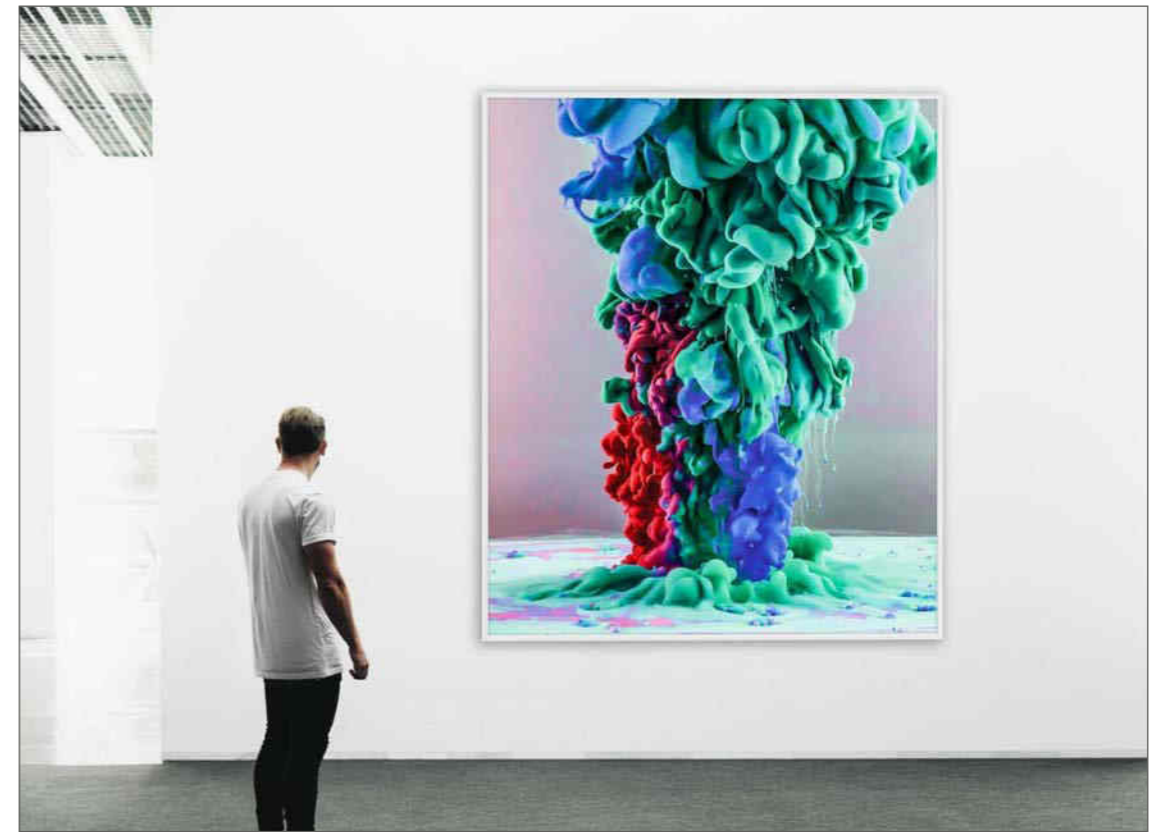
In Robb's images, there is a similar sense of movement and ascent - or is it descent? The other work that Gravity series remind me of is Sebastiao Salgado's 1980s photographs of workers in the Serra Pelada open-cast gold mine in Brazil. While Vigeland's *Monolith* gives you a glimpse of the divine, Salgado's images depict a hell. Like Vigeland, Salgado shows a world teeming with humanity, but his figures are depersonalised and dehumanised, as they swarm up the vertigo-inducing sides of the mine, seemingly becoming part of the mud from which they are trying to escape.

Robb's genius is to find in a microworld, the energy and power of Vigeland's work and the cinematic scale of Salgado's compositions. Whether Robb shares Vigeland's hope or Salgado's despair is perhaps answered by other images in the Gravity series. Robb photographs the pigment in colour so it looks like exotic coral. He photographs it with a white flower, paint sensuously clinging to the stamens. And he photographs the pigment spread out on a canvas in a brightly coloured abstract design. Robb's images of oil in pigment - like his images of the human figure - are life-affirming, optimistic and beautiful.

~ Matthew Rake



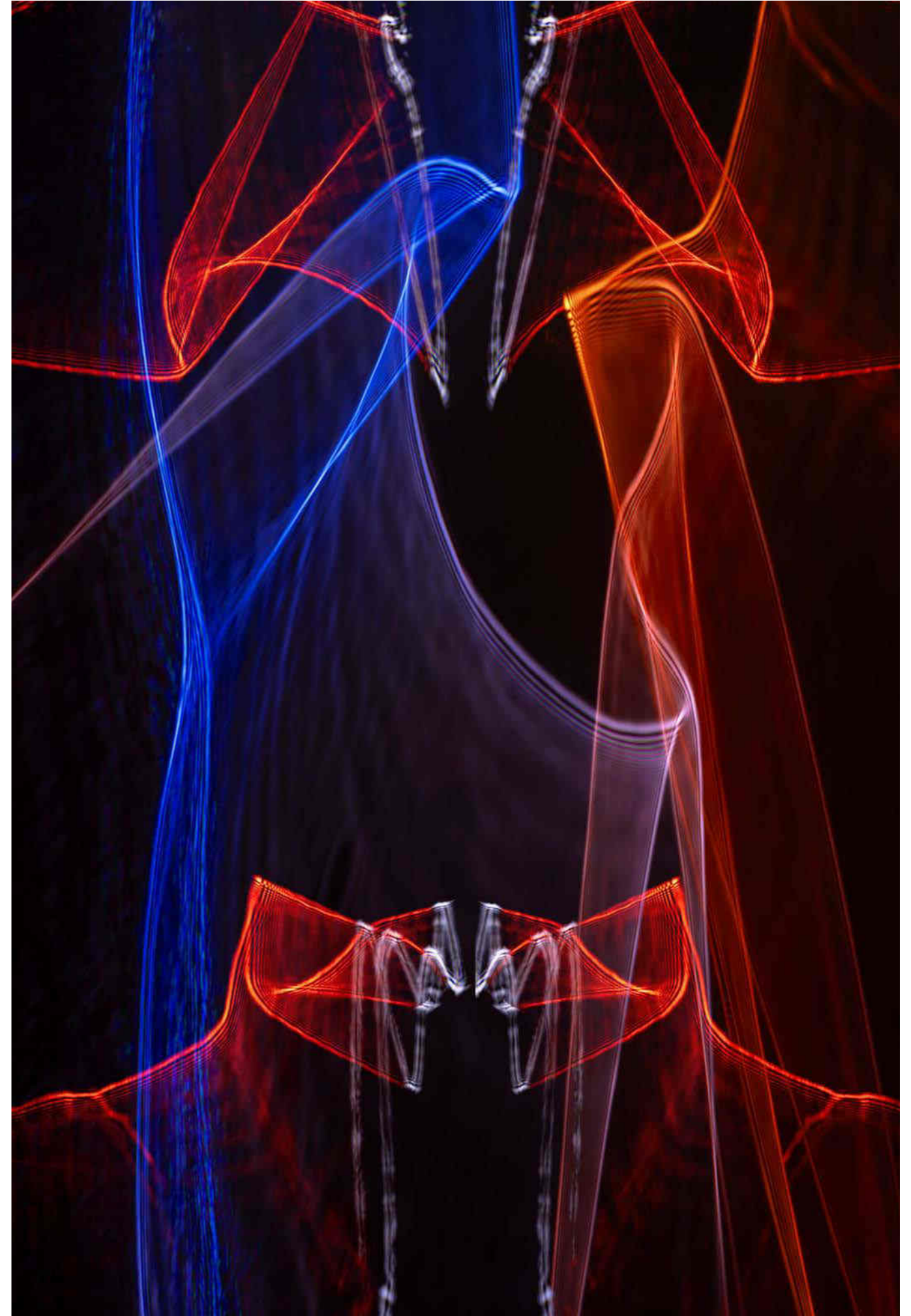
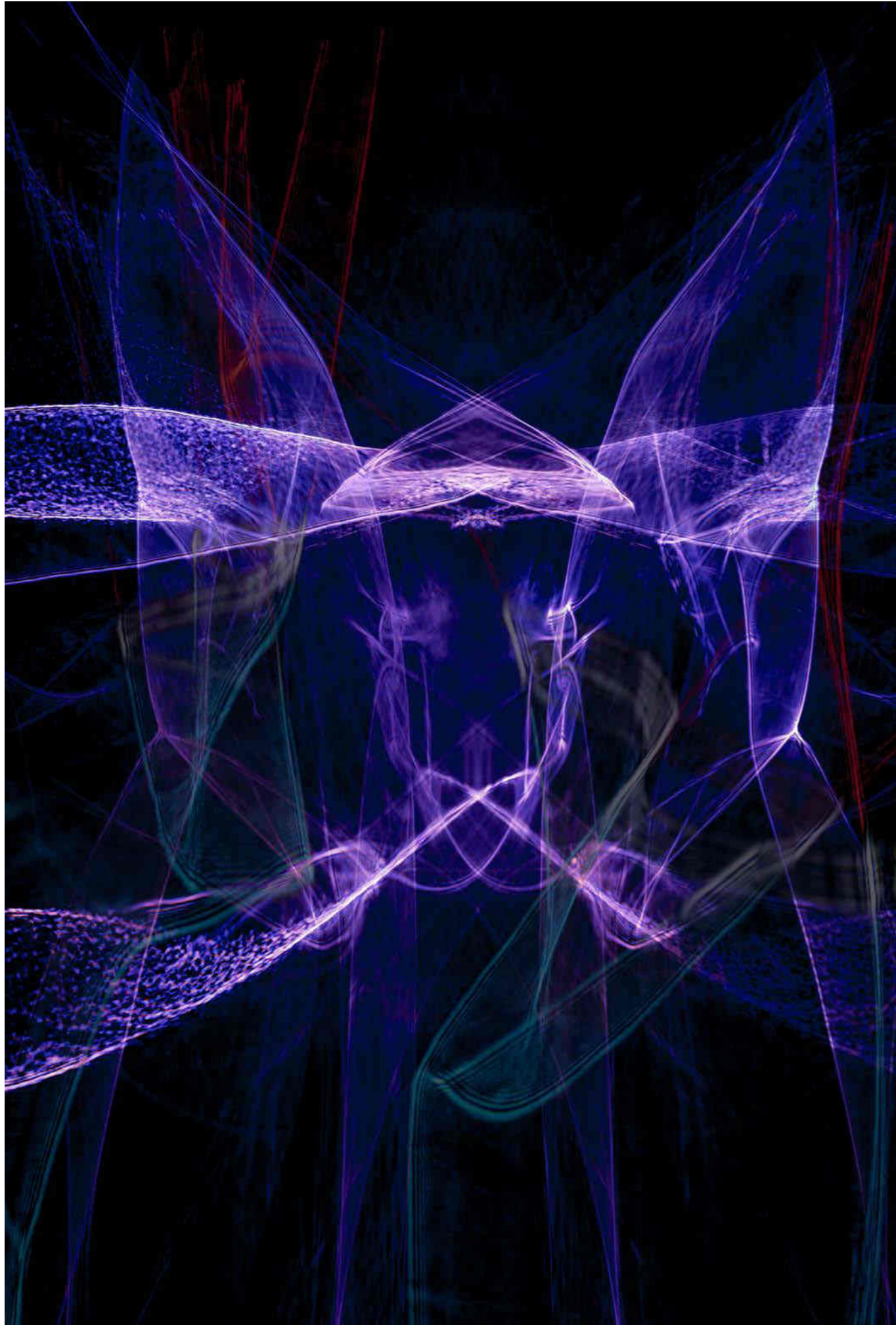


