

In-conversation:  
Ben Gooding and Caroline Jane Harris, on the occasion of  
*A Stopped World*  
Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery Berlin  
30<sup>th</sup> October – 19<sup>th</sup> December 2020

BG

*Let's start by talking about the relationship between subject and process in your work. In one sense the specific nature of the process you employ, that of cutting, is a methodology of production that could presumably be applied to any subject. We live in a world of such limitless visual immediacy I'm interested to know about how you arrive at what seem to be highly considered decisions regarding your subject matter. The one always seems to be relevant to the other beyond mere aesthetic considerations. The subject somehow seems to be contingent on or necessitated by the process.*

CJH



Detail: *A Stopped World*, 2020, 16 hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 57 x 88cm each

Central to my work is the process of cutting that I established on my undergraduate studies in Fine Art Printmaking (2006–09). At the time, I moved from carving into the surface of wood, to entirely cutting-out sections of paper with a scalpel. My revelation was how the cut-out introduced the discreet hand-made mark that I sought within the image-making process, one that superseded the distinct aesthetic of a tool-gauged cut. Using photographic prints enabled me to access any subject without recognisable translation and marry it with the manual process of cutting, integrating matrix and surface, traditional and digital, into a singular plane with dual realities. I was taken with the strict binary nature of the cut-out mark and its relationship to computer coding, as well as how the removed substrate became the non-tangible image that was 'seen', akin to viewing an immaterial image on a computer screen. I found that the space beyond the surface undermined the enervated flatness of the digital print and the images we experience, whilst imbuing the layer with an actual tangible depth, calling to attention the three-dimensional qualities of the print. These initial discoveries lay the foundations for the platform from which I continually introduce new subjects and explorations.

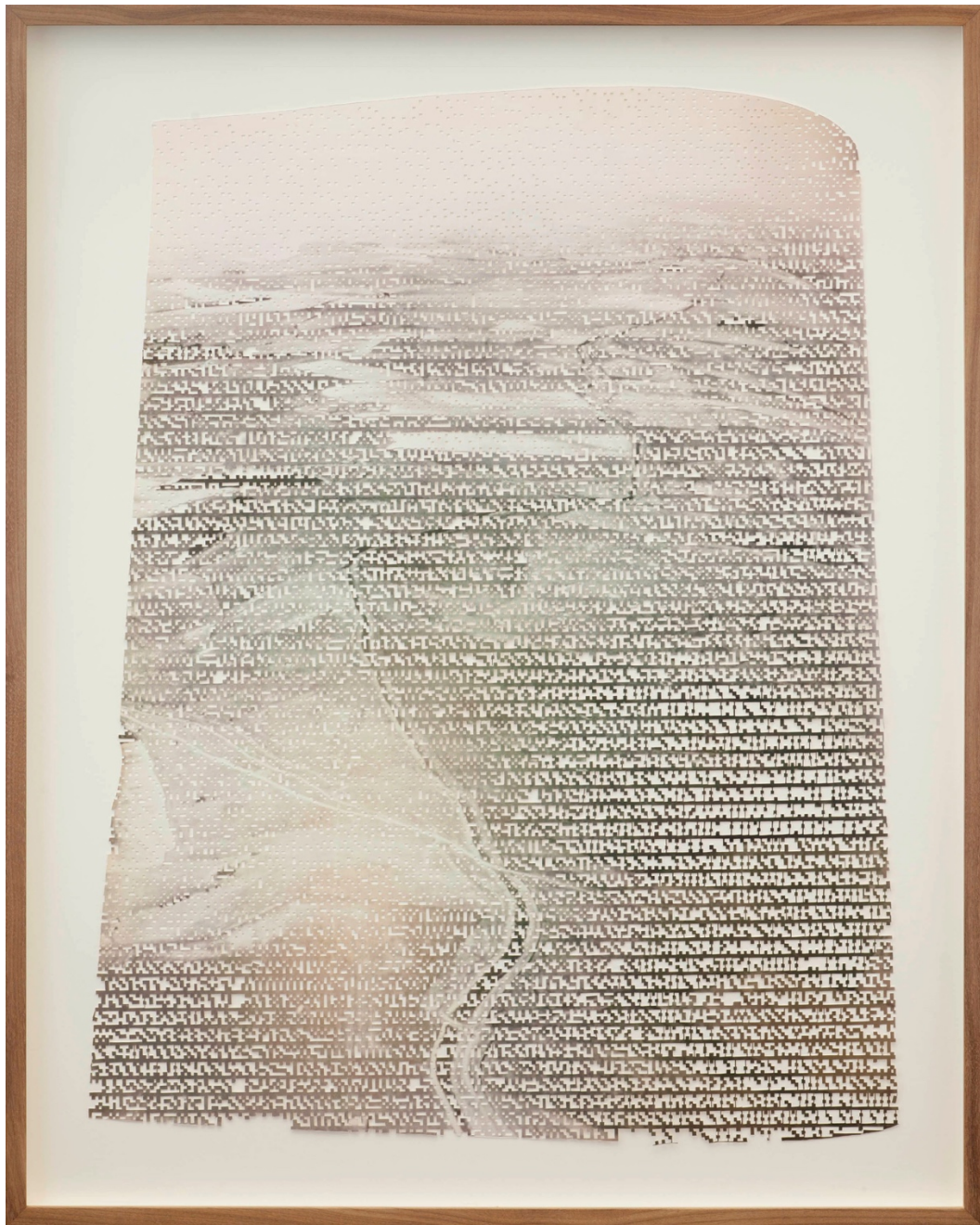
Today, this context of "limitless visual immediacy" informs and shapes my practice as, in my work I reflect upon our contemporary consciousness of images and visual technologies, finding stillness in images as an antidote to speed. At once there is the consideration of the extent to which to be visually arresting, to hook the viewer's attention and compete in our fast-paced consumption, but also as you mention, the importance of going beyond merely aesthetic decisions. My aim is to invite a slow, exploratory experience of looking where subject matter combined with process give rise to significance and experience. When sourcing material to work with I analyse both the content of the image and its own substantive nature. So, depending on whether I'm working with a JPEG from an iPhone, an antique glass slide, a found book or an internet video, the decisions around the process will have an allegiance to the origins and historical context of that image. By not predetermining my next source, I leave open possibilities for new ways of interpreting subject matters and creating pictures through a continuous investigation of images and processes.



