

*holding a torch up to my skin to
see what my insides look like*

by Jet Withers

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holding a torch up to my skin to see what my insides look like

The body of work created over the last year has been an intuitive and material-based journey into the “vibrant matter” of gelatine as well as my own reflections on childhood trauma (Bennett, 2010). This process has revealed relationships between light, darkness, shadow, abjection, and the body within the work. Through these themes and the crucial relationship between maker and material I have tried to map dark places of trauma, and some way provide healing.

When the work began it sat purely between the abject body and the structures that govern it, hold it, and disrupt it. I was interested in looking at the mediation of boundaries between the body and external structures. As the making evolved light kept on creeping into the work: the shadowy grid seen through a gelatine sheet, how coloured gelatine sheets glowed when lit from behind. Once light was a part of the work so was darkness.

When I was a child, I felt like I had a hole in my chest and in the darkest hours of the night I would fall into this hole. It would start with a pulling feeling in my chest, nothing to distract from it, nobody to see. Until I was

consumed by it; wrapped in its inky blackness. This work seeks to acknowledge that black hole in my chest as a child. Doing so through process-based work, where processes become therapy. Honouring the small girl who was lost in that hole by slowly and gently bringing wonder and light inside. Using the body and structure to remain present. In this way working from the inside out; mapping the unmappable.

Experimenting with a gelatine has been crucial to this process. Its materiality has guided the work, provided limits, and opened conceptual doors through its own inherent qualities. The gelatine is both bodily and not. It is soft when melted but set when cooled. It has a life span that ranges from a gelatine sheet to a puddle of liquid mould. In the same way that one steps into memories and times in order to heal them, I am intervening at various stages of the gelatine's life.

As I have continued to work with the gelatine, dancing between body and structure, light and shadow has become an important component to the work. It is almost as if like a child I am again holding a torch up to my palm to try and see what my insides look like. Tracing my veins and watching the glow of my flesh. Looking at my shadowy hand moving against the wall. Thus, light becomes a way to pass the threshold from outside to inside, and shadows to trace where the light could not reach.

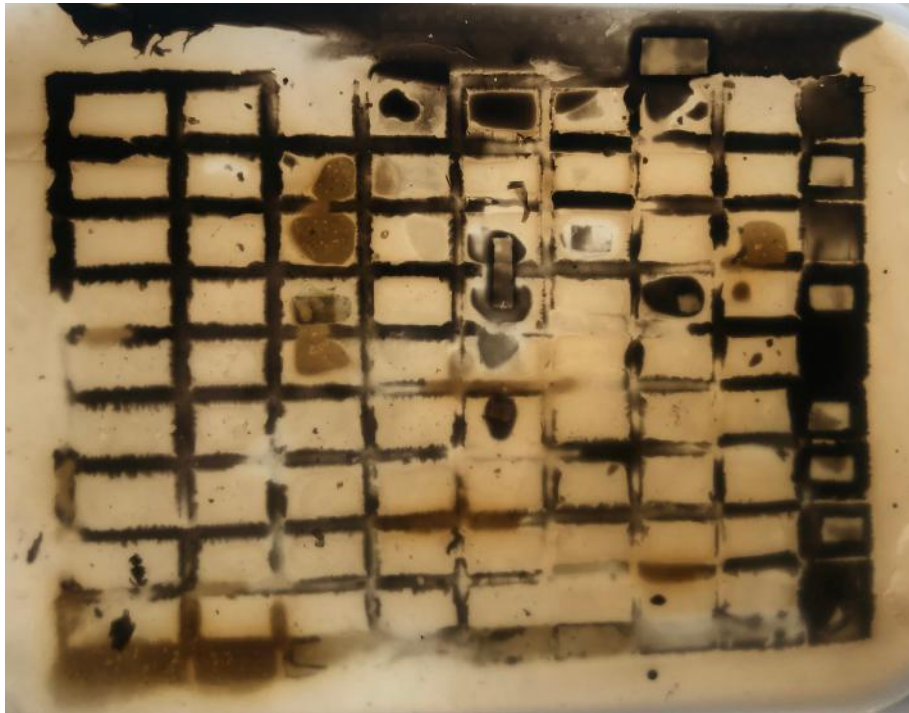
Close up of *'Wrinkled sheet'*,
2021,
dehydrated gelatine with
pigment, 594 x 841 mm



Background

I started working with gelatine in May last year for a screen-printing project. It was obviously in the middle of lockdown and thus we were asked to use whatever materials we had on hand to interpret the idea of a stencil. I chose to use gelatine because it could be both the substance one puts through a stencil but also the stencil itself when set. That was the beginning of my relationship with this domestic ingredient. Gelatine reminded me of childhood birthdays with jelly boats made from orange skins with chocolate sails, but the more I worked with the material the more it lent itself to expressing something about the times we were living in.

In the early gelatine works there is a reoccurring theme of a dissolving grid, including the grid inherent to a gelatine leaf (see the next few pages). Perhaps, it speaks to trying to find structure in the slippery present of a pandemic. A present where bodily anxiety or felt anxiety has been vastly increased by the global pandemic. We have become much more aware of our “leaky” bodies now than ever before. Of their permeability. Of their mortality.



*'Experiment with gelatine I', 2020,
gelatine, pigment and plastic tray,
350mm x 230 mm*



*'Experiment with gelatine II', 2020,
gelatine, pigment and ceramic tray,
170mm x 130mm*



Materiality, abjection and control

Due to a host of reasons, I've felt like I have been living in a slippery present for most of my life. The solid and steady feel more like exceptions I could count and name by months. Thus, although the pandemic brought that feeling into sharp societal relevance, this grasping for structure didn't feel new.

Kristeva defines the abject as the ambiguous space between Self and Other and thus "the place where meaning collapses" (1982). In relation to the body, abjection is the disgust we feel at seeing a hair on the floor although that hair was until very recently attached to our bodies and unquestionably a part of ourselves. We feel deeply uncomfortable about the ambiguous state the hair is in. It is no longer Self but is hardly Other. Divorced from its domestic context gelatine finds itself in a similar space when used as a material to make art. Even in its domestic context gelatine is abject.

