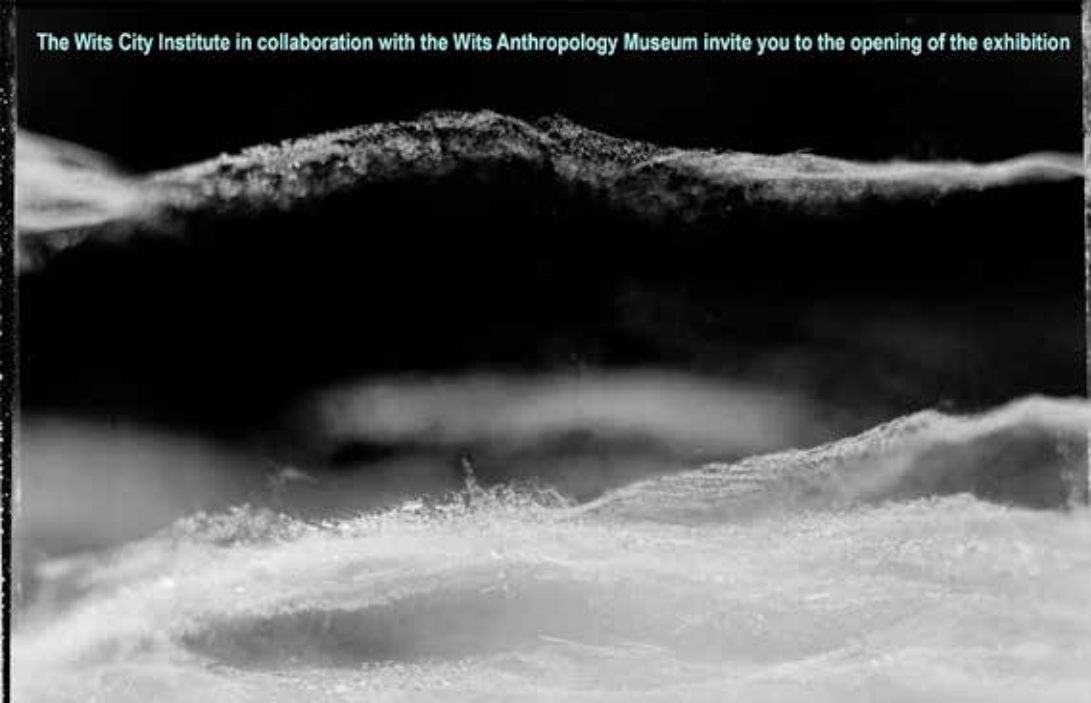
The Wits City Institute in collaboration with the Wits Anthropology Museum invite you to the opening of the exhibition



No Place

by Jean Brundrit

Date: 4 May 2016
Time: 18h00
Venue: The Wits Anthropology Museum, Central Block Building ground floor, west annex next to CB15, Wits University Main Campus, Braamfontein.

Exhibition ends 3 June 2016
For queries and to RSVP contact Patricia Hadebe 011 7179737 or patricia.hadebe@wits.ac.za

Jean will present a paper, *Visual Conversations: Reflections on the exhibition, No Place* as part of Wits Anthropology's seminar series. 5 May 2016, 11h30 to 13h00, Wits Anthropology Museum.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND JOHANNESBURG

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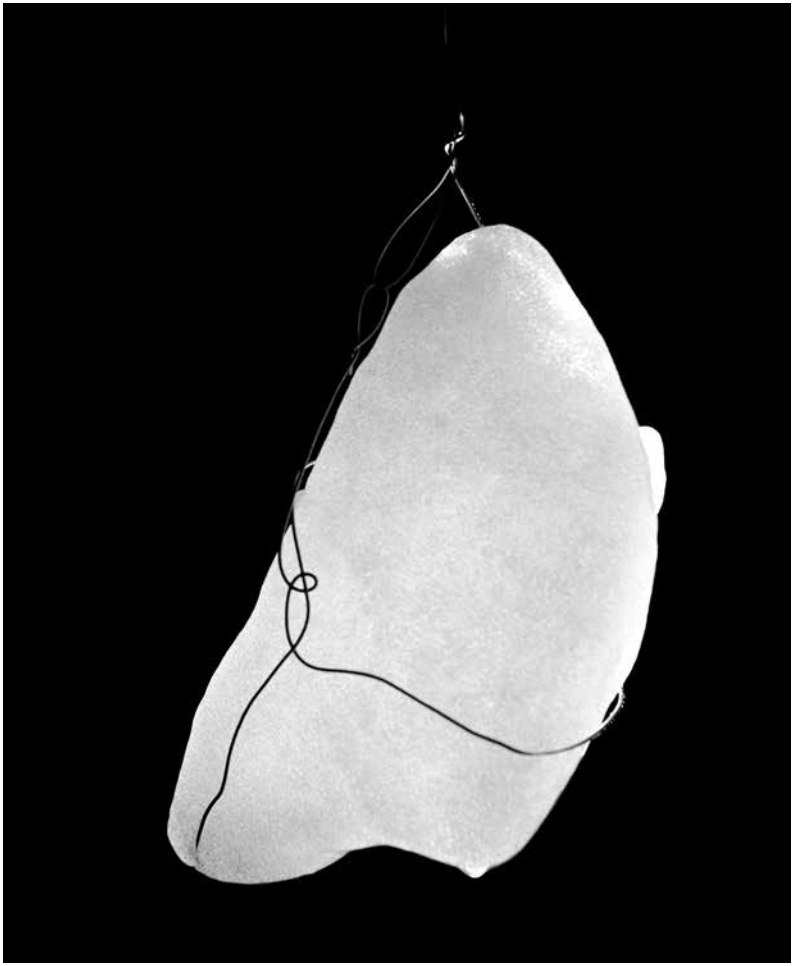
NRF National Research Foundation