Installation view: *A Stopped World*, 2020, 16 hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 246 x 376cm in total

For example, for my latest solo exhibition *A Stopped World*, I began with two starting points, the first was paperback books containing photographs of aerial views that I then captured from above. Here, the initial subject is both the photograph and book page as a physical, analogue object in 3-dimensional space, as well as the content of the image; the act of looking from a great distance, eschewing time and scale as it becomes spread out over the earth. In addition, the action of re-photographing the works from an aerial perspective, creates a *mise-en abyme* technique suggesting the infinitely recurring obsolescence of technologies and media that affect our processes of absorbing and reproducing images.





*Aerials (Tilt)*, 2020, hand-cut archival pigment print, 76 x 61cm

The second starting point was online videos of volcanic eruptions which I screen-captured on my computer. Although we all live on the same 'globe', there was no such thing as a 'global event' until media such as television, radio and most exponentially the internet, made them so. Hence, this process speaks to our once-removed viewing experience of large-scale natural phenomena, our connection to deep and continuous time and also the unseen dynamic processes of nature and the software through which we observe her. Here my concerns were again not only the subject of the video but the means to transmute immaterial moving content through the screen. For these works I increased the scale to hark back to the cinematic



experience that sits at odds with the portable view. My piece *A Stopped World*, made up of 16 printed and cut-out layered screenshots stretches over 2x3 metres in its entirety and envelops the field of vision. The sequential images read like linear corporeal stills from a movie shot on film, despite its original inception as weightless data.



Installation view detail: *A Stopped World*, 2020, 16 hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 246 x 376cm in total

BG

*There is always present in your work, a tension between the digital and the analogue. The speed and immediacy of the first then slowed and protracted by the physiology of hand and eye. Also, in how the fine grain accuracy of say, a digitally rendered bitmap, becomes transmuted by the tactility of the scalpel blade into a 'corrupted', simulacra of the original subject. There is something compelling in the temporal and material dissimilarity between these states.*

*This 'tension' however, is not necessarily made explicit in your work. Its operation is highly subtle, at times almost intangible, as if you want the central profundity of the work to remain elusive.*

CJH

Indeed, I purposely create this tension by combining contrasting elements — analogue and digital, fast and slow, machine and hand, fine and degraded — to enable the work to exist in an interval state of potential without hierarchy or resolution. The juxtaposition of these disparate elements serves to activate the overlap at their thresholds, imbuing them with a palpable presence that remains elusive. I connect this ambiguous quality to Marcel Duchamp's notion of *inframince*, which can be understood as a subtle transition from one thing to another, implied but with no tangible body.



Detail: In Bloom, 2020, 16 hand-cut Kozo paper tiles, 210 x 320cm

Another contradiction then is the combination of my influences from the material to the spiritual. In recent scientific theory, Duchamp's concept also relates to ideas from quantum physics that consider the close interconnectedness and effect of components when observed in an environment. Whilst in regard to the human condition from a Buddhist perspective, this experience of contrast could be seen as a reflection of our constantly alternating experiences, where to rest in the equilibrium of the anxiety is to find the opening that holds the full range of possible perception.

So, in my work the interface of for example hand-cut space through a digital print, gives rise to not only an internal dynamic but an interconnectedness that I perceive as present in the woven fabric of our universe. The seemingly dissimilar states transform the viewing experience to emphasise, not only what is blatantly seen but that which is elicited through the exchange. It is my aim that this tension manifests a discrete communication that requires intimate and prolonged contemplation.