Gelatine is made from the boiling down and clarifying of animal skins and bones. Yet this is forgotten when we use it in the kitchen, there exists a cognitive dissonance which is only questioned in seeing the words "porcine" or "bovine" next to the ingredient list. Food grade gelatine comes in two forms, a powder and as a gelatine leaf. Both of which do not connote being an animal by-product in a similar way to anything else we consume.

*'Structured sheet I', 2021,
dehydrated gelatine and pigment,
250 x 630 mm*

It is only when plain gelatine is dissolved in warm water and the distinctive smell fills the air, the smell of a crease or of a wet dog that we can remember gelatine is in fact collagen. Therefore, even in the kitchen the material “does not respect borders, positions and rules” (Kristeva, 1982). Within its domestic context gelatine is used to make liquids more solid. In this way to set or to hold (together). This quality is both honoured and disrupted in my work. Without gelatine’s holding qualities my sculptures would not exist yet at the same time I allow the gelatine sheets to mould and give in to puddles of smelly secretion. Outside of the domestic context the gelatine’s agency, it’s aliveness and role as collaborator in the artmaking process suggests an abjectness. A dissolving of subject and object, of maker and material.

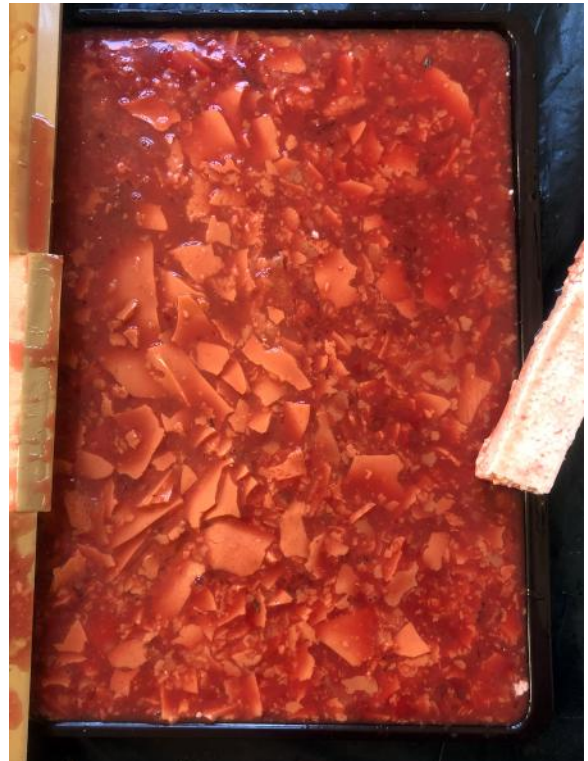
Working more intuitively alongside the gelatine has meant that the gelatine has opened conceptual doors along the way and steered the project as much as I have. Through the making trying “to give voice to thing-power” (Bennett, 2). ‘Thing-power’ being the agency that the gelatine holds; its potential to steer the work in unexpectant ways as an ‘actant’. In this way I wish to become “complicit with the material” (Lange-Berndt, 2015).

This intimate relationship takes place in the process of making and it not always accessible to the viewer. Penny Siopis considers this in relation to her glue paintings and sees the process as a kind of performance art saying that “there is a live event and then there are residues” (2018). The dehydrated gelatine that carries the cavities of its mould, the cracking and warping as it peels away from its tray or acetate backing becomes the residue of its process. The map of the gelatine’s precarious dance between decomposition and dehydration.