From the *Thin Ice Series*
2016. Black and White Polaroid photograph. 12 x 9 cm

From the *Thin Ice Series*

2016. Black and White Polaroid photograph. 12 x 9 cm



Old Ice
1993. Black and White photograph. Printed with pigment ink on Matt Paper.
12.7 x 10.5 cm

Moments frozen

In 1993 a party was thrown aboard a research ship in Table Bay docks. The event celebrated a successful Scandinavian expedition to Antarctica involving many scientists and three research ships. On board research laboratories were open, survival gear was on display, videos of penguins were shown, and on the deck, people mingling, a buffet and beverages. In keeping with the polar theme the table centerpiece was a large chunk of glacier. Shards of this were ice-picked off and served in drinks to the guests. It was announced that this piece of ice came from the two thousand year old section of a glacier.

I was at this party and while I savored my drink and gazed at the ice, I noticed that it was filled with air bubbles. As the ice melted trapped air was released into my glass and I breathed it in - the same air that had been on the planet two millennia before. I was so taken with this notion, that I was breathing in the air of the past, air pre industrial revolution, uncontaminated air, that at the end of the evening I left with a takeaway piece of glacier. This stayed in my freezer until I photographed it. I suspended the ice, sending a flash of light through it from below.

This photograph is one of the images on this exhibition, and in a way, a starting point for *No Place*, whose theme ice, the environment and its' fragility is a recurring topic.

Conversations across time: *Big Sea*

In the black and white photograph, the first to appear in my book, *Big Sea*[1], a spike of ice supported by a thickened base, pushes up above the skyline. Light falls obliquely onto it and the surroundings, highlighting the spire's smooth paleness and casting a shadow onto another, smaller ice formation to its side. The foreground is textured with tiny ice structures, their facets reflecting brilliantly in contrast to their unlit sides. Larger pieces of wrecked ice float in the chaotic surface of the pack ice, tightly packed. The horizon line is sharply defined, light against a darker sky that foregrounds and emphasizes the left edge of the weathered shard.

The vista described was experienced and photographed by Richard Lawrence Vere Shannon (1897 – 1976) during his service aboard the Royal

1 *Big Sea* (2015) is an art work realized in book form. It comprises of 96 pages, colour litho printed, and scaled 21.8 x 15.5 cm.

Research Ship *(RRS) William Scoresby* in the Western Antarctic and Southern Ocean. It is one of a body of photographs made by Shannon between 1927 and 1930. Shannon's son and my father both worked in the field of marine science and I was asked to examine the archive with a view to assisting with its preservation. I saw the potential to include Shannon's photographs in a project I was working on, and negotiated with his heirs for permission to use these images.

Shannon titled this photograph, *Pack ice off Alexander Island*[2]. He composed the photograph so that the peak of ice with its central placement, dominates the surrounding terrain. As such it becomes more than a document of a remarkable ice form, but a marker for something else, a monument or a beacon. I assume that the ship was travelling very slowly giving him ample time to assess photographic possibilities, make decisions, prepare and take a photograph. Looking at this photograph I can see that he is considering the formal elements in the land – the light and shadow – consciously selecting and composing through the viewfinder.

Shannon was an enthusiastic amateur photographer. During his time aboard the *William Scoresby* he photographed with two cameras, a sheet film camera and a roll film camera[3]. For *Pack ice off Alexander Island* he used his sheet film camera[4]. This exposes one negative at a time[5]. Shannon processed his negatives on board, taking the time required to realize a successful negative. His care is reflected in the manner he photographed, and in his deliberately selected subjects and the formal considerations.

In reviewing his negatives from this time I organized them into groups of similar subjects. The *William Scoresby* was a research ship, part of the British Discovery Investigations Committee[6] which had whaling as a central research focus. Unsurprisingly, then whaling stations and associated activities were a frequent subject of Shannon. Another focus was an expedition led by Sir Hubert Wilkins, which entailed taking a plane and a small car to Antarctica for aerial and land exploration. Shannon recorded these undertakings, the seaplane stowed aboard the ship or taking off and landing. He also made

2 The matching of images to titles has been done using Shannon's captions on the negative sleeves and from his personal album of prints, under the guidance of his son, Dr. Vere Shannon, in an attempt to be as accurate as possible.

