

Storm Warning



Tom Falconer



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Exhibition catalogue
2025
Tom Falconer
Michaelis School of Fine Art

Thank you

Mom & Dad

Nina & Pete

My Collective Supervisor
(Dom + Inga + Xhanti)

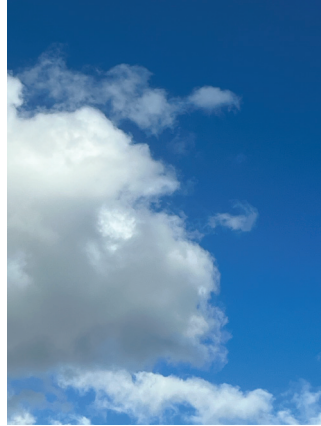
Charles Van Rooyen

All other Technical Staff

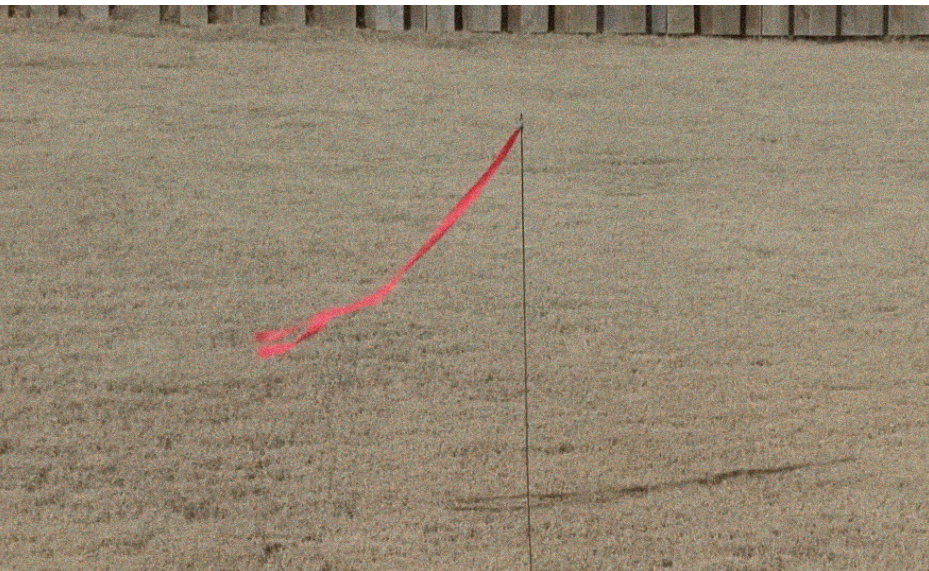


To gaze

- to bind
- to tether
- to cower
- to face
- to hide
- to stand
- to thrash
- to weigh down
- to bolt
- to suspend
- to close
- to open
- to predict
- to ignore
- to imagine
- to consider
- to laugh
- to cry
- to drown
- to dry
- to make
- to despair
- to dream
- to proceed
-



Born into a highly politicised family in a moment dominated by rainbow nation euphoria, I felt as a child that South Africa was at the helm of the global march towards equality. That the legacy of resistance fostered here would overflow into the world, stamping out the remaining vestiges of discrimination as it went. This national myth was pivotal in shaping how I understood myself to fit into the world. The future was bright, and I expected the present to take after it. As I have grown, I have felt the reconciliatory dream slowly dying within the national psyche, as the gap between promises and material change has become exceedingly apparent. The failings of liberation are plain to see, but the task of stomaching the reality of a false dawn has proven thoroughly disorienting and has left me wondering how it is that the winds of change have died down so abruptly.





"My own effort is to try and bear witness to something that will have to be there when the storm is over, to help us get through the next storm. Storms are always coming."