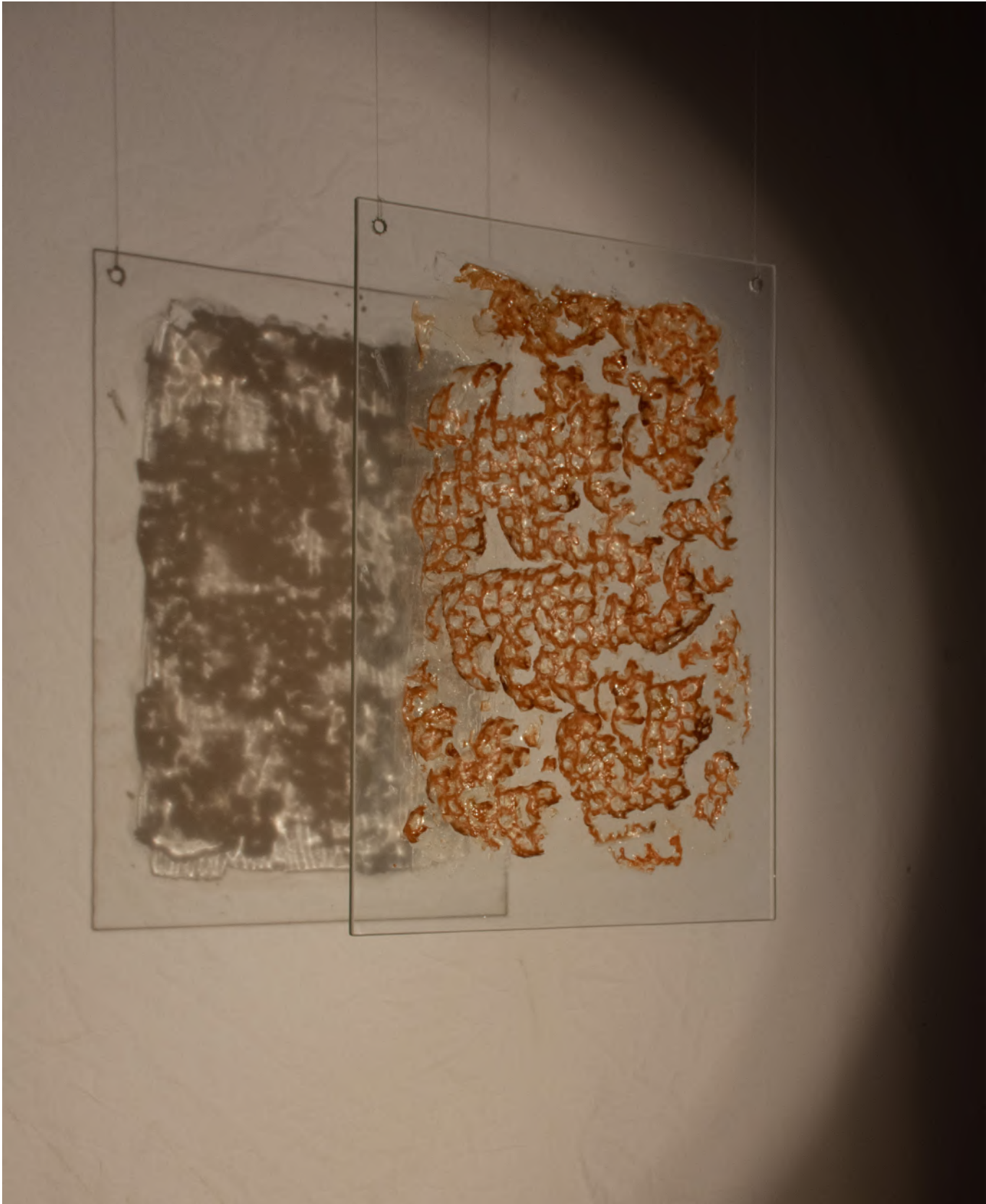


Process photograph of congealed gelatine in the bottom of my mixing bowl.

Process photograph of molten gelatine that has moulded beyond use, liquid and sweet smelling.



*'Moulded gelatine on glass I',
gelatine, pigment and glass,
297 x 420 mm*



*'Moulded gelatine on glass II',
gelatine, pigment and glass,
297 x 420 mm*



The last two artworks illustrate the importance of timing in pressing pause on the moulding process. The mould eats away at the soft gelatine but in dehydrating the gelatine we can preserve the record of that process as in the dry sheet one cannot see the mould only its affect. This gelatine sheet which acts as a trace for a live performance of degradation, speaks directly to abjection. Kristeva postulates that the corpse is the ultimate symbol of abjection (1982: 3). It is where the line of mortality has engulfed its subject, and we are reminded how close to that border we are. Thus, an eaten away gelatine sheet acts as a veil between presence, subjecthood and decomposition.

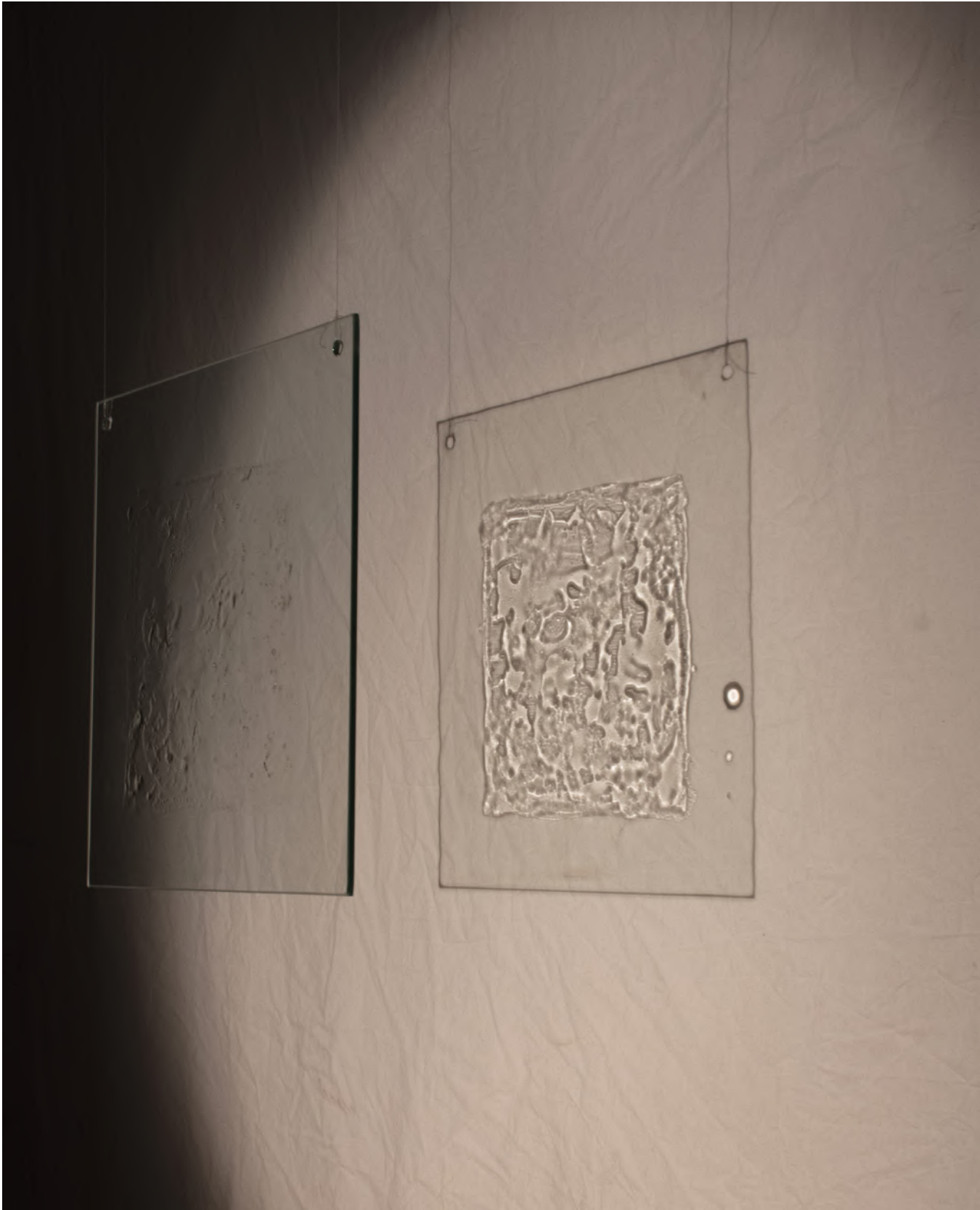
Process photograph of powdered gelatine dissolving.