3 Shannon's roll film camera has a signature, two tiny hairs on the edge of the internal film window that stopped light on each exposure made with this camera. Most apparent in *Devil Peak, Table Mt etc*, on the left hand side. This indicates that his roll film was photographed on one camera.

4 I am assuming that he had only one sheet film camera but I have no evidence for this.

5 The negative is already cut to size (unlike film in a roll that would be cut after processing) which means that each sheet of negative, with its delicate, light sensitive coating is processed individually as a loose object.

6 The Discovery Investigations Committee was the agency responsible for British activities in Antarctica from 1923 – 1949.

a number of beautifully crafted portraits and group shots of members of the expeditions. He photographed the crew and scientists at work and during shore visits. One has the sense that he had an affable manner as a photographer, putting his subjects at ease and directing poses that took advantage of available light and surroundings.

The photographs that I was interested in, were the ones of weather events, polar landmasses and marine life, but what really stood out were those of icebergs and the sea. I was interested in seeing how he observed when he photographed the sea and surrounding environment. As the master of the *RRS William Scoresby*, Shannon would have scrutinized the sea as a navigational necessity. He would have considered it every time he was on watch. The view from the open bridge would have enabled an unhindered sight, as would the extended daylight hours in the Antarctic summer. When he photographed he could draw on his familiarity and extensive experience of the environs, and could make informed visual choices accordingly.

Eight decades later, I too was examining the sea, but in a very different situation. I was looking through a camera at the ocean but in the context of an art project. Shannon spent a lifetime at sea, I made a few carefully planned voyages. Of one journey, to the edge of the continental shelf[7], I wrote:

> I undertook a voyage in a small boat twenty-five nautical miles south of Cape Point. This expedition, while only a few hours and in moderate weather conditions, was long enough to make some observations about deep sea waves as they welled up and bulged, retracted and opened into cavities. Although there were generally defined swells and troughs these seemed to be an underlying form onto which endless surface variations occurred. Water collected, patterning the surface one moment, then falling away, insubstantial the next - a dynamic, heaving mass.
>
> This far out to sea no land is visible. The seascape is all one can see and this contracts and expands as the boat rises and falls, changing one's point of view. As the boat descends to the bottom of a trough, the world contracts. The next instant a vast seascape opens up around one, as the boat rises to the crest of a wave. [1]

I include this passage here as it highlights two things: looking at the form and surface of waves; and the continuous shift in one's point of view as the position of the boat changes. As I was photographing from a small boat, I planned my photographing so that I only needed to concern myself with

7 This was a commercial pelagic birding excursion into an area where birds surround working fishing boats. For me the focus was to experience and photograph deep sea.

composition and straightening the horizon. As a larger vessel the *RRS Scoresby* would have provided a comparatively stable platform to photograph from. Shannon rarely has the horizon sloping. However, he would also have experienced a changing viewpoint in the large swells of the Southern Ocean, as the ship went up and down with the sea.

There is a dramatic account of a small boat's encounter with a large wave in Antarctic waters. Ernest Shackleton[8] wrote:

> At midnight I was at the tiller and suddenly noticed a line of clear sky between the south and south-west. I called to the other men that the sky was clearing, and then a moment later I realized that what I had seen was not a rift in the clouds but the white crest of an enormous wave. During twenty-six years' experience of the ocean in all its moods I had not encountered a wave so gigantic. It was a mighty upheaval of the ocean, a thing quite apart from the big white-capped seas that had been our tireless enemies for many days. I shouted 'For God's sake, hold on! It's got us!' Then came a moment of suspense that seemed drawn out into hours. White surged the foam of the breaking sea around us. We felt our boat lifted and flung forward like a cork in breaking surf. We were in a seething chaos of tortured water; but somehow the boat lived through it, half full of water, sagging to the dead weight and shuddering under the blow. We baled with the energy of men fighting for life, flinging the water over the sides with every receptacle that came to our hands, and after ten minutes of uncertainty we felt the boat renew her life beneath us. [2]

In assisting with expeditions and scientific endeavours, Shannon was part of the legacy of British exploration in Antarctica. The times that he photographed in (1927-1930) obviously influenced the content of his work and added gravity to his visual record. However, his photographs that attracted me in particular, were the ones that stuck up conversations with my own photographs. I began to work with his archive and my images of the ocean and by combining and integrating these two bodies of images, plus some photographs taken by my father in the Southern Ocean, they form an interdependent narrative.