BG

*In recent years you have utilised the 'bitmap' as a primary tool in your methodology and it has become for you a rich and indispensable language that opens up tremendous possibility for processing and manipulating images, and yet it is something that many people might be quite unfamiliar with.*

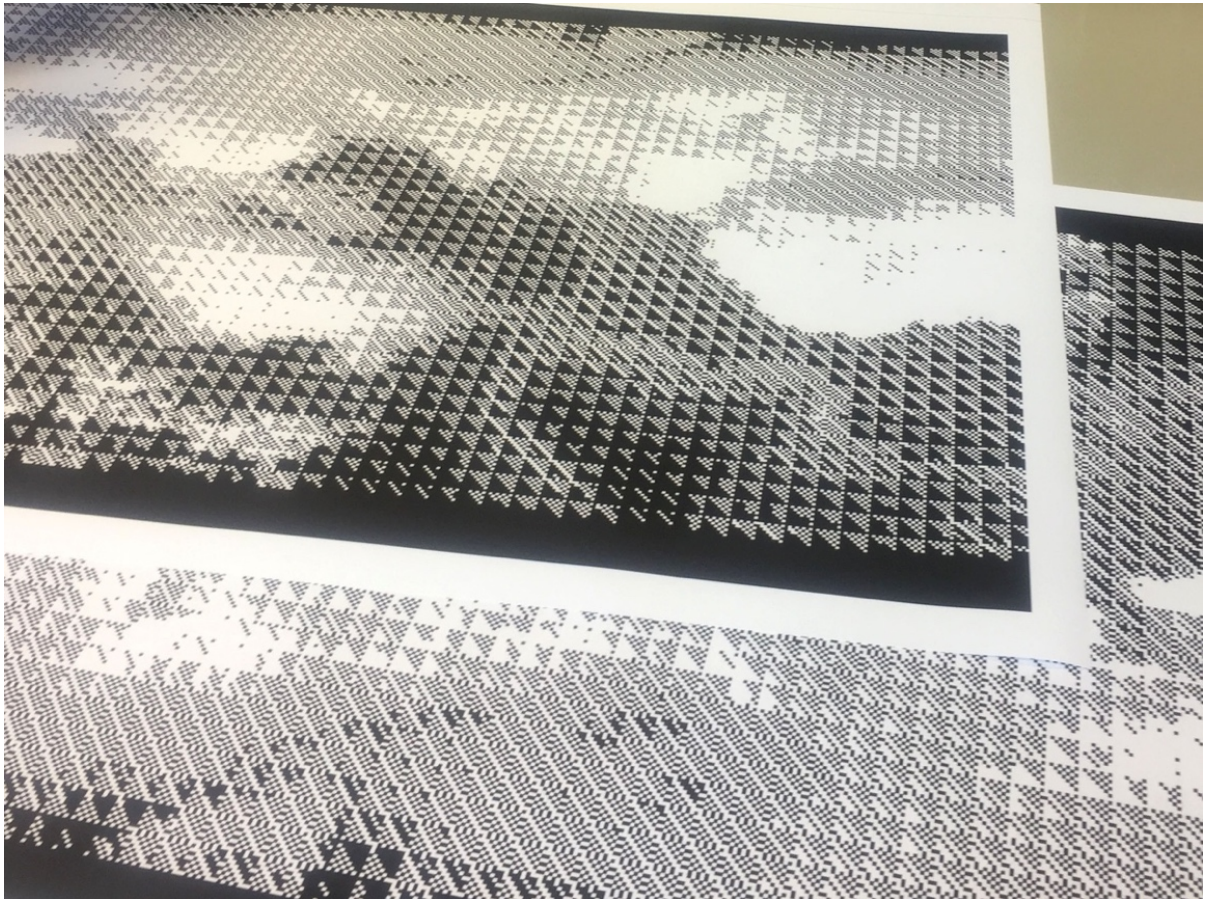
*I wonder if you could briefly describe the bitmap as a function as it might be quite illuminating for people to understand. I'd also like to ask about the specific bitmaps you decide to use. There are a number of controls one has when setting a bitmap and these produce very different renderings of the same image, so what is your thought process regarding this? Do you have a default setting you use for aesthetic or practical reasons, or are you detached somewhat in your decision-making regarding this? That is to say, any specific bitmap is secondary to the requirement for it to be bitmapped.*

*I'm also interested to touch on your transition from cutting out the voids between things (tree branches) to your focus on the bitmap. They are very different phenomena so what was the journey from one to the other?*