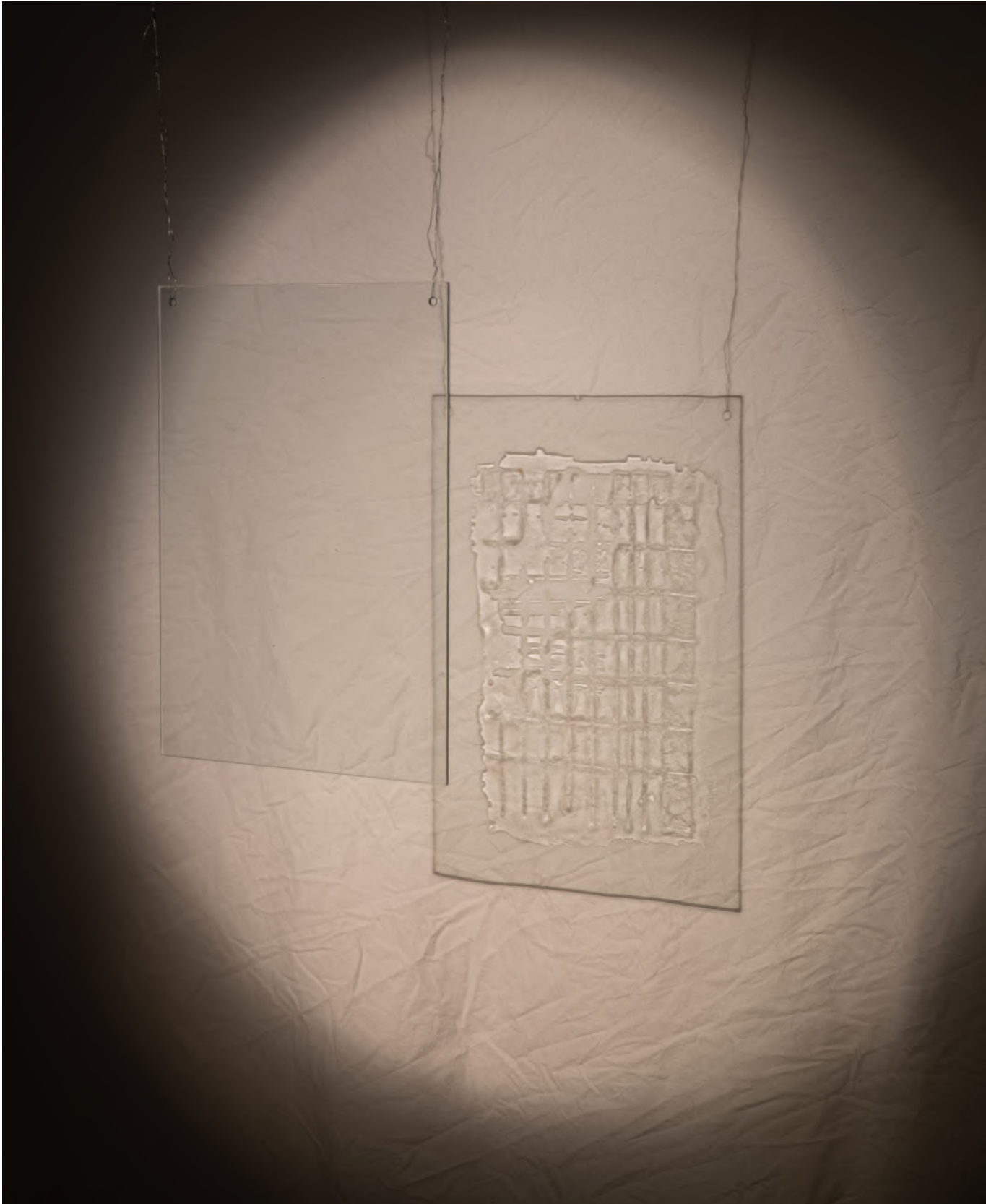
Light/Shadow

In Victor Stoichita's *A Short History of the Shadow* the author speaks to the myth of the origin of painting or art as set out by Pliny the Elder (1997). According to Pliny the first painting was someone's shadow traced over by a line. And this served as the beginning of the "absence of the body; presence of its projection" theme present throughout art history.

The shadow has functioned as an immaterial double for a very long time. Stoichita reminds us that the shadow was how the Egyptians visualised the soul, the Ka (1997). The shadow is a double, a translation dependent on the existence of its caster and therefore another subject-object relationship. But when the shadow does not appear to follow its caster like in the 'glass paintings' series our understanding of this relationship is troubled. The light shone through the glass is interesting as it is not a true shadow, it both concentrated light and obstructed light. Existing somewhere between shadow and light.