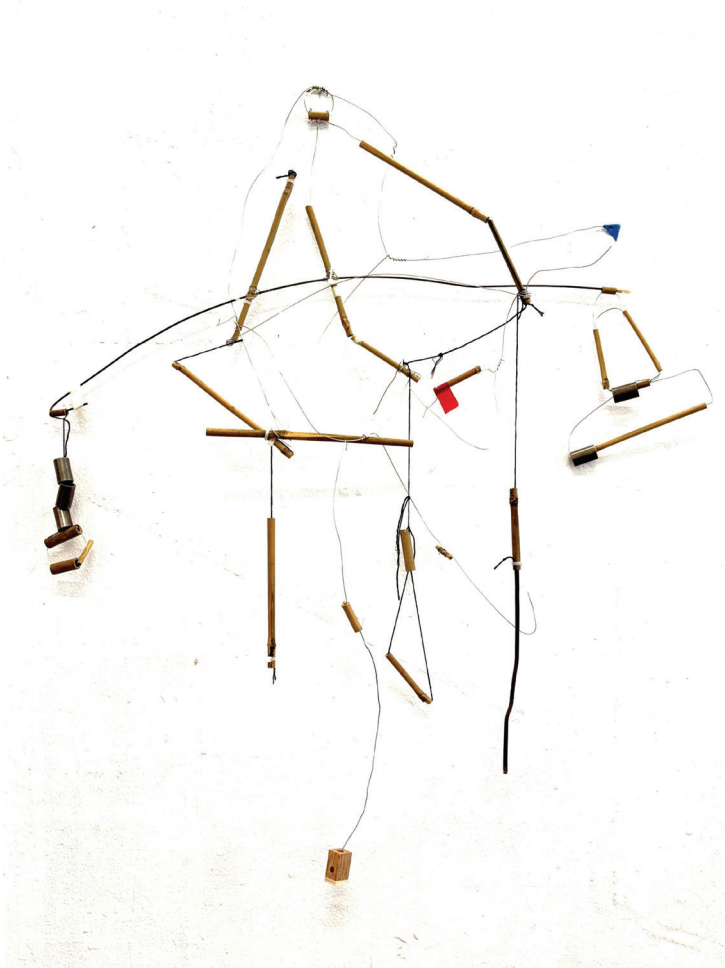
*James Baldwin
(Pavlić, 2015:3)*

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I have spent my time at university grappling with my own existence amidst the flux of the global present and the complexities of our national history. I have many questions, most of which centre around the collision between systems of power and an individual's experience of life. These questions have led me to a series of readings, many of which pinpoint the capacity of oppressive systems to adapt over time while maintaining their inherently corrupt character. Such shapeshifting conjures the possibility of a series of false new beginnings; a promising future continually delayed. Which makes me wonder: if the character of the world around us is so pervasively fraudulent that it largely absorbs moments of potential progress, how can we expect widespread change to take hold? This question feels especially relevant in a society where most people exist in a perpetual state of vulnerability, far away from the levers of power.

As I have wondered about the loss of momentum after moments of rupture, the winds of change have picked up in the opposite direction. I have found myself not only grappling with the inertia of promised futures dissipating but also searching for ways to process the unstable nature of the ground upon which we stand. In this pursuit, the writings of James Baldwin have been a beacon of hope. Charged and dense as they are, they offer a blueprint for the probing of a surrounding culture, both in moments of rupture and in times when momentum has died down. The epigraph that begins this text, encapsulates his reckoning with his duty as a writer in a moment that bears sharp similarities to the one we now find ourselves in. This quote along with his broader usage of poetic analysis ultimately shaped the direction of my inquiry.