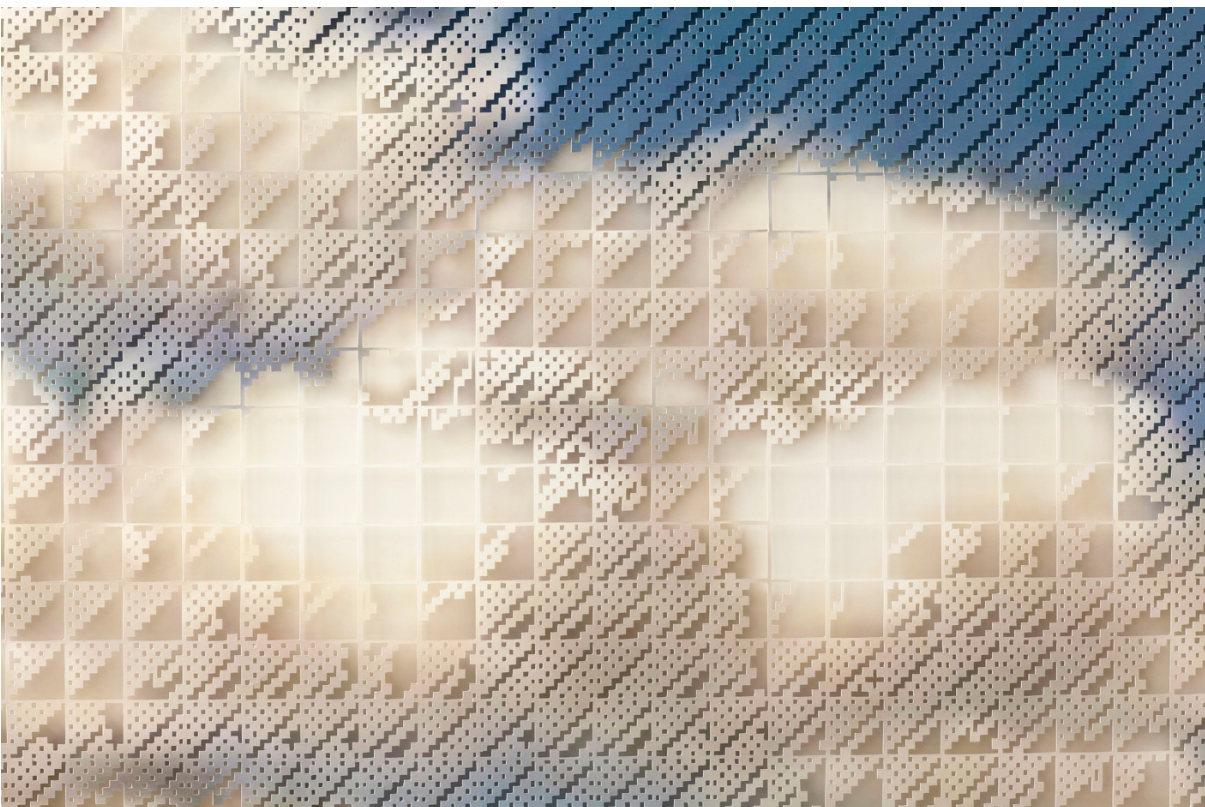
CJH

A 'bitmap' is a term from computing that refers to the mapping of some domain to bits, creating a spatially mapped array of bits. I apply the 'bitmap' function in Photoshop to my images by making them into grayscale before the software maps pixels into a reductive black and white translation. I consider which specific method or pattern accentuates the qualities of the subject and overall composition of the image. In addition to Photoshop's bitmap parameters, I add a pattern of my own making over the top in order for the design to be uniquely mine. The bitmap pattern is printed and used as a stencil on top of the digital print, and then later to make etchings, drawings etc.





Printed bitmap images before being cut-out into stencils



Detail: *Deep, Slow, Still I*, 2020, hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 90 x 123cm



This binary representation of an image speaks to the operation of my cut-out process that reduces each square to on or off, as well as the square steps of digital waves making up 0s and 1s of a computer monitor. Adding to this, the ordered grid of the bitmap juxtaposes with the naturalness of the subject matter and highlights how unreal the image itself is. The bitmap/grid structure is an emblem of the Modern and artists that I reference from Cubists to Neo-Impressionists, but also rejects narrative or sequential reading by breaking the image into spatial fragments. Hence for me, the bitmap is both a formal tool to translate an image into one that I can cut with a scalpel, but also as a visual signifier that draws the viewer's attention to the origins of the image in its previous state suggesting the structure of its own making.



*Deep, Slow, Still I*, 2020, hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 90 x 123cm

As you mention, in my earlier works (2010–2014) I was cutting the outlines of tree-branches so that the image and its representation manifested similar figurative functions. Discovering the bitmap function moved the reduction process towards an abstraction where the cut marks transitioned from mimicking the subject of the image, to indexing the immaterial qualities of the actual digital photograph. Formally, this also allowed me to flatten two disparate images onto one plane just as

with Photoshop layers but in three-dimensional space to create pictures that also read as objects.

To refer back to one of your earlier points *"in recent years you have utilised the 'bitmap' as a primary tool in your methodology and it has become for you a rich and indispensable language"*; the bitmap is currently a feature in my work, but I disagree that it is an indispensable language for me. My motivation is to explore ideas and processes that best serve the innovation and production of new work, without becoming attached to anyone means to do so. Currently in my practice the bitmap is a conduit for the themes and concepts I'm interested in, but it may become obsolete as, I serve the work, it doesn't serve me.