'Gelatine painted on glass III', 2021
gelatine and glass
300mm x 300mm



'Gelatine painted on glass II', 2021
gelatine and glass
297 x 420 mm

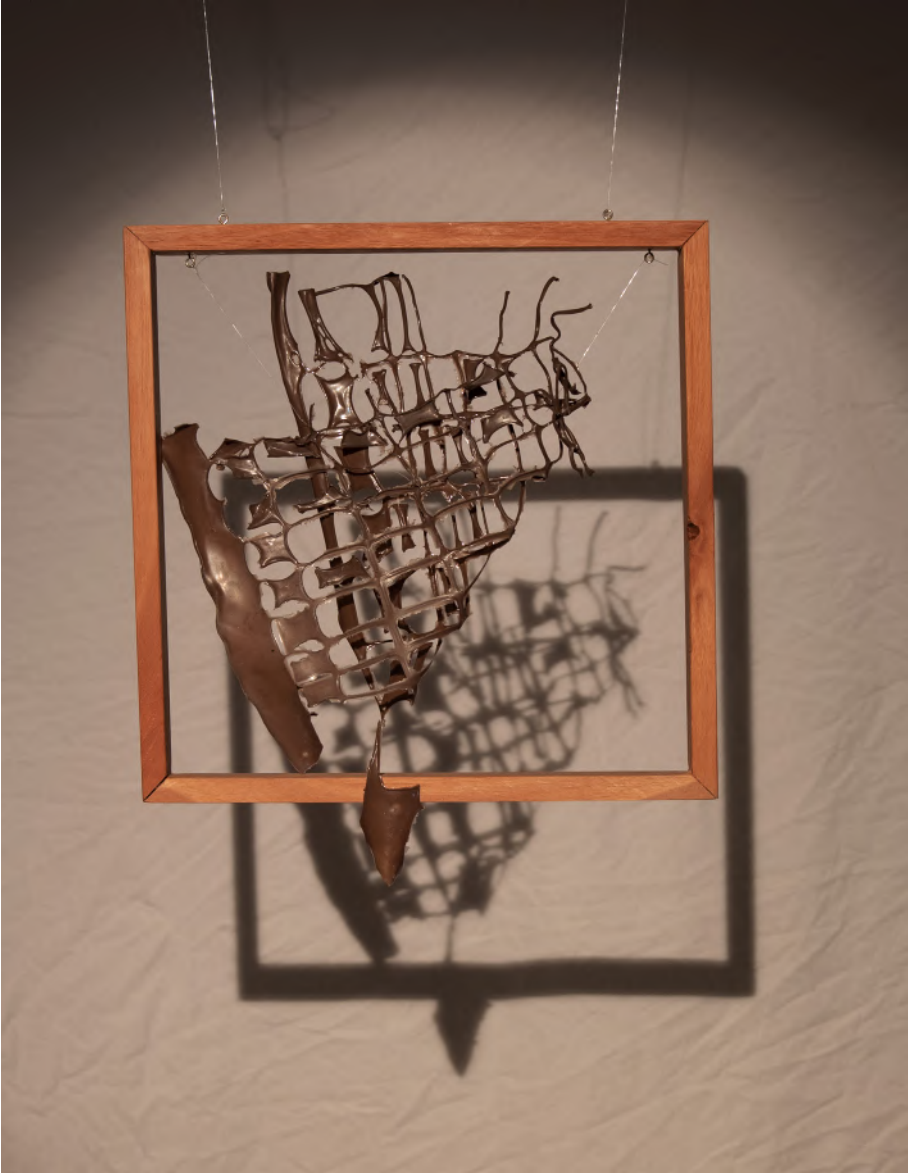
It sounds contradictory but “in the place where meaning collapses” I think it can also be found (Kristeva, 1982: 2). The ambiguity of shadows provides space for new meanings and translations. When speaking about William Kentridge’s work Andreas Huyssen speaks about how shadows encourage our imaginations to fill in the gaps that they leave. In this way they provide us with a “productive ambiguity” and “teach us to negotiate the blind spots of vision and knowledge” (2013: 14).

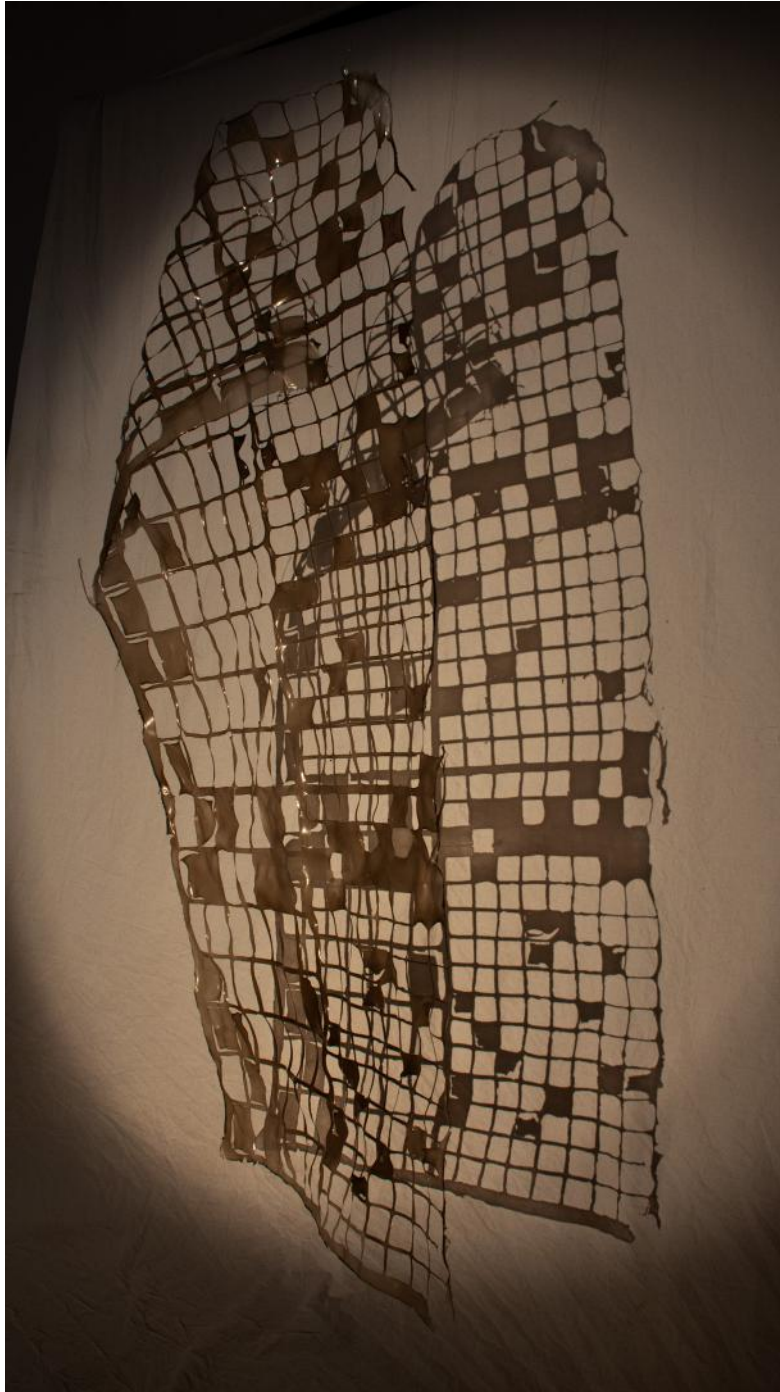
The multiplication of form between the shadow and structure in the *Silhouettes* series builds tension between the sense of holding together and falling apart: catching the viewer between the shadow and the original. This relationship illustrates how light and its absence, shadows provide another layer or way to map the unmappable and the in-between.