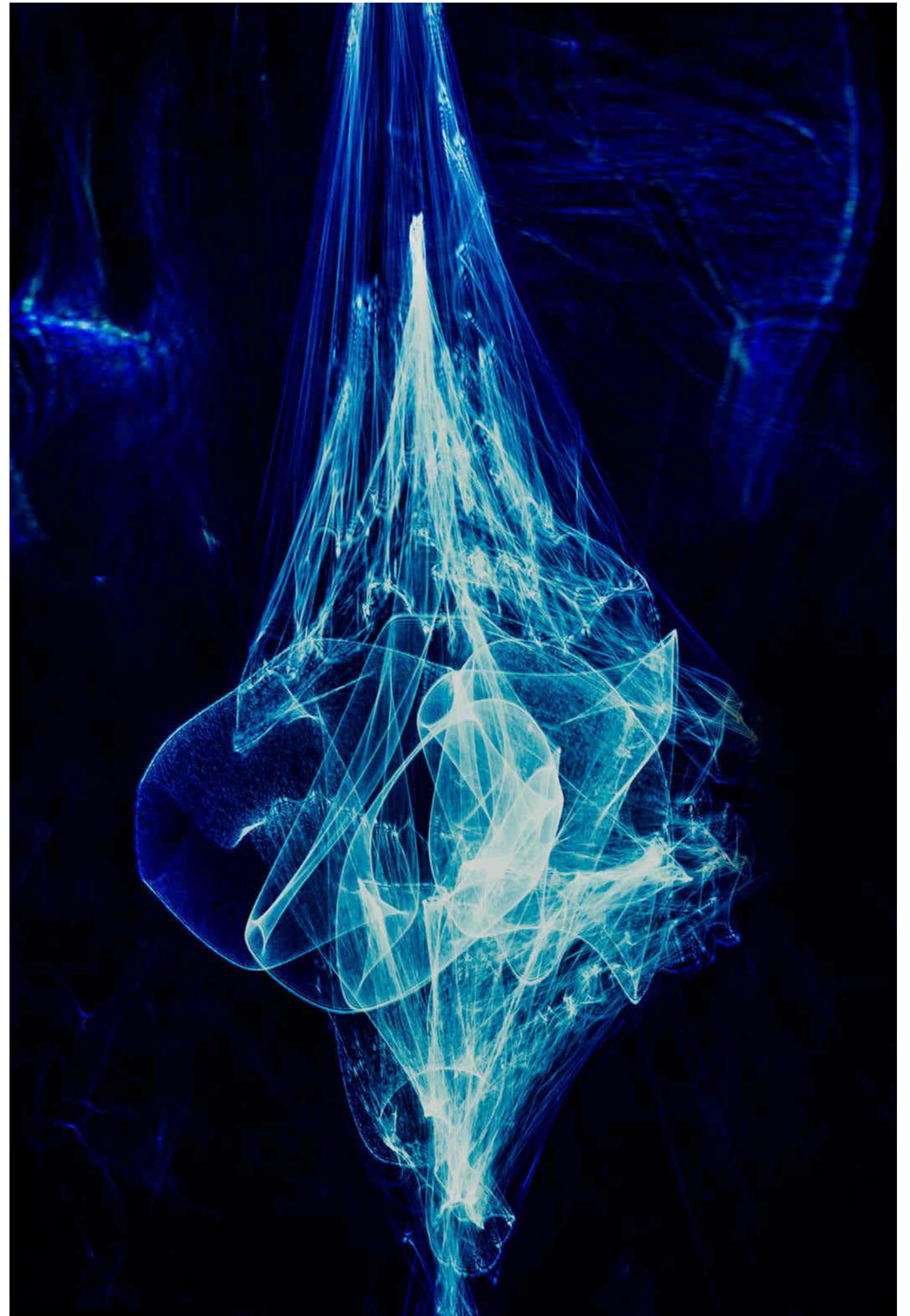
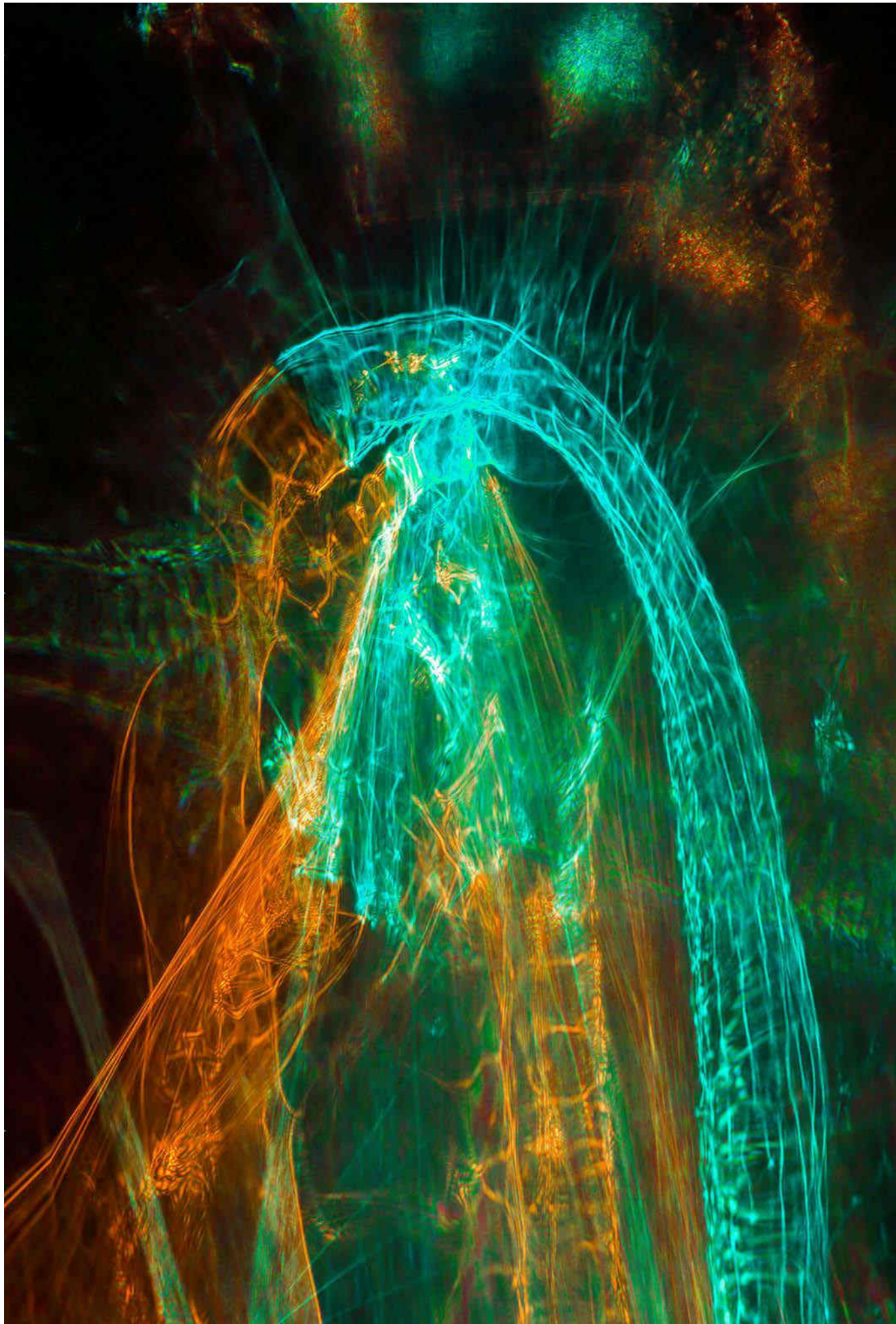