BG

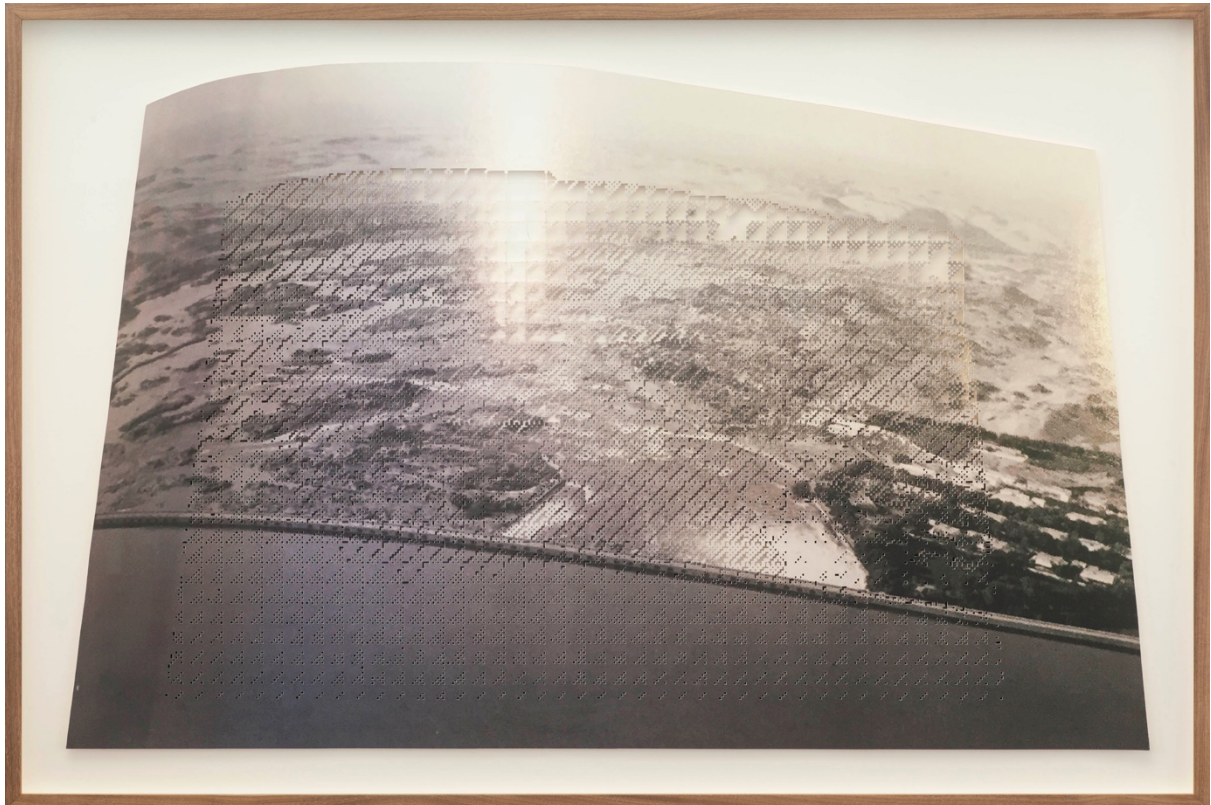
*Another thing one becomes attentive to on closer inspection is the fact that these works are in fact objects. This is another "interval state" as you say. The assumption that these works are two dimensional and pictorial in nature is exploded when one starts to observe the shadows that are cast onto the under layer, and as the thickness of the substrate becomes apparent in the cut of the paper, and indeed how the paper can warp and bend out of shape in those areas of extensive excavation! What is seemingly held to be understood as pictorial convention is rendered as something almost sculptural.*

*I think the shadows are absolutely crucial to reading these works. If the prints were framed flush together, they would effectively be images, but the depth you set between them activates this matrix of shadows revealing a third 'image' which is a conflation of the two material prints.*

CJH

Absolutely! Just as light bouncing off surfaces is what enables us to see objects, light and depth play crucial roles to the perception of the artworks' structural dimensionality. The screen-captures are of luminous images that have no intrinsic brightness or axis outside of the computer screen. Whereas the book pages are illuminated by the flash of the camera and depth is suggested by the curved spatial geometry of the page. It is only after these images have been printed, cut-out and layered that the interplay of light, shadows and surface affect the reading of the works as three-dimensional image/objects rather than representations on two-dimensional planes.





*Aerials (Sweep)*, hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 62 x 94cm

For my screen-captured video prints where there was no physical 'original' image, the relationship to shadow is introduced externally to the work from fixed spotlights in the gallery. In my series *Aerials* however, the photographed glossy pages also reflected the camera's flash, indexing a light-source that is internal to the picture from a time and place separate to the cut-out illuminated within the gallery, before the viewer. In *Aerials (Sweep)* the highlight on the page collides with the receding horizon within the image visually suggesting a sunrise, synthesising the emitter and emitted like an ouroboros snake.