‘Gelatine silhouette I’, 2021
Gelatine, pigment, wood and fishing gut
300mm x 300mm (size variable)

‘Gelatine silhouette II’, 2021
Gelatine, pigment, wood and fishing gut
300mm x 300mm (size variable)









'Gelatine silhouette I', 2021
Gelatine, pigment
850mm x 1800mm (size
variable)



The Void and the Body: Mapping the unmappable

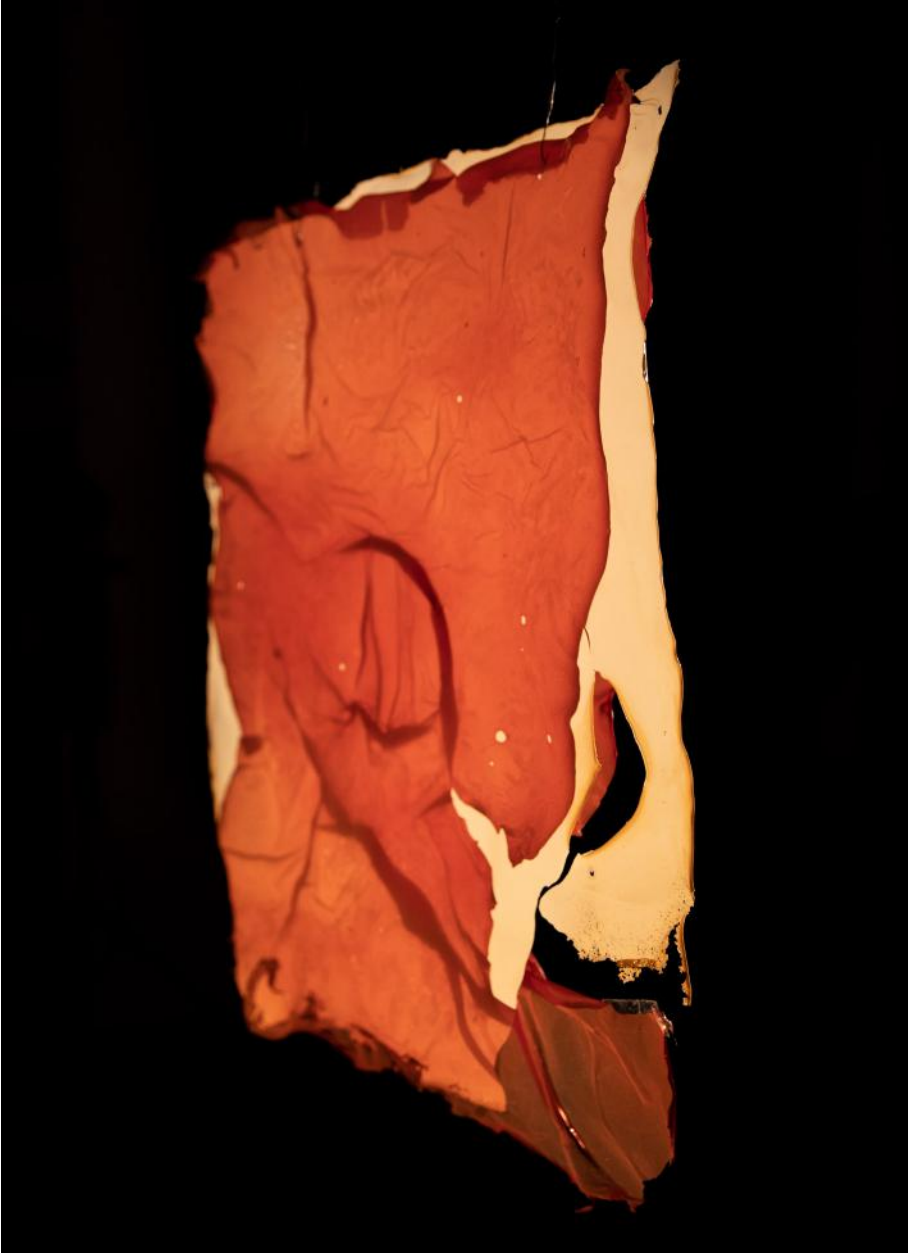
Maps are a way of claiming spaces and territories and although this has had an incredibly problematic history in the colonial project, personally the act of claiming space, especially if it is an internal space of trauma, has the potential to be healing. Luca Cerizza speaks to how “drawing a map is a way of imposing order” and I think that the presence of grids and rectangular forms and edges in my work reflects this (2007).

However, Cerizza also says that maps become objective synthesized images that are “stripped bare of all the strength, hope and accomplishments that made [the map] possible” (2007). The ‘vibrant materiality’ present in the gelatine and the agency that it has been afforded in the work means that ‘the strength, hope and accomplishments’ of the material are evident in the work. They are evident in the aliveness of the gelatine, the bodily references enhanced by the curation of the work with light.

In the chartering of journeys to unseeable and traumatic spaces the body and the abject have a very specific role to play. Their job is to keep the feet of the traveller firmly placed on the ground. Present. According to Jeannie Fonte the presence of the body is undeniable in the 'two states of pain and live performance'. In these states the body must be acknowledged because without the body those two states would not exist (1992: 251). However, the abject also pulls us back into our bodies. The transgressing of boundaries reminds us of the limits of our own and their potential permeability. The abject feeling of disgust and intrigue is such a bodily one that it requires us to be inside our bodies to feel it. Staying present within the body allows me to step into the void safely.