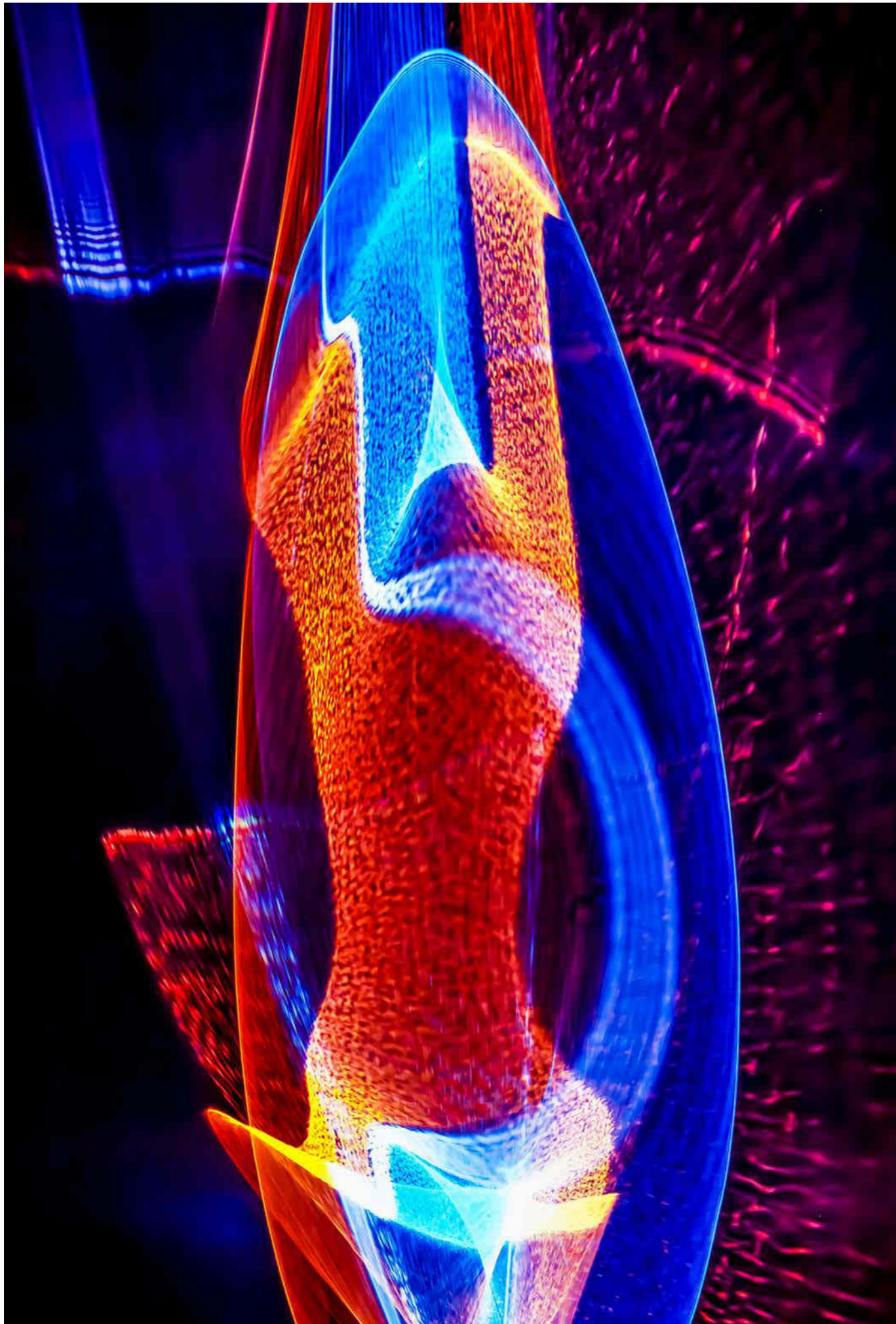


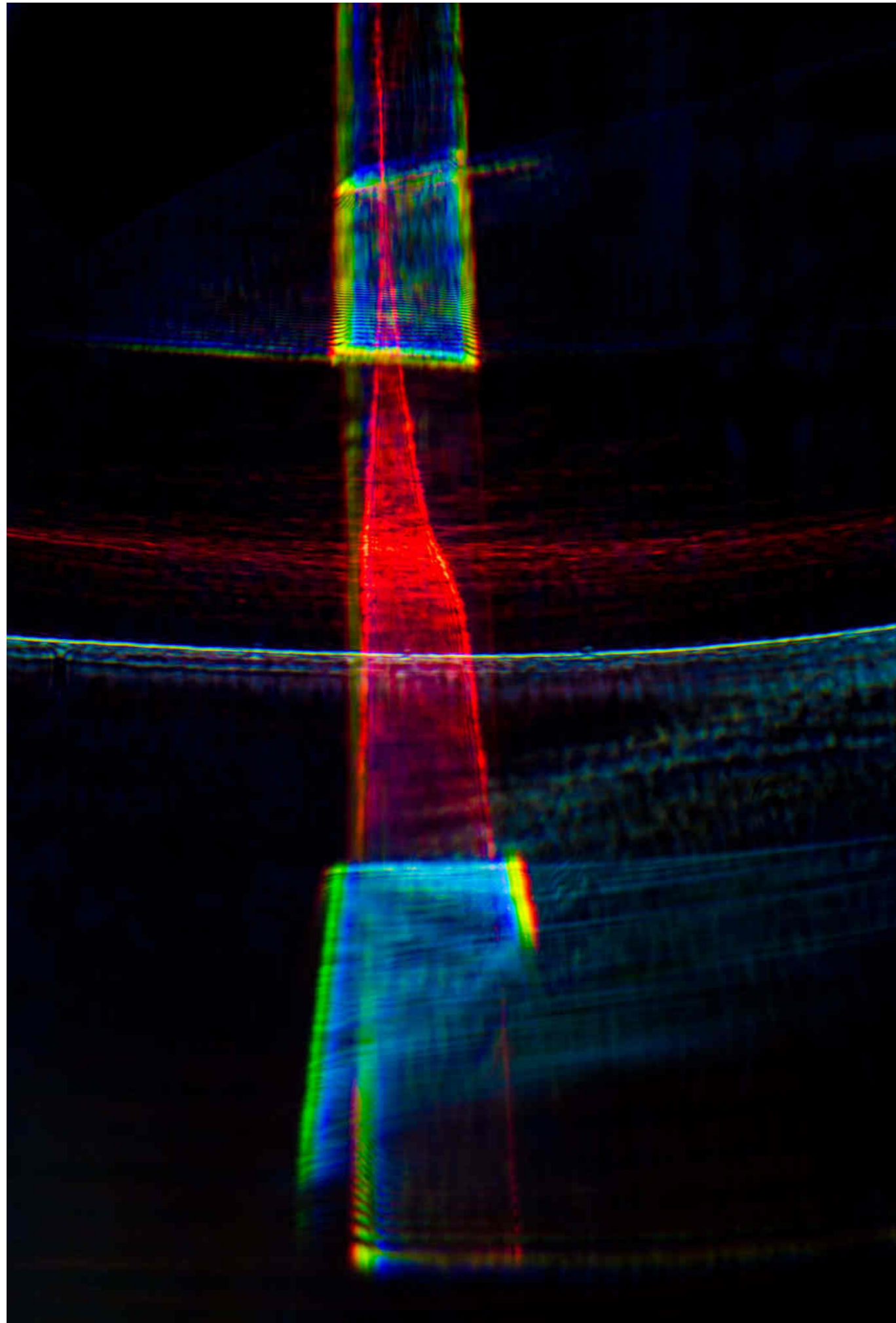


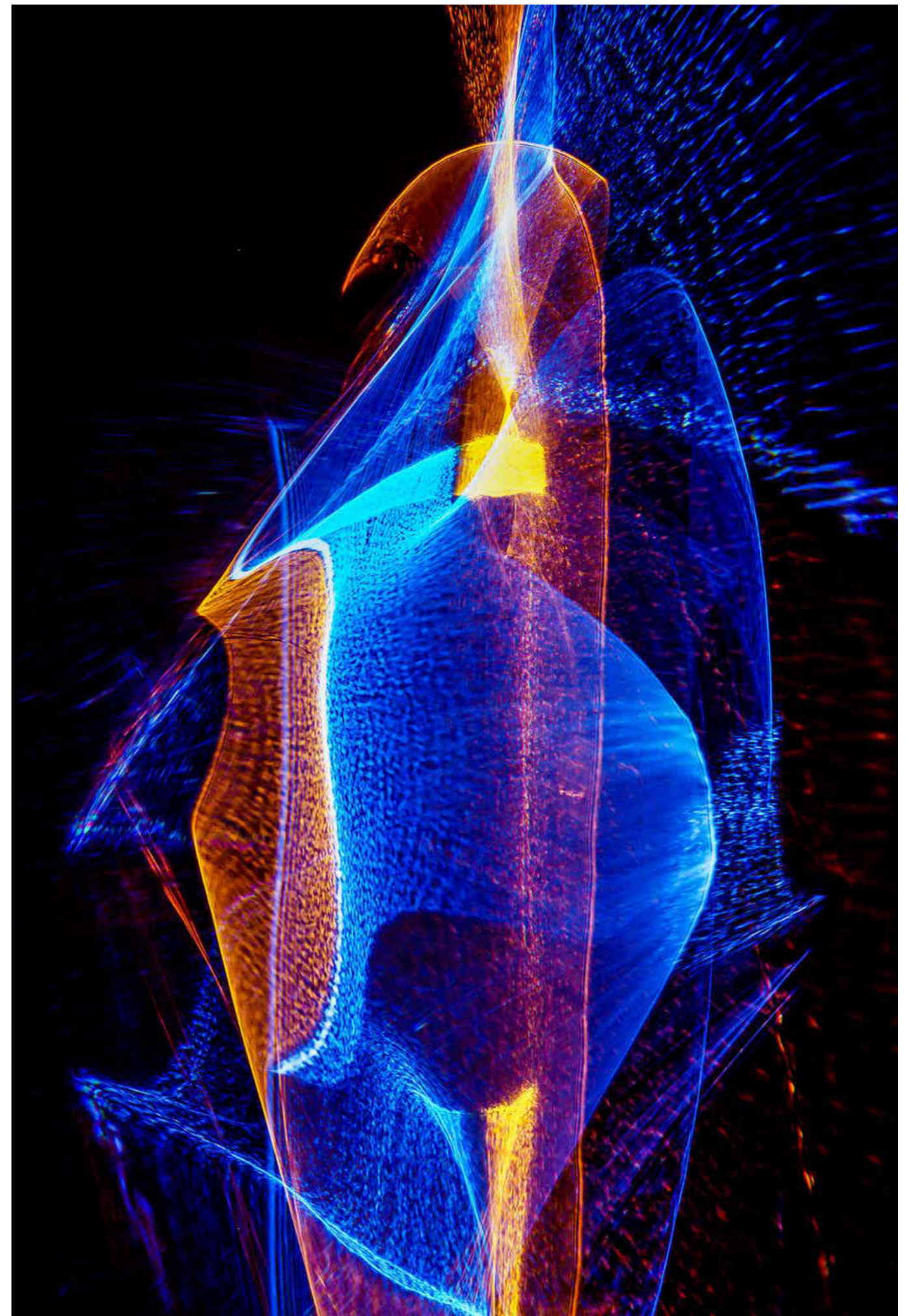
LIGHTFIELDS











FLOWERS







R O R S C H A C H F L O W E R S

Rorschach Flower series from Liminal Projects is an ongoing collaboration with Jeff Robb. These flowers are sourced from home-grown and specialist tulip suppliers, studio-shot in 3D, and then digitally sculpted to create symmetrical works that enhance their form. The result is beautiful, haunting art. Robb's flowers are not fragile and delicate – they are monumental, one metre wide, filling the picture frame, seemingly bursting from it. Look long enough and, like bees in search of pollen, we get drawn in.

The flowers seem to envelop us, pull us into a vortex, transport us – enraptured – into a fantastical world of colour and beauty. Time seems to slow here, as we contemplate a world that seems enclosed yet limitless, coherent yet unfathomable, part of a pattern yet infinitely varied. Paradoxically by focusing on the details of the flower, we gain some apprehension of the vastness of the universe that surrounds it. Robb gives us an indication of what he sees in the pictures in his Latin titles – *Os Cava* translates as hollow mouth, *Rex Aquilae* as king of the eagles, *Formica Pirata* as pirate ant. But ultimately, the viewer makes the meaning in this world. Petals can appear like folds in drapes or sheaths of transparent fabric; they can appear to descend in waterfall-like movements, take flight in great wings, or ignite into flames.

Amongst the stamens and pistils at the centre of the flower, some discern dancers or carcasses, bats or butterflies, pupae or larvae or the heads of insects; some see otherworldly creatures; some have even reported seeing samurai warriors deep in the folds.

In a sense, Robb hands over the images for us to create – and this is quite deliberate. As the title of the series indicates, Robb took inspiration from the Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922). In 1921, Rorschach created a series of symmetrical inkblots by pouring ink on paper and folding the paper tightly. He would then ask viewers to tell him what they saw in the ink blots, to assess their personality, emotional functioning and psychological condition.