Ironically the works in the exhibition that conform to the notion of "object" most conventionally via their release from a rectangular framing device, have the most infinitesimal dimensional terrain akin to inverted Braille. In *Flat Earth (Tilt)* and *Flat Earth (Sweep)*, real depth is located within the minutely etched surface of the mirror-finish copper in contrast to the unreal virtual space of the reflected gallery. Unlike in *Aerials (Sweep)*, light reflects off these surfaces in the present time of the viewer and are animated by human presence.



Installation view: *Flat Earth (Tilt)*, 2020, etched and inked copper, approx. 65 x 40cm

When I was a printmaking Fellow at City & Guilds of London Art School (2016-18) I discovered the formal qualities of these plates that I was using to print series of etchings. I began to conceive of the 'plates' as artworks, making decisions from the beginning of the process about the aesthetics of the final object, rather than displaying them as by-products of edition-making; I was pursuing the object rather than the image. The etched copper pieces in my exhibition would not produce successful prints on paper, but through this process I subvert their functionality and make them unique and corporeal.





Installation view detail: *In Bloom*, 2020, 16 hand-cut Kozo paper tiles, 210 x 320cm in total

I believe the works become most sculptural when they're installed unframed, so the space behind the paper is not delineated from the space of the viewer; the resolve of the work is not contained but site responsive. In my solo show *A Stopped World* I installed a 16-tile delicate Kozo paper cut-out entitled *In Bloom*, fixing only a top solid strip of paper directly to the wall. Strands of cut-paper drooped, twisted and hung below the visual border of the work, jutting forward and moving gently in breezes from the door. Different effects were activated between the paper and wall where it waved and warped, casting shadows that transitioned through sharp and soft peaks, creating a second drawing on the wall.

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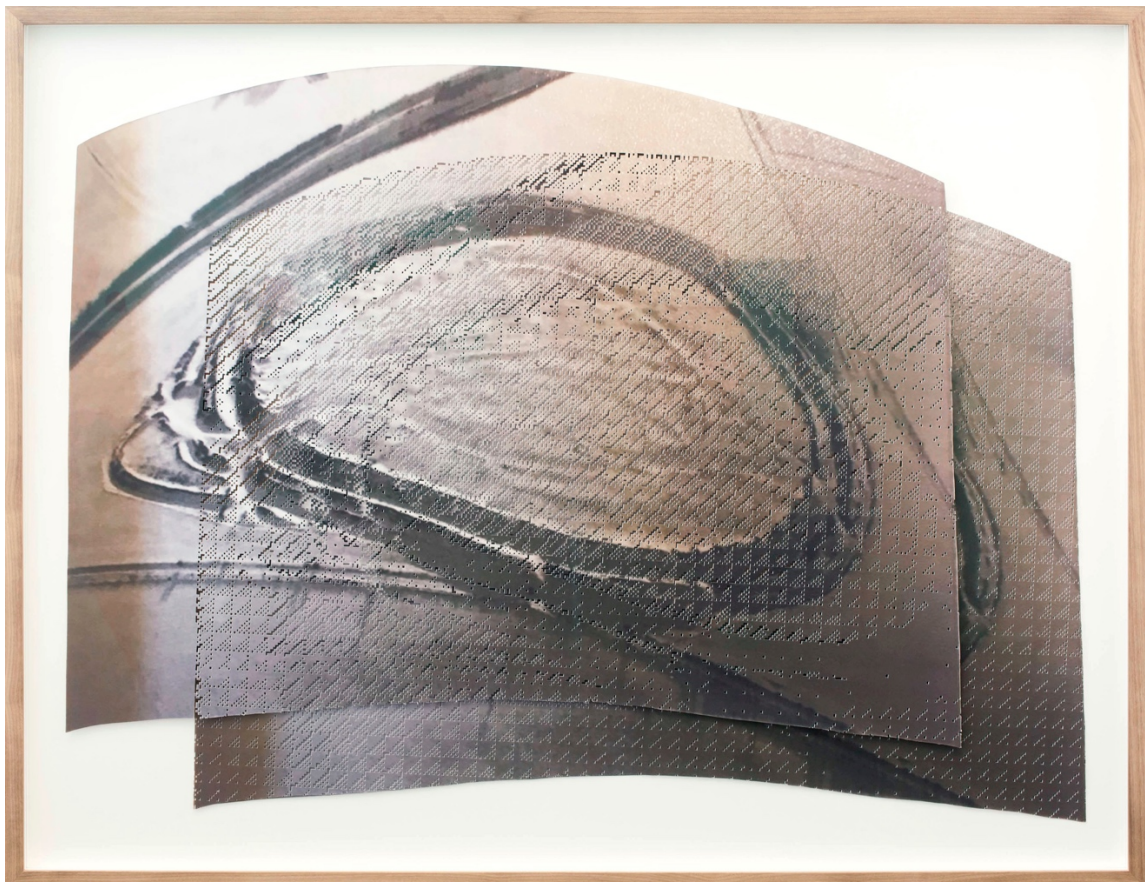
*Do you feel the same way about the cutting process? One might say this is the most essential feature of your practice. Even when you have worked, for example, with the etching technique, the act of cutting has been central to your approach. Is the scalpel dispensable too? The act of incising has certainly been your modus operandi for many years so let's turn to that now. I'm interested to know about the physical and mental demands this way of working places on you. The level of concentration required to achieve such precision must be exhausting, and one assumes you can only work at a certain*