The unseen. The inside.

*'Red and cream layered sheets',
2021
Gelatine and pigment
600mm x 850mm*

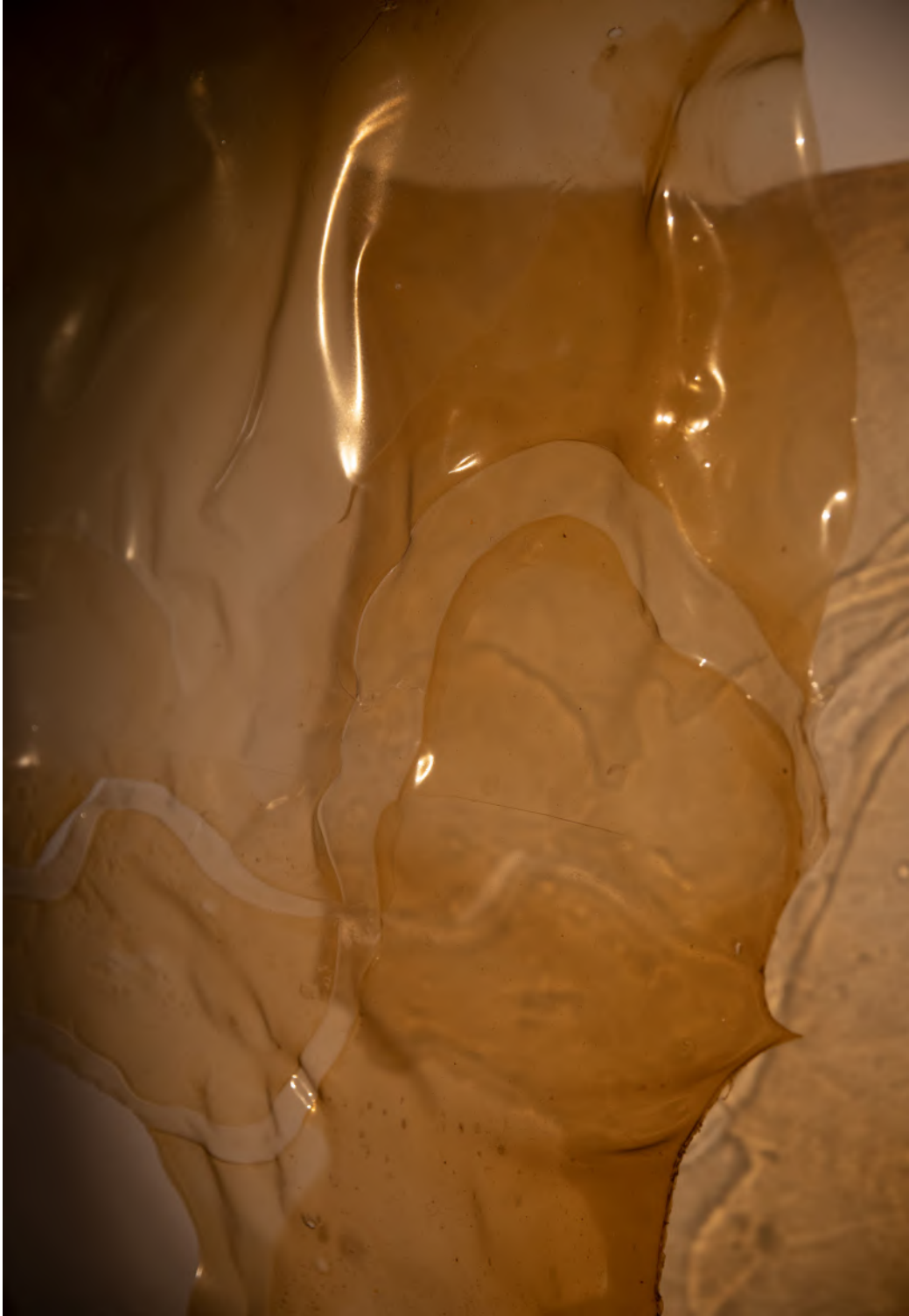


This work is both cartographic in its mapping of process and material-based ways of working and thinking. But it is also phenomenological. And forms part of a reflection on trauma and ways to process trauma. Due to a traumatic event that happened when I was a young child, I felt like I had a ball of dark matter in my chest while I was growing up. My own black hole. And although I didn't set out to make this work about it, the gelatine led me to the light and the lit gelatine needed the darkness.

Montello speaks about four psychological spaces in relation to the size of the human body in space. These spaces are the figural, the vista, the environmental and the geographical (1993). Only the first three are important for this essay. Figural space is smaller than the human body and can be observed from one location. The metaphor of the hole in my chest would be figural space. Vista space is bigger than the human body but can still be understood through observation from one location. A room is vista space. Lastly environmental space is much bigger than the human body and cannot be understood from direct experiences from one location. In order to map a neighbourhood or city many different observations from different locations would be needed (Yuan, 2020: 260).

'Projected sheet I (red)'
2021
gelatine and pigment
600mm x 8500mm





I am theorising these three spaces as a way to explain the manifestations of my own personal void in the making and curation of my work. When describing the black hole, it is safely in the realm of figural space. Yet when I was inside it, it was all encompassing: environmental space. Thus, demanding many different ways to observe it, all grounded in the body and light. And finally, the exhibition space becomes the vista space iteration of the void. This dark room becomes an externalisation of the black hole, and a way to allow other people into it.

*Close up of 'Projected sheet II
(yellow)',
2021,
gelatine and pigment,
850mm x 1200mm*



To close

The impermanence of the material, the exhibition and the use of light and shadow is significant. Gelatine is impermanent in all of its forms, the least when dried but even then, one could never consider it archival. But this feels right, an impermanent material curated by light and shadow. These metaphorical ephemerality extend to the idea that although this is important work that I am doing in the processing of trauma it is not permanent.