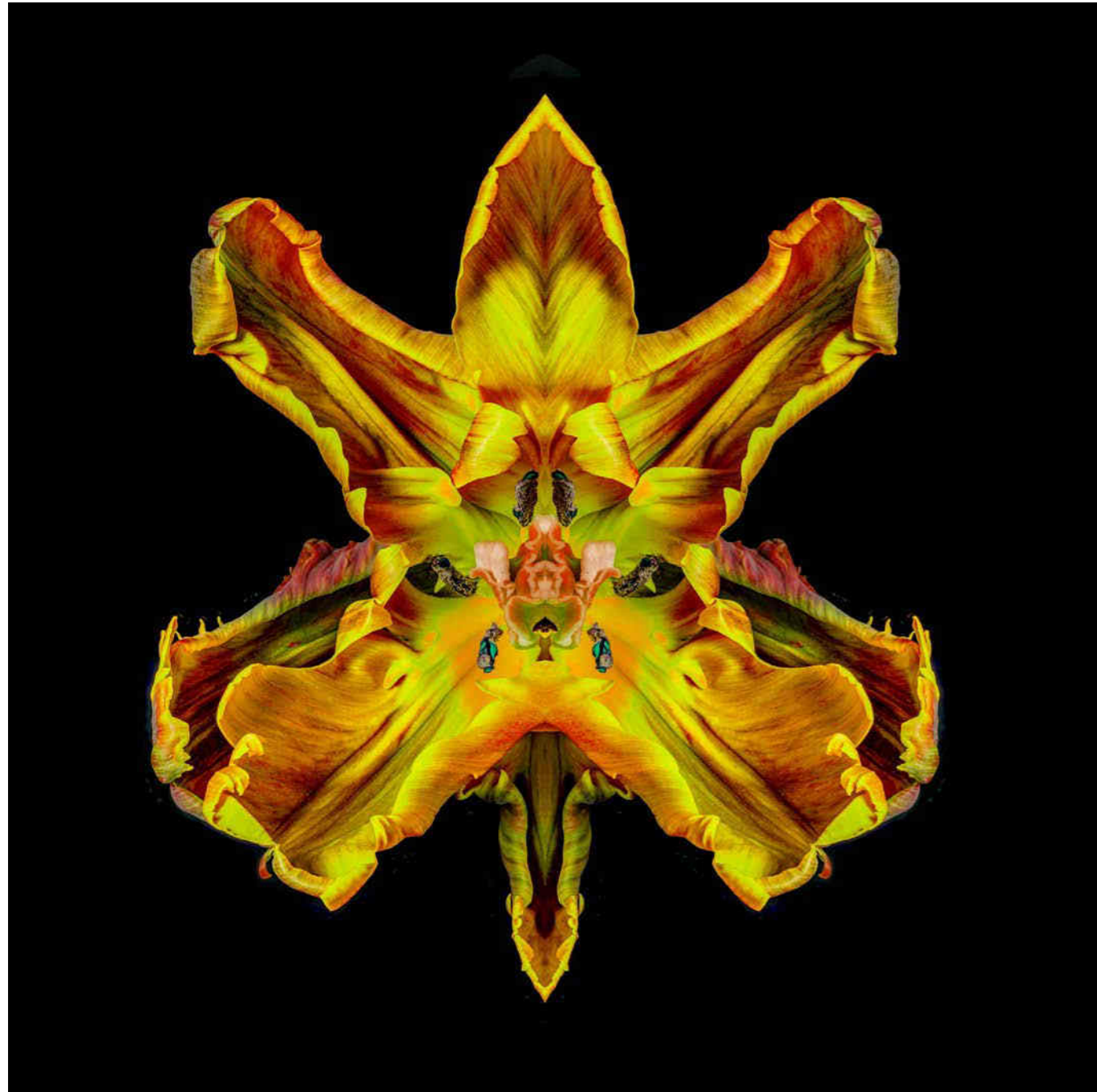
Clearly, as an artist not a psychiatrist, Robb's aim is not as prescriptive. And yet his bifurcated flowers look similar to the inkblots and they provoke our subconscious mind in a similar way. You see a reflection of your concerns and desires.

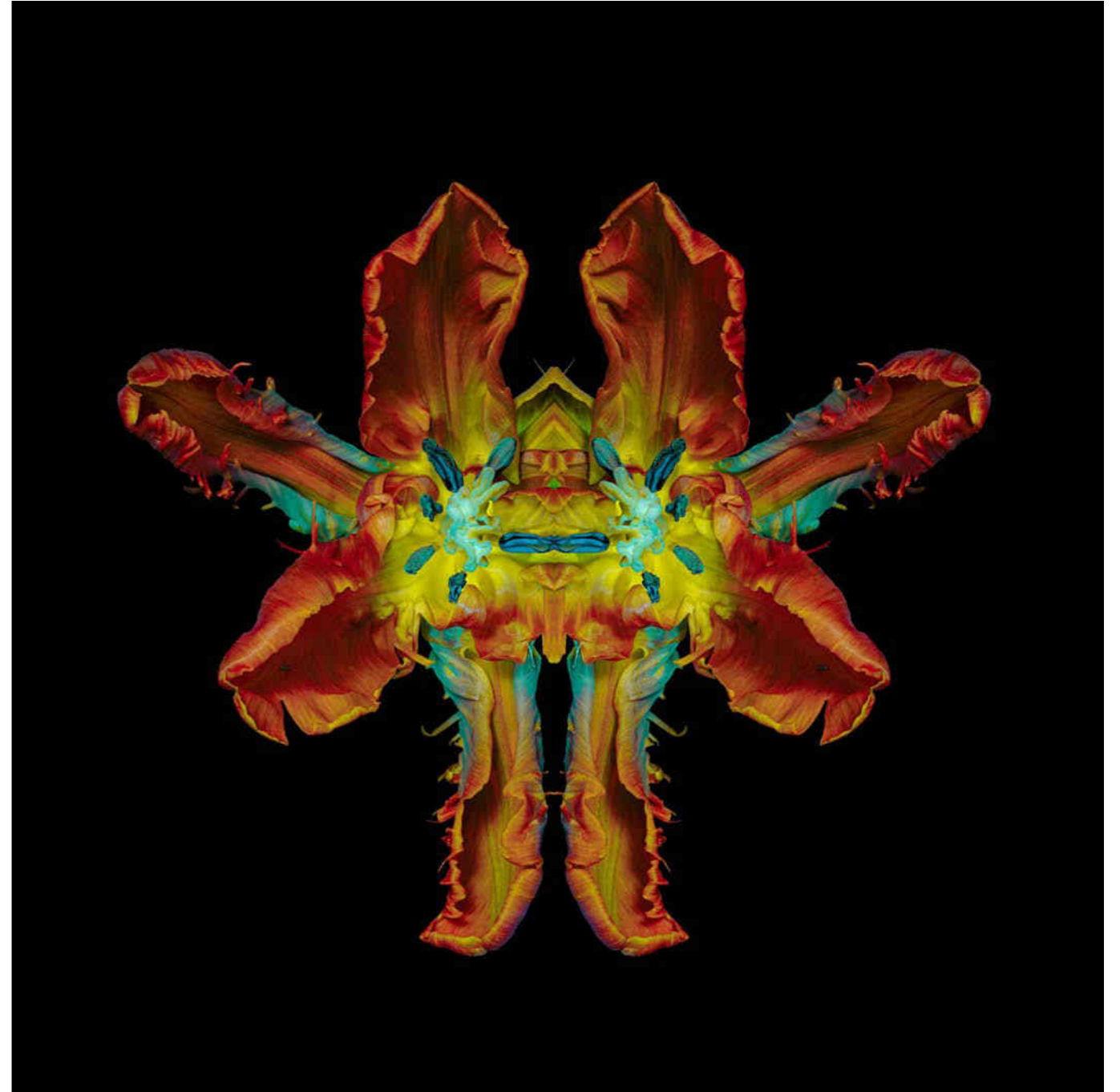
American painter Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), perhaps the most famous modern flower artist, once said: "When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else." That is what Robb has done, he has given you the world of a flower, only for you to find that it is the world of your imagination.