From these different bodies of work with their different intentionalities, I began to put together *Big Sea. Big Sea* was conceptualized as an artwork,

8 Ernest Shackleton was the leader of the Imperial trans-Antarctic Endurance Expedition of 1914. His ship, *the Endurance*, got trapped and eventually crushed in pack ice leaving the crew camping on the drifting ice. Launching the ship's three lifeboats they navigated to the closest land, Elephant Island, which is so remote that they had no chance of rescue from passing ships. As a result Shackleton and five others sailed eight-hundred miles in the boat referred to in the quote - a seven meter long lifeboat – to South Georgia with its permanent human settlement, to get assistance.

in a book format. Its physical realization into a three dimensional object was as carefully considered as the content. The book is small in size conjuring associations with something valued, a travel journal or a serious novel. The cover is deep blue. Its surface is broken by the debossed title that reads delicately, its legibility depending on the angle of illuminating light. The title letters appear to float, slightly unanchored in the cover's textured surface. Straight on, the book looks somber and conservative but when tilted the light, bright blue, page edges are visible, a whimsical reference to phosphorescence and through this to a transitory state, a fleeting moment, passing time.

Inside the cover, the images begin almost immediately and through this positioning are clearly the primary focus of the work. The convention of starting to view from the front of the book, guides the viewer through the sequenced images, in the desired order. The images connect to one another and function together more as a visual poem than a story.

In *Big Sea*, Shannon's photograph *Pack ice off Alexander Island*, described earlier in this text, is placed between pages of digital 3d laser scans, which are comprised of images made up of single pixels. The analogue photograph with its seamless, continuous tone shows signs of deterioration, chemical marks and spots in the sky. This, in addition to its slightly warm colour, signals that it is a photograph from the past. These images appear in the first section of *Big Sea* and when read together introduce the theme of time, pointing to the *time difference* between the two images. By extension reading the digital 3d laser scans next to an archival photograph also speaks of different ways of imaging. Without familiarity of the specific scanning technology, the viewer might still understand these as digital or computer generated images and therefore not photographs. The time difference is made apparent through the aesthetics of technology.

Time as subject, underlies and extends throughout *Big Sea*. An example of a direct dialogue is the placing two photographs taken of ships' decks next to each other, on opposite pages. One photograph is black and white with water coming over the side, the other is in colour with its deck glisteningly wet. Both are photographed in pale sunlight. The compositions mirror each other as the ships steam forward next to each other, decades apart.

Certain themes thread a storyline over a number of pages. An example of this starts with an image of birds which appear in a photograph flying above a dramatically lit sea. In this colour image a single bird with a large, curved wingspan stands out, foregrounded and framed by clouds beyond, points to new topic. Here the visual language, with its drama and lighting, has qualities associated with 'tasteful' oil paintings – a romanticized vision of the sea. The

mood shifts as the sequence of photographs progress – double page spreads that are filled with the sea's surface overflowing. Ships enter the pages, moving south into loose pack ice; and a large tabular ice berg appears. This is an environment inhabited by pelagic birds. The idea of birds is visualized over the next few pages – the sea surface with white foam along the lower part of the image, echoing the shape of a wing combined with close-up, abstract shapes, traces of a wing and feathers. After this is a photograph of birds on a small white island surrounded by a mass of birds in the sea and a blank page, allowing the viewer to pause, before encountering a key image – an albatross spread over four pages. From the introduction of birds as a topic to the declaration of the importance of the albatross, the conversation has spoken in diverse visual languages, at differing scales and with varying importance. Some images will be skipped over while others will elicit contemplation. This visual dialogue between the past and the more recent past is open ended, and relies on the viewers' reading, rather than prescriptive captions or didactic texts.

The interval of time between Shannon's photographing and my investigation is significant. It separates Antarctica as a place geographically distant and allows me to think about it, not only as a place existing physically on the planet, but also as a place in my imagination. It has come to symbolize something bigger, an abstract place to generate ideas, some of which have been explored in the artworks exhibited on *No Place*.

The artworks that comprise the exhibition, *No Place* are connected by a set of thoughts begun with *Big Sea* and are pursued through a series of visual investigations, that are in dialogue with each other across the walls of the exhibition space.

Mapping: *Making the Waves, No Data* / and *No Data II*

An initial investigation for this project was mapping and place. In *Making the Waves* instead of photographing waves, I scanned the waves with a 3d laser scanner, an instrument normally used for land surveying. For this project I was assisted by professional land surveyors.[9] Land is usually surveyed before it is mapped and thereafter maps are used to locate position and also to demarcate ownership.