*pace. The constant pressure you have to apply with the blade must become physically deleterious too. And yet this physical labour could easily be laser-cut in minutes and with far more accuracy. Do errors creep in as you cut and are these expected or indeed welcomed?*

CJH

As I mentioned earlier, I realised in my undergraduate studies "Using photographic prints enabled me to access any subject without recognisable translation and marry it with the manual process of cutting...", I would also add to this that the cutting process allows me to incorporate the hand-made mark into my artworks without overt expression. It bypasses reflexive personal gestures, in some ways you could say that I am at the other end of the spectrum from the Abstract Expressionists with regards to the intention behind my work, as they sought to convey spontaneity and feelings, my work is controlled, and I wish to remain relatively unseen. For me the cut mark is a more neutral mechanism to layer meaning through working with my hands (our first tool), valuing traditional skills and indexing time. I do not aim to master the image but rather bring out alternative readings of it through manual and material interventions.



*Aerials (Turn)*, 2020, Hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 75 x 97cm

This way of working (drawing) is very focused and meditative. It suits the way I am as a person; a slow, contemplative thinker who likes to look closely analyse the details and meaning in things. For me the repeated incisions that remove the body of the print become tallies of my time and attention in the present moment. I keep the cut-out substrate from each work and store it in its own dated container like an urn. Distinct to painting where one could spend all day working on a canvas only to cover it up the next day, the cut is final and revealing, all is laid bare. As the Trappist monks who dig their graves a spadeful a day, I find a humility in this way of working and can watch the hours of time slowly amass as the piece becomes lighter and the pile of cut-pixels heavier. Sometimes I fall into a 'flow state' (Dr Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi) where one experiences eternal time and loses all self-consciousness, finding a sense of egolessness and opening.



Detail: *A Stopped World*, 2020, 16 hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 57 x 88cm each

I welcome a margin of error that evidences the grapple and limitations of bodily manipulation with physical materials. I liken the process to tightrope walking where small slips are easily amplified, but when one finds the sweet spot then there is control and ease with little wobbles. The fragments in the work where elements of the design fall completely out speaks to the vulnerability of digital media; corrupted files and endless updates that make technology incompatible or obsolete. At other

times, strands of paper autonomously fall forward interrupting the space of the viewer before the surface, operating at the edge of the medium's physical means.

These idiosyncrasies and "errors" from the manual process add a way in for the viewer to recognise that the cut is not made by a laser and connect on a human level, taking the time to discover each individual incision that has an imperfect slant, in a slow engagement and attention that mirrors the making of the work.

And as for is the scalpel dispensable too? Everything is impermanent.

BG

*In your most recent exhibition, A Stopped World, you have employed an interesting curatorial convention whereby you reflect or 'mirror' one work with another. Most notably the sixteen-panel work of the same title is situated opposite an installation that appears to be a reflection (or echo) of the cutting in the first but with no image to contextualise what the cuts relate to. These 'blank' cut paper works are also unframed giving them a more fragile, ghost like quality that differentiates them whilst still perceptually anchoring them to the original work.*

*Similarly, you have replicated two other works in copper which, although not 'reflections' of the originals, stand as counterpoints to them. Or one might say they are a 'remaking' of the original rather than a duplicate?*

*I think this mirroring or remaking is a fascinating aspect of your practice. It strikes me as being a particularly exciting conceptual territory for you right now as it transcends what a singular work is capable of doing.*

CJH

Indeed, within the show there are two types of repetitions, one where digital prints and Kozo paper are cut at the same time as monozygotic twins are split from the same egg; and the other manifests in the *Flat Earth* works that are made from the stencils of the *Aerials* series, analogous to genetic mutations from digital prints through to etched copper sheets. These repetitions heighten the act of looking and focus on process over subject, adding a sense of self-referentiality and discovery to the succession of the works.





Installation View: *Default View (Deep, Slow Still I)* and *Deep Slow Still I*, 2020

The first 'twins' the viewer comes across in my exhibition are *A Stopped World/In Bloom*, followed by *Deep, Slow Still I/Default View (Deep Slow Still I)*, in the adjacent space. These works were produced by layering and cutting both digital prints and Kozo paper at the same time, before separating them to create autonomous pieces. Similar to the process of their own making – capturing video-stills as screenshots one second apart – the dialogue of the installations wraps around an elusive slither between two frames, heightening the present paradoxical moment between intangible points.