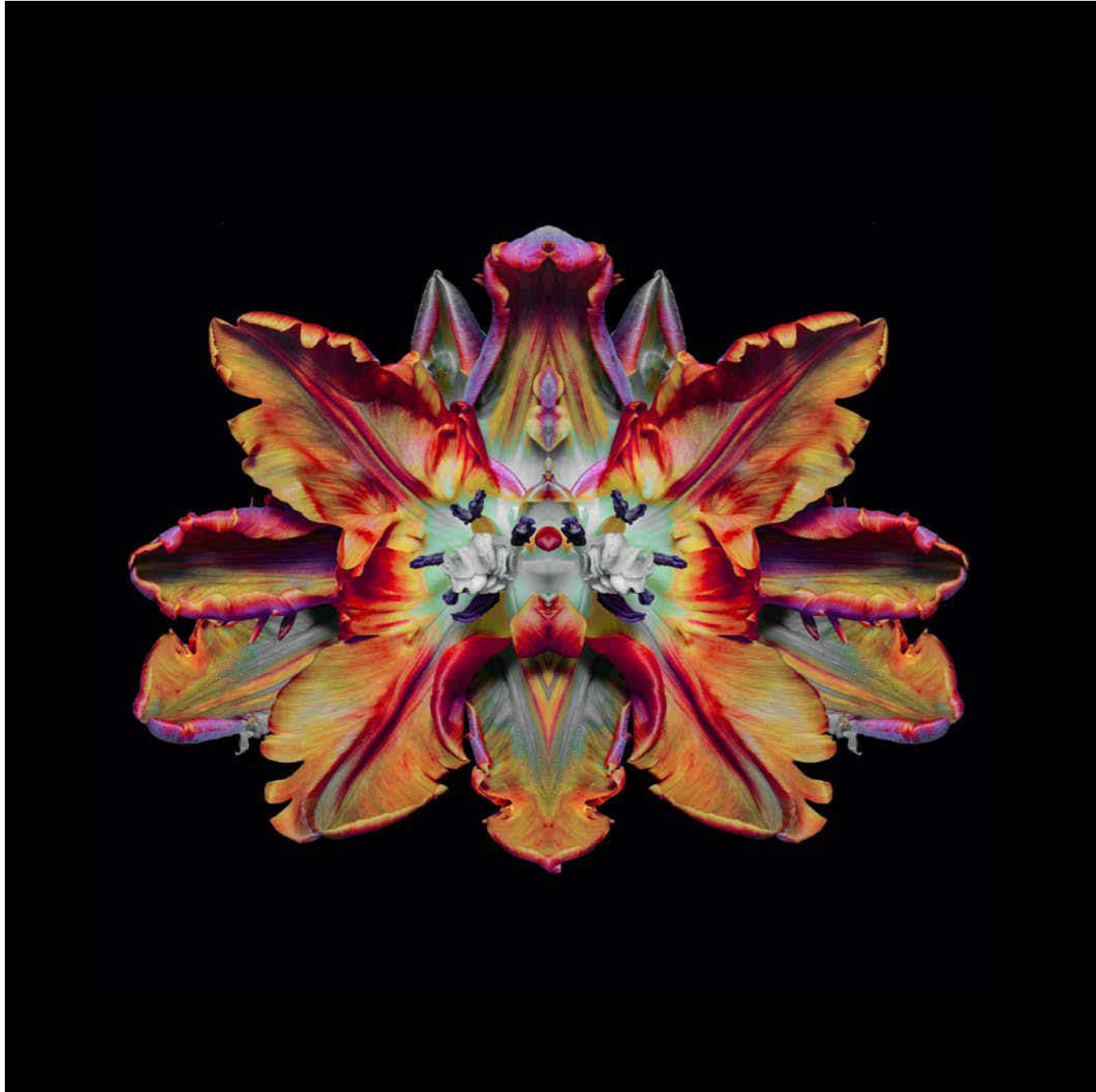
Take some time to look at these images, make a note of your favourites and return to them again and again, checking back to see if the impact of your flower continues to resonate. Ultimately, the choice will be made by your subconscious imagination.

~ Matthew Rake









QUOTIDIAN OBJECTS







ACTS OF WILL







WORKING METHODS

To many, the techniques and methods employed in the production of three-dimensional images and objects are as fascinating as seeing the finished article. On seeing Robb's work for the first time, there is a sense of wonderment and disbelief that transcends the everyday. His images enchant the viewer and inspire in them to know more. Robb works in a variety of media including painting, holography, lenticular photography, bronze sculpture and laser light, but the final product invariably has a three-dimensional quality. This is usually achieved through an illusionary optical transformation. This optical transformation is central to Robb's work, through which he explores the boundaries of physics and the limits of human knowledge. It is worth defining some of the methods and media that Robb works with because there is so much misinformation regarding the production of three-dimensional imagery.

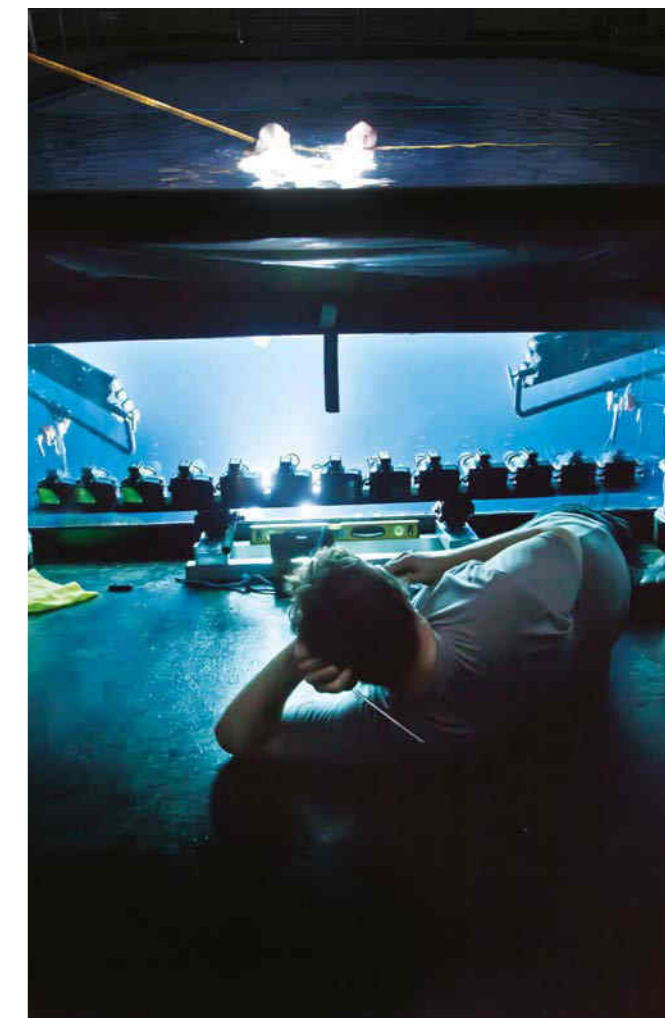
H O L O G R A M S

In the 21st century, various commentators have incorrectly appropriated the term 'hologram' to refer to a three-dimensional imaging technique known as 'Pepper's Ghost'. This method dates back to 1588 when Jean Baptiste Giambattista della Porta described the technique for the first time in his *Magia Naturalis* (Natural Magic), and was made popular by scientist John Pepper, who adopted it for use in theatres in the 1860s. Pepper's Ghost uses a semi-silvered mirror to reflect a space or image hidden from the viewer, thereby making the object or image appear to float. 'Tele-prompters', used by TV broadcasters today, are a modern implementation of the Pepper's Ghost technique. The terms 'hologram' and 'holography' actually

relate to a specific technique invented in the 1940s for recording a light field, which can be replayed. The inventor, Steven Benton, described a hologram as a "time window that captures a moment to be replayed in the future". This is most commonly achieved using a laser exposing a photographic medium on an optical table using mirrors and lenses, microscope objectives and beam splitters. Under a microscope, a hologram is a complex pattern resembling minute filaments, that work together to refract and focus the light. While studying at the Royal College of Art in London, Robb produced many hundreds of holograms which are now in collections worldwide, including the Victoria and Albert museum in London.

True holograms come in two types. 'Transmission holograms' that change through the spectrum of colours as the viewer moves up and down are illuminated from behind and have no vertical parallax (the visual effect achieved from differing viewpoints), while 'Reflection holograms' are illuminated from the front, usually single colour and have both a horizontal and vertical parallax. Robb developed unique working methods in both forms of holography to suit his vision that culminated in a Darwin scholarship and extra year of study at the RCA (1992-3).

Another misconception of Robb's work is that of 'holographic projection', as seen in films including George Lucas's *Star Wars* and James Cameron's *Avatar*. This type of effect is not possible in the real world due to the fact that light travels in straight lines and has to bounce off something to be seen. Maybe one day.