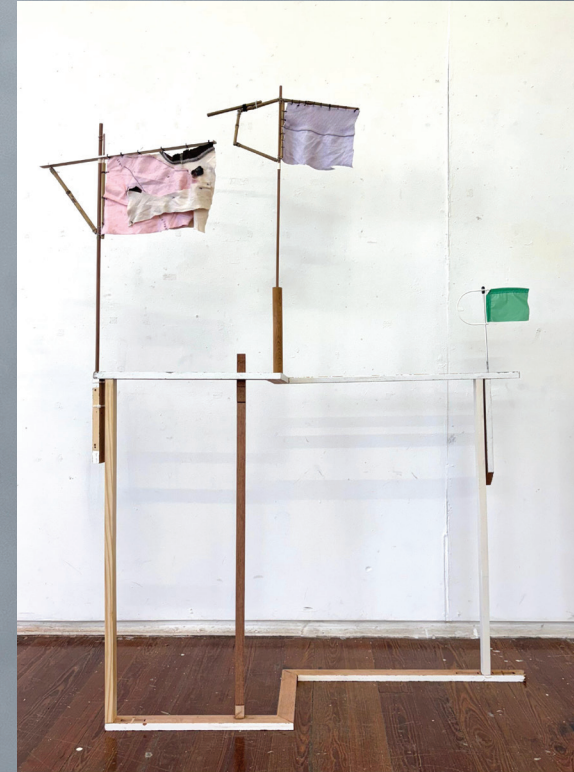


Baldwin gave that quote in Istanbul in the summer of 1970, at a time when the surging momentum of the civil rights movement had largely dissipated. For all its successes, the movement had failed to enact the fundamental societal restructuring that it called for. Its advances had been absorbed by the sheer inertia of the systems it critiqued. Thoroughly disillusioned with America, Baldwin sought refuge in Europe. After some time, he set his sights back on his home country, and with renewed perspective attempted to articulate some semblance of future possibility, a reason to continue to work. It is this search for a reason to proceed through the chaos that I feel drawn to, to figure out what it means to work, to create, throughout the tumult.

Today, the global resurgence of authoritarianism seems to signal that the winds of change have turned against the very notions of humanity that thought leaders, like Baldwin, pursued – notions that we all seem to have taken for granted. Another storm is blowing in. From where I sit, a barrage of daily headlines carries frenzied news of massacres in faraway places, of people becoming aliens, of shifting borders and coagulating hatred. In this broader context I wonder what I am to do in a world that is descending into madness faster than the tools can be fashioned to reason with it.

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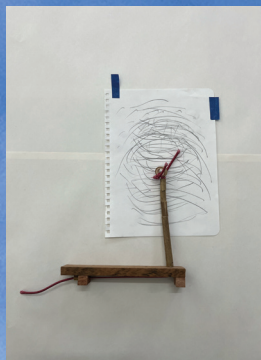
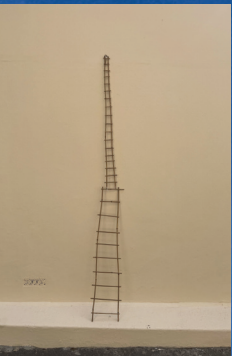
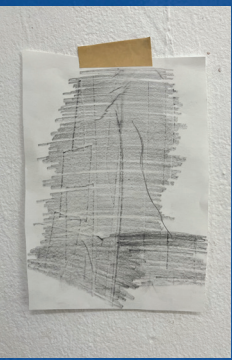


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This year, I set out to make the storm. The storm that has been, the one to come and the stasis in between them. My presentation has taken the form of a bricolage installation of delicate, hybridised sculptures loosely derived from weather prediction and endurance equipment. In ensemble, they conjure an experience of disorientation, placing participants amidst both suspended calm and swirling chaos. By invoking Baldwin's continuum of storms, I aim to continue the work of the probing poetic, capturing the paralysing precarity and disembodied chaos of the present, while also appealing to the momentary reprieve in which possibility can exist. In doing so, I wonder how it is we claim the necessary space for thought when action is so overdue.

I have modelled my constructive approach on the act of improvisation and response as a way of mirroring the ongoing exercise of weathering political tremors. These works come from a space of personal meditation on the world my generation has inherited, a process of wondering how possibility, insight, care and even hope may function given the lack of coherent resistance to the projected future we have been served. Finding ways to the bear witness to the storm is a call to address the elephant in the room, the reality of which we are all asynchronously aware – that something is deeply wrong in the world that we occupy.