*Deep, Slow, Still I*, 2020, hand-cut layered archival pigment prints, 90 x 123cm

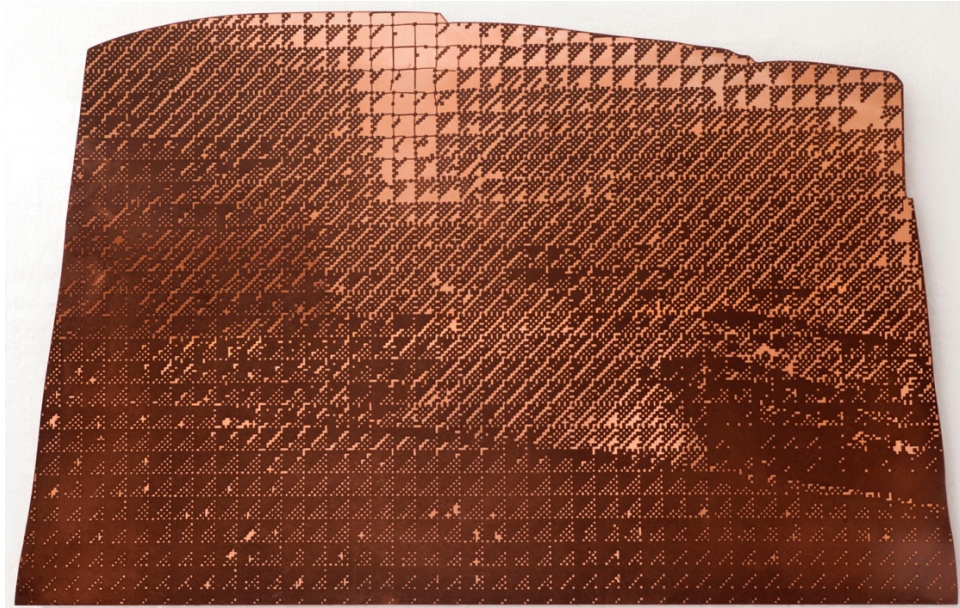


*Default View (Deep, Slow Still I)*, 2020,  
hand-cut layered Kozo paper and archival pigment prints, 90 x 123cm

Within *Default View (Deep, Slow, Still I)* and, as you mention in *In Bloom* there is also “no image to contextualise what the cuts relate to”, however I feel that the position opposite *A Stopped World* provides a figurative context as the design of each panel can be discovered in the opposite work. Rather than the content of the images being the overt conveyor, the frailty and intangibility of the cut medium speaks to that of a fleeting plume of smoke or an online image that has been reproduced so many times it begins to fail.

The second repetition is found in the *Flat Earth* copper works which are photo-etched from the stencils of the *Aerials* series. These differ in their mode of repetition, insofar as they are produced subsequently to the ‘original’ artworks. What I find interesting here is how information gets embedded into the process through each technological transformation, metamorphosing from soft to hard recording evidence of each previous digital and physical state, which becomes indexed within the final surface. So, in turn the viewer is like an archaeologist analysing traces of history through material detritus. Unlike in traditional Printmaking where the lowest numbers of an edition are more sought after as the plate begins to wear and the “aura of the original” fades (as described by Walter Benjamin), I embrace the degradation that occurs through each evolution of the process and seek the hybrid and inadvertent nature that arises from incompatible media.





*Flat Earth (Sweep)*, 2020, etched and inked copper, approx. 40 x 65cm

Within the exhibition the choice to have both framed and unframed works was very deliberate to enable an unmediated experience of the work. This reflects upon my thinking around real and digital engagements; the absence of tactility in digital images and within newer visual technologies such as Virtual Reality drive me to create works of haptic complexity. With the growing popularity of VR where the viewer is taken out of their immediate environment and transposed in a disembodied form to an alternate reality, for *A Stopped World* I wanted to create an exhibition of works with multiple perspectives and an array of blatant materiality that aroused a bodily response to human-scale, depth and detail, within three-dimensional space.



Installation view: *Deep, Slow Still I, In Bloom* (through doorway), *Deep Slow, Still II*, 2020

By bringing together myriad physical metaphors I aim to create a richness of complexity and contradictions without instruction to choose one singular pathway through the reading of the work but enable different relationships. Echoing the layers of analysis and processes that are applied to the images, through repetitions the original sources become more displaced as the primary subject is stratified through individual interpretations. In addition to the 10 pieces on the walls, the 11<sup>th</sup> artwork can be fathomed as the temporal and material dialogue that exists between them.

The mystery of what an image is, is that it's an absence of something seen, and so often we are looking at an image rather than the real thing. The Kozo papercuts are like ghosts in their lack of images, but the stencils are the poltergeists that disturb the subsequent works into existence. Or perhaps It is not the Kozo cut-outs at all that are the phantoms, but the original 'subject' of the images that has become the outlier that haunts the exhibition.

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