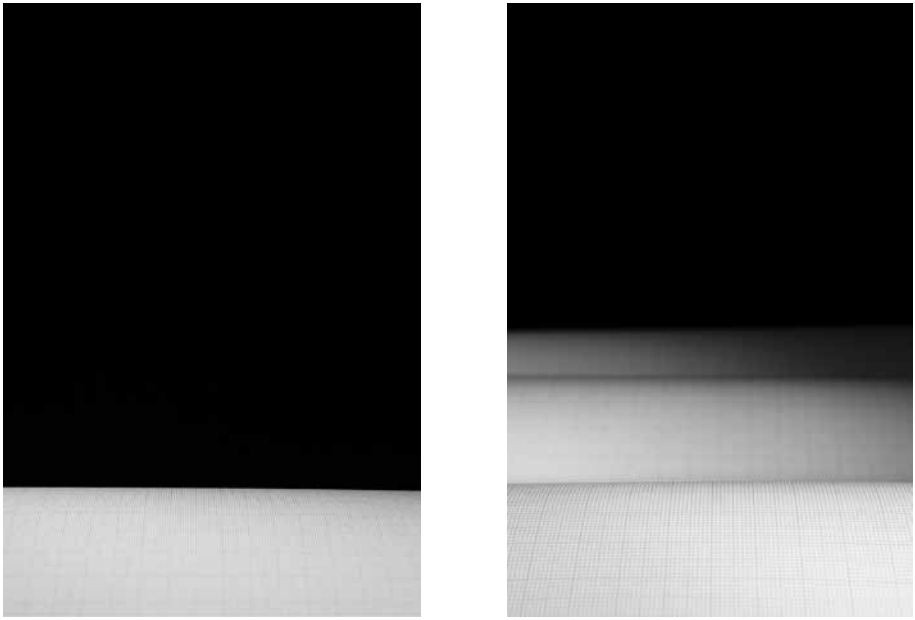
Mapping the sea was a pointless exercise in terms of creating a map that could be understood in a conventional way. *Making the Waves* comments on

9 Lloyd & Hill Inc.

the futility of trying to manage and influence something, like the sea, that is beyond human control.

No Data I and *No Data II* talk to the limitations of mapping and empirical knowledge. These photographs depict a graph paper foreground receding into a dark void. In *No Data I* the plane of focus is very specific, directing the viewers' gaze to the horizon line, the edge between the grid and darkness, the limit of visibility. In *No Data II* the viewer can see beyond the front wave-like form but over the edge, clarity dissipates into a fog of indistinctness and eventual obscurity.

The graph paper photographed in these works references the grid onto which land features would potentially be drawn to create a map. But this matrix contains no data, it is the blank space on the chart, possibly waiting to be filled in or unfillable – an acknowledgement of limits of vision and knowing.



From Left to right: *No Data I* and *No Data II* 2016. Black and white photograph. Printed with pigment ink on Matt Paper. 59 x 39.4 cm

Wave Series

The *Wave Series* photographs were taken from a small boat, which was low in the water. The images were shot while the boat was at the bottom of a swell, looking up towards the rising wave with its jagged crest. In isolating this moment and photographing from a low position, one's sense of space is compressed, bringing the wave closer and emphasizing its immensity.

Photography allows one to see (and potentially understand) beyond visual perception with the naked eye. For instance aspects of the structure of a moving wave can only be examined in detail once it is stilled with imaging technology, such as photography.[10] A waves' surface is a fleeting, temporary space but once immobilized, its surface variations and structures become visible for contemplation. The complexities of the form are revealed, and the trace of the force and energy that resulted in the structure is made manifest.

The wave surface topography replicates land surface topography. With slight modification, reframing to exclude the skyline, and ignoring the association of blue with the sea, this could be an aerial photograph of a landscape, a solid, static place.

Incongruously, although these are still images, the composition and presentation of the series together on the wall, heightens a sense of movement. The sea appears to be flowing off the edges of the pictures and travelling in opposing directions from one photograph to the next. A sense of movement is further emphasized by the large scale of the photographs. By filling one's field of vision with the photographs one can choose to have an immersive viewing experience. The sense of motion is palpable and potentially disorientating.[11]

10 Up until technological advancements in photography could freeze motion, the actual shape of waves and patterning of the sea were impossible to perceive and picture in an accurate, detailed manner. Of course the sea has been pictured as an impression of a visual observation, and in terms of art-making, pictured successfully.

11 *The Wave Series* photographs originally appeared in *Big Sea*, and therefore at a smaller scale.

Opposite and over page: *Wave Series*
2014. Colour photographs. Printed with pigment ink on Matt Paper. 59 x 73.7 cm

Seascape Series

These images, reminiscent of a turbulent storm at sea have a strange luminosity, a phosphorescent glow. The foreground explodes in violent turmoil and spray, parting its surface in places to reveal unidentifiable forms lurking in the depths. The light and radiance of the sea makes it seem otherworldly, evoking a sense of dis-ease. Contributing to this is the darkening horizon, suggesting that these are night-time photographs.

In fact, these are constructed seascapes, manufactured in my freezer, and composed to include details of chaotic ice crystals and bubbles held in static, clear ice. By photographing with a shallow depth of field, some details of the ice are crystal clear while others are blurred because they are out of focus, not because they are moving. Here any motion is literally frozen.

Old Ice* and *Thin Ice Series

In the introduction to this text I talked about acquiring a two thousand year old piece of glacier from Antarctica. I photographed the ice in 1993 and am exhibiting it here for the first time. The *Thin Ice Series* exhibited adjacent to it, is a response to my experience of breathing in air bubbles that had been trapped, frozen into the glacier until it melted. They suggest fragile worlds held encased below, emerging towards the surface, being released, then dissipating. For me they are a visual translation of the act of breathing, inhaling and exhaling, and by extension, of life.