*'Projected sheet II (yellow)',
2021,
gelatine and pigment,
850mm x 1200mm*

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A Studio Visit with Jet Withers

by Margot Dower

Jet Withers works with gelatine primarily, though one could say that her practice encompasses mould, light, shadow, wood, structure, dissolution of structure, water, sugar, deep time, the home, control. Among her works exhibited in December 2021 are screens of gelatine, mounted between glass panes, sculptural works where the gelatine has molded to specific forms, larger, flatter works where a thin layer of gelatine has been poured, and structures like doorways or windowframes where gelatine is suspended. All of these, of course, subject to change, as the gelatine tends to remain fugitive: susceptible to mould, changes in humidity, dissolution.

In Withers's work, nothing is stable or fixed. Conditions must carefully be met to allow the gelatine to attain a shape. If the conditions are not sustained the work will change, bubbling imperceptibly and dissolving into a lattice of tiny holes. If the conditions are not sustained things change. In some ways this makes her work an exercise in catching a gesture, the specific way the gelatin was dissolved and poured and dried. The object holds within itself the circumstances of its own making.

When I visited Withers's studio she was working on a triptych of

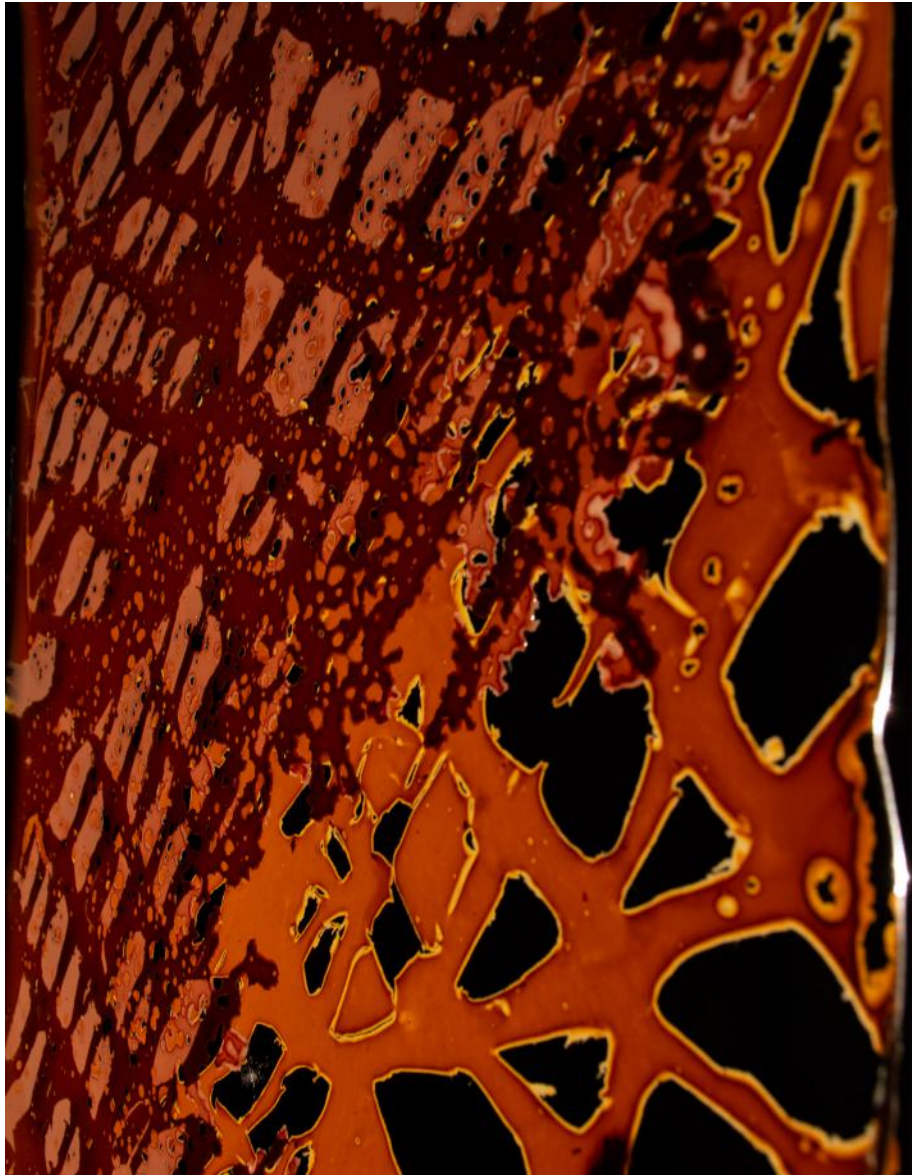
Close up of 'Structured sheet II', 2021, dehydrated gelatine and pigment, 250 x 630 mm

poured gelatine - meant to dry flat- which had curled while it dried, corners reaching up towards us. What she really needs, I thought, is a studio with perfect controlled conditions, a million dehydrators, fans and spotlights. And then I thought about the sheet of gelatine on the floor and how much work has gone into making it do something specific: remaining static. The amount of work it takes Withers to achieve compromise between her work and her intentions is, perhaps, where some of its most interesting aspects lie.

There is something oddly romantic in the pursuance of a medium to its natural conclusion. "I see so much of the process that nobody else sees," Withers remarked in conversation. I think of someone cloistered away with only one thing to work with. I think of stretching something solid, finding the places where it becomes flexible, pliant. The places where it snaps off. The refusal to compromise the material speaks to the setting of conditions for making the work, the construction of the arena where the push and pull between control and release will take place.

In exhibition, Withers shows "live" gelatine, unmolded and undried. I am reminded of chunks of seaglass, the sweet smell of something slowly decaying, wondering if it is changing imperceptibly while I am there. Careful looking and attention are rewarded here, where time stretches: what happens when you look through the gelatine leaves, finding patterns and shapes in the shadows they cast, what happens when you forget about the work for a week, or a semester? How do you stabilize something that wants to move?

Margot Dower
November 2021



Acknowledgments

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Close-up shot of