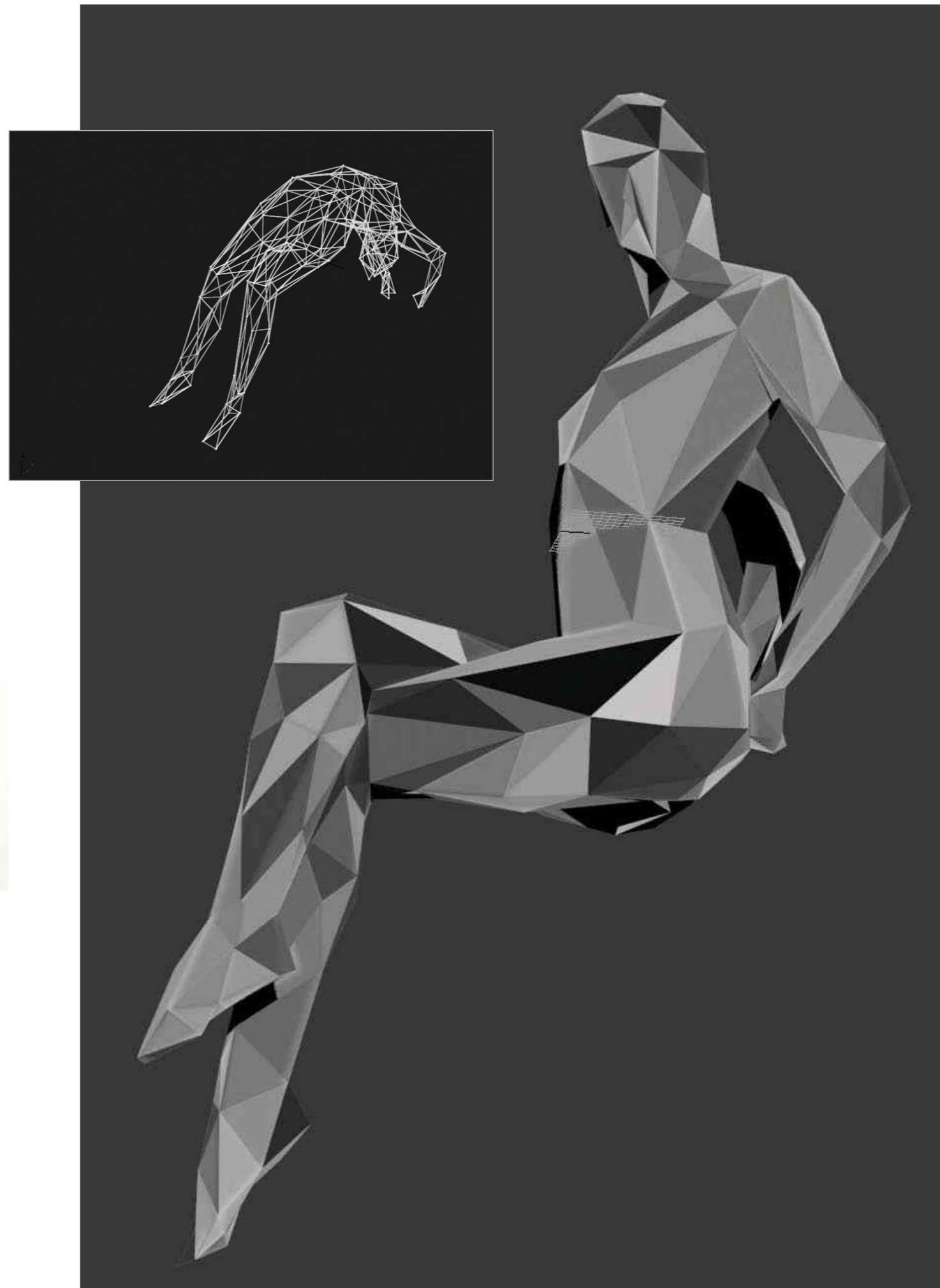
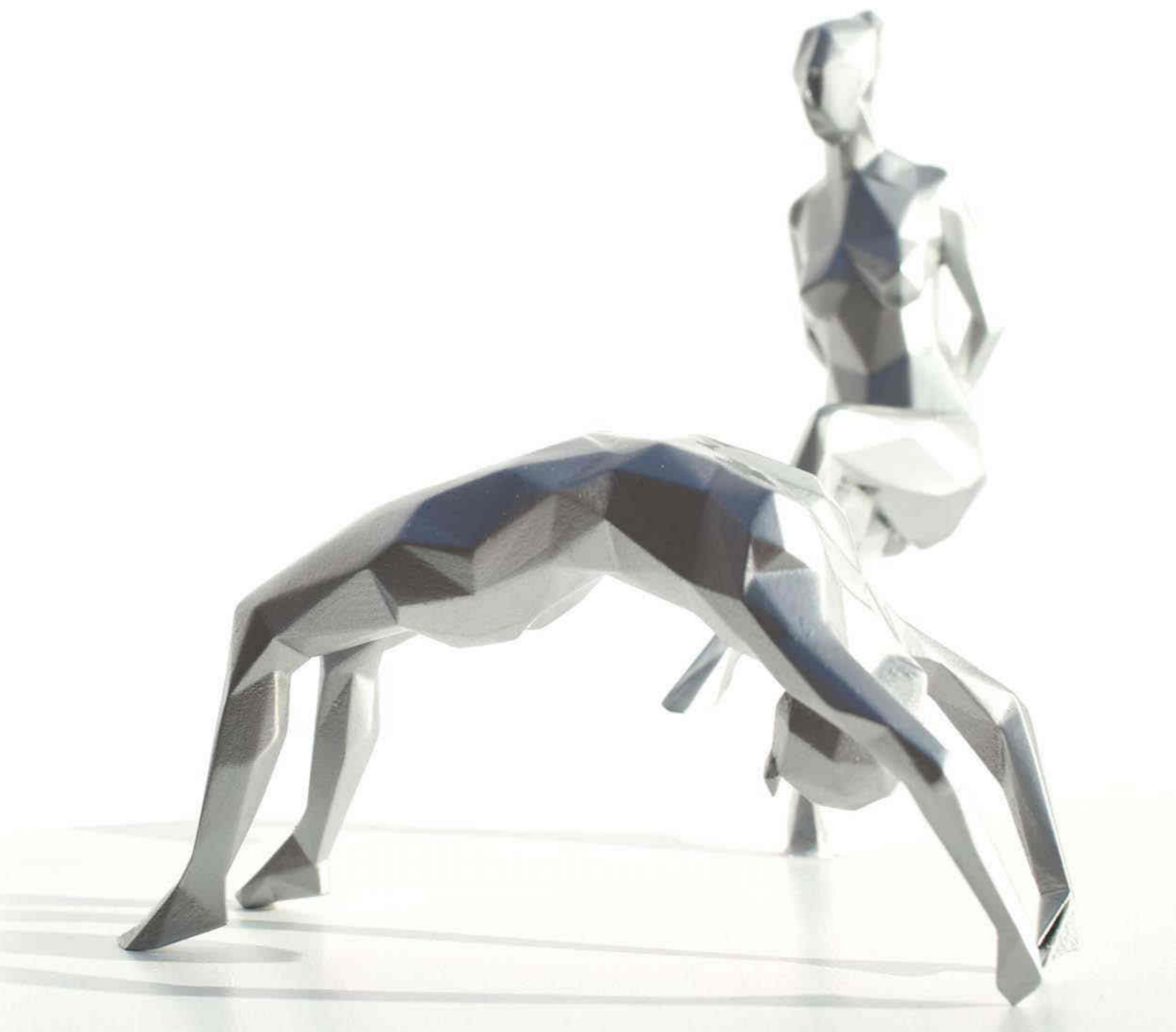
Large holograms are extremely difficult and expensive to make and have a restricted colour palette, so latterly Robb has turned to an alternative technique known as lenticular photography to achieve a greater colour gamut and a more gallery friendly viewing experience. Again he developed his own techniques and patented them (US patent number 2007/0003272 A1). Lenticular photographs are produced using conventional printing techniques combined with a lens, presenting the viewer with a stereoscopic pair of images to give the illusion of a three-dimensional image. In neither holograms nor lenticular photography are there any layers of material giving rise to the three-dimensional effect.

Robb's work usually starts with conventional methods such as painting, pencil sketches, photography or physical models to pre-visualise ideas. From the initial ideas Robb uses three-dimensional modelling software to produce on-screen prototypes. For camera-based projects, following successful pre-visualisation, Robb takes production into the studio and begins the process of constructing the scene and aligning the camera systems. This involves set building, employing models and using film techniques such as time-lapse photography and green screen compositing.

Robb constructs his own cameras and photographic rigs to achieve his images. In order to capture three-dimensional information a number of views of the subject are taken. For a static subject, 50 frames are typically captured by a

moving camera on a rail system, specially designed and built by Robb for the purpose. If the subject is moving, as in his underwater Aerial series, a number of cameras are used to take photographs simultaneously using a specially designed triggering mechanism. The captured frames are processed using software designed for the film industry to achieve the highest quality renderings. These frames are out-put to a laser based writing system that encodes the image onto a photographic substrate. The image is then combined with an optical lens structure to form the final lenticular photographic work, which is finished using a bespoke laser ablation technique.











J E F F R O B B I N T E R V I E W E D B Y E L L I O T B U R N S

Elliot Burns:

I'd like to open by asking about the recurrent subject of your practice, the liminal state.

Jeffrey Robb:

If you think back a few hundred years ago, the average person didn't move far away from where they lived and they only met a few hundred people. A big change for them was growing from a child to grown up; that was the rite of passage. Now our culture has ended up with us all in a perpetual liminal state of change. In the Western world especially, and maybe even in those cultures that don't own very much, people are very aspirational; they're in a state of change. I'm trying to visualise that human state of transition, within a technical and three-dimensional sensibility. Obviously, I'm not making a direct translation, I'm using the bread and butter of fine art history, the nude, done in a different way.

EB:

So, you're centring the constant liminal state to capitalist concerns of desire?