These are macro photographs of air and ice, revealing minute detail of their frozen structures. These images make reference to ‘nature studies’ but the title, *Thin Ice*, implies a different intention to scientific documentation. The term ‘thin ice’ refers to a precarious situation. In this instance used to refer to the delicate fragility of the structures and the vulnerability of the ice, and in the context of the *No Place*, to comment on the planet’s perilous environmental situation.

The material that these images were photographed onto, Polaroid 54, is no longer manufactured and remaining film stock has already expired. This expired analogue material also speaks to a history of photography, of time elapsed and of items perished. The film is a material from the past, and because of this seemed an appropriate film to photograph onto for this subject matter, which is a revisiting and re-examination of a preceding work.

From the *Thin Ice Series*
2016. Black and White Polaroid photograph. 12 x 9 cm

Seascape Series
2016. Black and White Polaroid photographs. Printed with pigment ink on Matt Paper.
54 x 42.2 cm

Ice as a way of seeing: *In cold light*

As I worked on the ice images for *No Place* and reflected on *Big Sea*, I thought about the materiality of ice and speculated whether ice itself could form an image and what that image might look like. Was it possible to shape an image-forming lens from ice, and photograph with it?

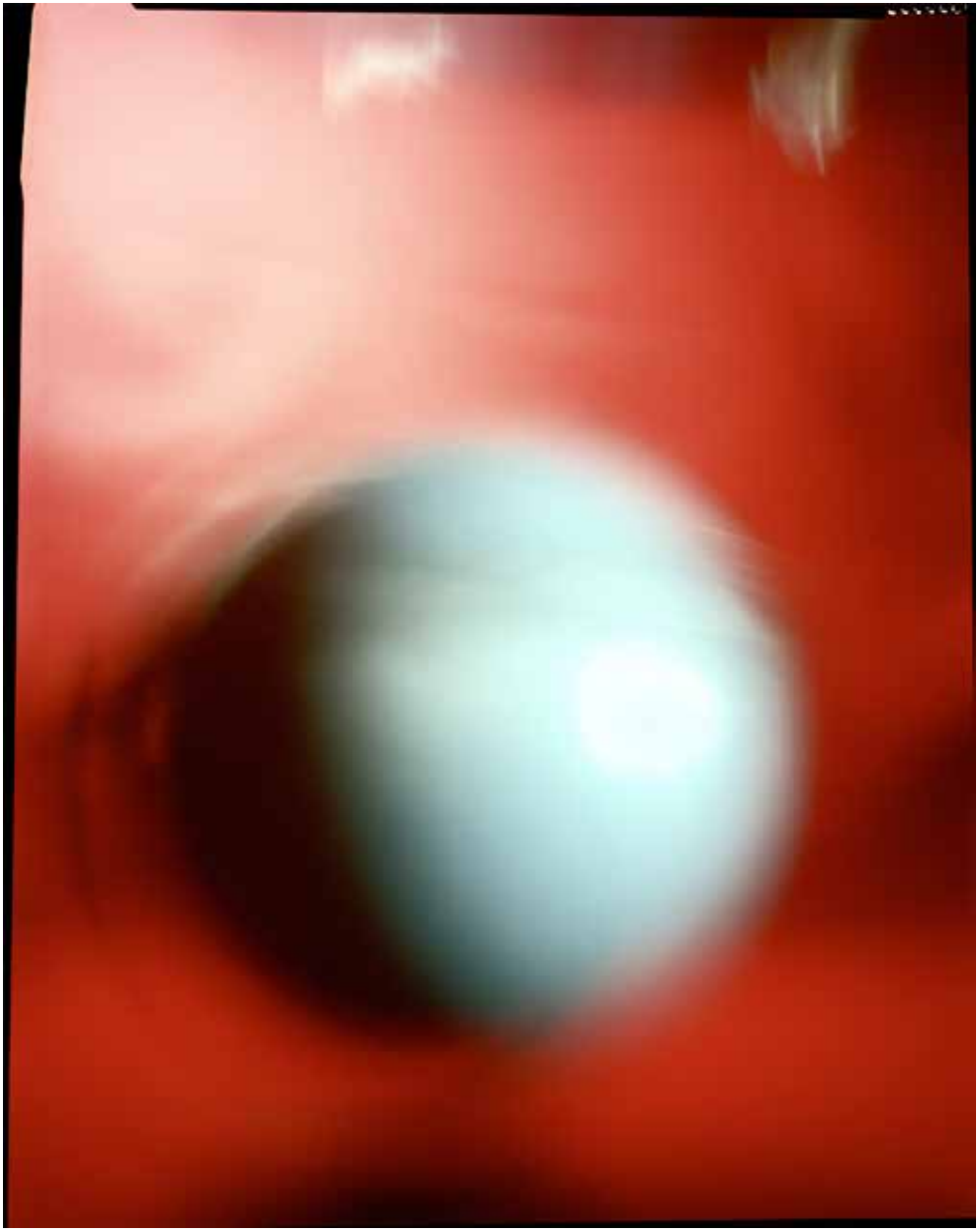
A superficial search on the internet showed that clear ice shaped into a convex lens can be used to focus the suns rays to start a fire. This is useful knowledge for survival but more importantly it was a clue that ice does refract light and possibly, when shaped, would form an image.

After reading up on optics, and single element lenses, I froze clear ice, hand shaped it and placed it into an improvised lens board on my 4 x 5 inch camera. This camera was selected as it has extension bellows that allow the lens to film distance to be altered easily, facilitating in finding the focal distance of the lens.

I attempted to photograph a world globe against a black background in a studio environment. It was difficult to decipher the images. After much adjusting the distance of the ice lens to the ground glass focus screen, and the distance of the camera to the globe I could see a partial image, or could I? During the shoot I held my hand in front of the lens. It was very distorted but I could identify my fingers when I moved them. Red light was much easier to discern.

After much experimentation and numerous attempts I made *In cold light*. For this I photographed a globe against a red background. Red is a particular colour for photographers and it demands special attention as it flattens form and has little tonal variation compared to other colours when reproduced. In the natural world it signals danger and poison. Using red as the background colour was practical and worked conceptually – an alert to pay attention, a threat. The centre of the image is occupied by the pale blue globe, lit from one side with a shadow describing the spherical form on the opposite side to the light. At the top are two white marks of scattered light. The image's overall focus is soft, with an impression of form with no defined detail.

The edges of the globe are yielding, they bleed and disintegrate into the background in places distorting the globe's spherical shape. This is particularly noticeable on the upper right hand side where the support stand cuts across the perimeter with 'sketched in' marks. The aberrations occur as light moves through the low precision lens. When comparing the ice lens image to a photograph made of the same subject with a conventional lens,



In cold light
2016. Colour photograph of a globe, taken with a lens made of ice. Printed with pigment ink on Matt Paper. 54 x 42 cm

aspects of *In cold light* can be decoded. The colour difference between the globe and the background is distinct, as are the different intensities of light in the picture. The folds in the backdrop cloth and light scattered by the highly polished bulldog clips holding it up are recognisable.

Time is a crucial factor when photographing, because the ice lens melts. This way of photographing is not very practical or sensible or easy to control. The process of making an artwork under these conditions, a warming, changing, melting world, interests me. As the lens thaws it's shape changes, it shifts and eventually falls out the lens board that held it. The image formed is blurry and insubstantial. This seems appropriate, consistent with ideas associated with visual phenomena observed at the poles such as halos, multiple 'suns' (parhelia), mirages, and the results of light bending atmosphere. It makes poetic sense that an image formed with an ice lens would be elusive, would be transient and present unusual possibilities.

I am interested in advances in visualizing technology that allow one to see things never observed before. The ice lens, while not an advance, is different technology and resulted in another way of seeing. In this vision the globe seems to be moving, a blur that we associated with recording motion - a fragile earth reeling in a toxic atmosphere.

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2. Ernest Shackleton, *South: the story of Shackleton's last expedition 1914 -17* (London: Century Publishing,1983), 174.

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Dr. Vere Shannon for sharing his father's archive and relevant information.

Justin Hill and Gavin Lloyd, land surveyors of Lloyd & Hill Inc. for their expertise and willingness to be part of an art project.

In cold light
2016

Globe photographed with a convetional lens.