JR:

There are two sides to that. There's the capitalist state, of wanting stuff, which you see in developing countries, who aspire to material goods like branded clothing, which obviously the developed Western world takes for granted. But also, in hopefully a post-capital state, where magic and spirituality are more aspirational than physical goods.

EB:

Or wellness and experience as it might be co-opted.

JR:

Human beings are themselves growing up within the cycle of an individual's life, learning that it isn't physical objects but their inner-self and relationships with other people that are the key. Not to want a car or a bigger house, all those things that we're being told that we need. The trouble is, very quickly you get into new-age speak. That's a semantic issue as it doesn't fit in with the language of commerce; they can't sell you personal wellbeing and happiness very well.

EB:

Can't they? Even Alex Jones, the right-wing conservative media pundit, is essentially a vehicle for selling wellness products.

JR:

But they don't work, so it's all false.

EB:

Of Course. Why do you think the lenticular medium is so useful when expressing liminality?

JR:

The lenticular medium acts very much like a window on to another three-dimensional space; that portal aspect, combined with the ability to freeze transitory motion, so that the floating figures are analogous to the liminal state. Capturing things you can't see, is in my opinion very much heightened by the use of the three-dimensional

media. If you did a painting it might look more fantastical, new-age-y and sci-fi.

EB:

You'd need to fill in the symbology and references, rather than allowing the media to speak for itself?

JR:

Exactly, it'd be too prescriptive. Whereas with a lenticular image you're already asking questions about the medium, because most people haven't seen it before, at least at such a quality and size. They're weirded out, partly because they don't know anything about the history, which goes back to the 1950s for holography and to the late 1800s for lenticulars. The first ones we recognise as familiar, were made of Bakelite in the beginning of the last century.

EB:

And lenticular paintings dating back even further?

JR:

It was first proposed and demonstrated by the French painter G. A. Bois-Clair in 1692.

EB:

There's a long technical history. Visible in the behind the scenes photos of your practice is a real sense of a relationship between the craft and the science, coming together.

JR:

Possibly, where I have a unique position is due to my background. Starting in photography, then doing a Master's degree in three-dimensional art and holography at the Royal College of Art, and then working professionally in three-dimensional image making for fifteen years after that. Working in the professional realm, in a commercial environment, you're being asked how to do things that you wouldn't choose to do. You've been in the hot seat of being asked to produce unusual things, from trading cards of American footballers to banknote holograms to advertising hoardings for whiskies. It gives you this huge grounding in abilities to produce anything you like.

EB:

Why or when did you shift out of the professional arena?

JR:

I suppose for me that the watershed came from the portrait of the Queen Chris Levine did in 2003/4 that I helped with; that was the end of my commercial life in 2004.

EB:

Why was that the tipping point?

JR:

Looking back, it catapulted the medium into the public gaze. Suddenly there is a lenticular photograph in the National Portrait Gallery, suddenly there was a lenticular touring the world, suddenly



it was on lots of diplomats' walls, suddenly it was at auction for £200,000. It left a high watermark. Plus, people are quite fickle, once they knew you're associated with a project like that, it ticked a box. Which subsequently made it easier to take the medium further than it had been before. The medium that I work in, it's a completely undiscovered country, because people who've been using it to date have appropriated images. For example, Peter Blake has taken his collages and turned them into 3D. Roy Lichtenstein did it too. But they didn't make the prints. They wouldn't know how. Whereas there's absolutely no one trained in lenticular. You could count on your hand the number of these photography systems in the country and the ones who have built those systems are not artists; they're doing it as a means to an end, for other people, who themselves would dip in and out of the medium. So, it's very artisan in that sense, it's still very crafty and it's still incredibly niche. I like that.

EB:

Your position occupies both the technical and the artistic terrains, which is quite unique.

JR:

It allows me to know the unknowable nuances of how you do it, which are often subliminal. Often people ask "How'd you do it?" Well I've never measured anything, I've just a sense of how it should be. Ask someone how to kick a football, you can't break it down to

the physics of it in a way that helps you practically.

EB:

You can't explain the maths. I assume there's a maths and an accuracy to the process?

JR:

There is, yet an interesting point with media which represent the three-dimensional world is that it is actually the things that are not quite right that make it interesting. You can make things that are too 3D.

EB:

Almost an uncanny valley.

JR:

Except the uncanny valley is specific to human faces I think. If you look closely at a realist painting, it's the paint that makes you interested in it, the fact that it's not a photograph. The nuances of the medium that don't make it look exactly like a window on the real world are the ones which make it interesting. What you've got to know is how to use those things that are not accurate. For example, lenticular photography can only really portray two to three feet of space, but you can convey a huge amount of dimensionality using visual tricks. You can have a shadow, miles away, because you can read that as a blur, whereas, if you have text back there, you can't

read it. Volumes which are two to three metres cubed translate really well into the lenticular medium. Whereas it's very hard to do true landscapes, because, if you're three miles away from Mt Everest it looks flat. You can't move far enough.

EB:

Will advances in the scale of lenticular printing change that?

JR:

The thing is as you go bigger in X and Y you don't go bigger in Z. So, the answer to that is no. And that's something that a lot of advertisers don't understand. They used to say "Can we have a billboard sized one?" and they expect it to go back fifty feet. But it still can only go back three feet.

EB:

You've spoken about an underlying aspect of your practice being an interest in magic. How do you relate that to these very contemporary technical digital challenges?

JR:

Magic has been part of every culture that we know of. The famous image of the sorcerer, at the Cave of the Trois-Frères in France, is about 13,000 years old. The traditional philosophical take is that it goes: magic, religion, science, in terms of human history. But if you look at society today there's more reference to magic than ever before. When the conquistadors went to South America, they were so far advanced that the natives had no comprehension of what was in front of them. It was like aliens landing. Arthur C Clark famously said "Any technology far enough advanced looks like magic" and in the novels of Iain M Banks this is taken to its logical conclusion where you imagine a society so far advanced than ours, where the machines are sentient; but then they're presented by this thing that they can't understand, and how do they deal with that? Quite an interesting idea about how the unknown will always be central to a culture. In many ways magic relates back to: We don't know why we're here! We don't know why we exist! The really basic questions. Our entire physical universe is made up of these incredibly esoteric things.

EB:

You're trying to present these questions through the form of the female nude, why is that? Is it due to its central place in an art historical context? Its ease of communicating and understanding?

JR:

For me the female form is a beautiful thing. It immediately grabs people's attention. It's been done so much that to try and do it in a way that hasn't been done before, which is hopefully what I'm doing, is breaking new ground within a very traditional setting. I think often that is the essence of great art. There's nothing new, but if you can take something that's been done a lot before and make something new, then that's a really interesting intellectual and creative challenge to make your life's endeavour.

EB:

I have to ask, how do you place your work in regards to critiques of the male gaze? In order to exist your work necessitates a quantity of digital eyes and creates something that has a near object status.



JR:

Most people who buy my art are women. In this age it's very easy to argue "You're objectifying women". However, people want naked women, women want naked women, that is the truth. It might not fit into the current politically correct way of answering your question but those are the facts.

EB:

How about your more abstract, spatial projects? These don't quite fit the same market concern.

JR:

The pyramids? That was the first step in an idea of making three-dimensional objects from a medium which itself is two-dimensional but shows a three-dimensional space. I think that's another completely untapped avenue I could go down. It's like making holographic sculptures, in terms of space and shadow, to represent it at a fundamental level. But it's difficult and it's very expensive.

EB:

Because getting the lenticulars cut to those specific shapes is so bespoke?

JR:

You have to work on a relatively large scale to make it work. I've invested a huge amount of time and energy and money doing the ones I've done. Suspending double-sided pieces, positioning those in space, having them rotating, having them animate. No one is doing it; or very few. There's a big piece in an airport I think.

EB:

A wall that transitions?

JR:

No, it's a mobile. As they move, they change colour; Genius.

EB:

A chandelier.

JR:

Basically, or a mobile. Whereas I'm trying to make physical objects that exist in two spaces, not virtually, it's right in front of you. Lying on my death bed I want to be able to say I had a good crack at it, at doing with this medium what I could and no one else did. I quite like the fact that it's one hundred and twenty years old, it's not a new medium, it's an old medium, it's in the same realm of age as photograph, maybe sixty years younger or so. As an artist the best I can do is relentlessly pursue what I know I can do and what I enjoy doing; whether it's in fashion, whether the nude is in fashion, whether the lenticular is in fashion, or not; for no other reason than I have to do it to stay sane.



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Collections

Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK
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