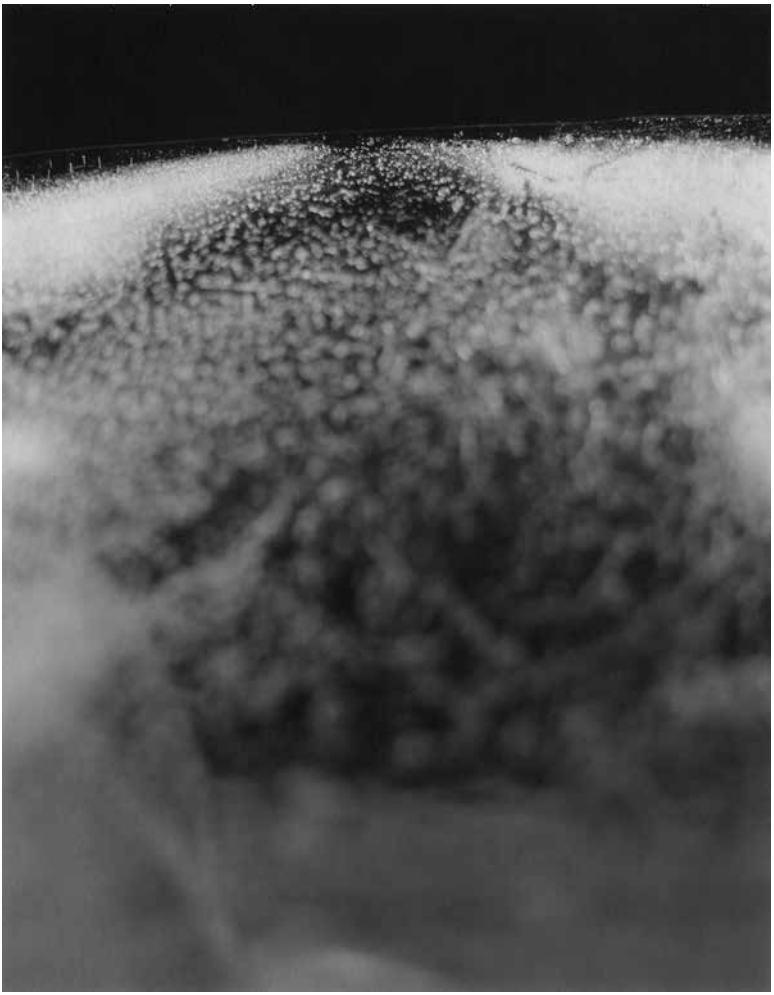
Biography

Jean Brundrit is a visual artist who works with photographic media. She has exhibited extensively in South Africa and contributed to a number of international exhibitions. Brundrit is a NRF rated researcher and is a Senior Lecturer at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town where she teaches photography. She is interested in how photography has influenced the way we understand the world and what it enables us to see.

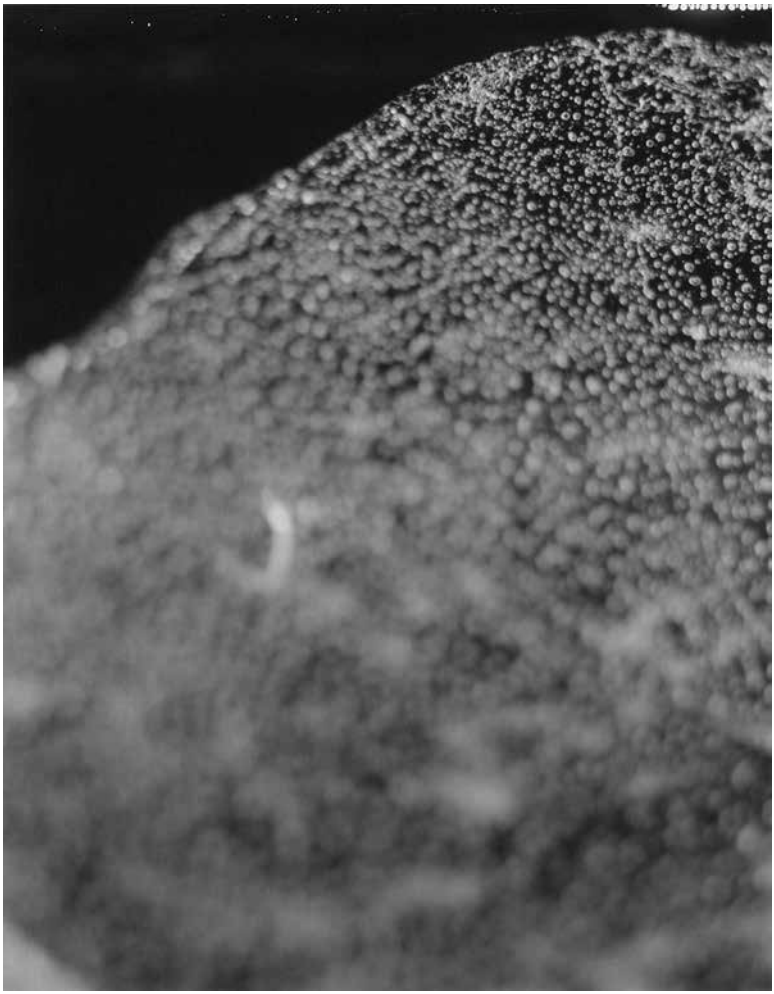
Her research interests are primarily concerned with exploring the environment and identity, specifically lesbian identity and strategies of representation within a South African context.

Her work pertaining to the environment is focused on the impact of rapid climate change and how this is represented in art, as well as the interconnectedness of humans and their relationship to the natural world.

Jean is a visiting research fellow at the Wits City Institute.



From the *Thin Ice Series*
2016. Black and White Polaroid photograph. 12 x 9 cm



From the *Thin Ice Series*
2016. Black and White Polaroid photograph. 12 x 9 cm

Installation views of *No Place* in the Wits Anthropology Museum.

Above: installation view of *Making the Waves* 2012, and *No Data*.

Big Sea unfolded
2016. Installation in cabinets. Inkjet prints. Dimensions variable.

Below: *Big Sea* 2015. Page detail showing *Pack ice off Alexander Island.* Book form artwork, colour litho printed. 96 pages. 21.8 x 15.5 cm.

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