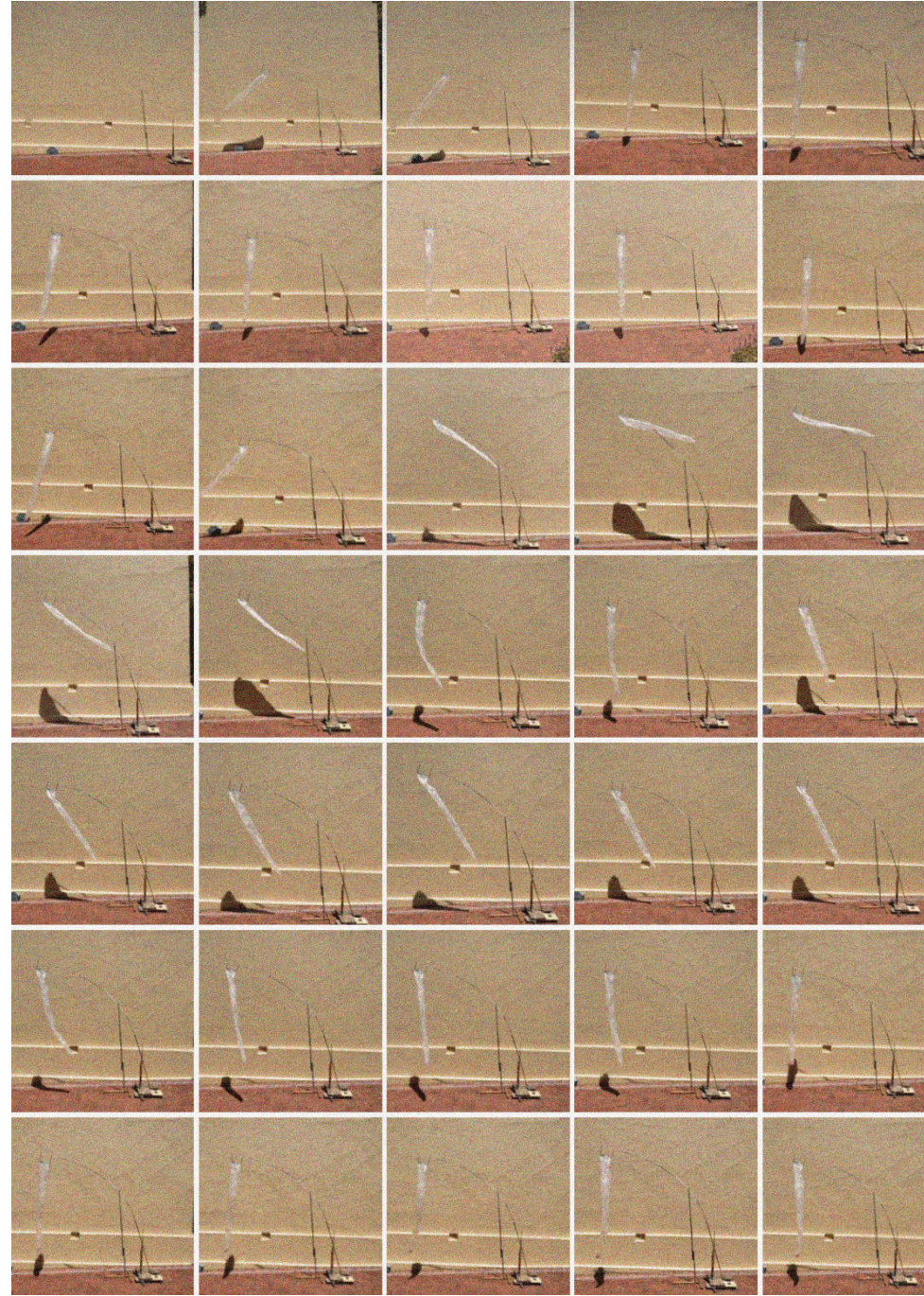
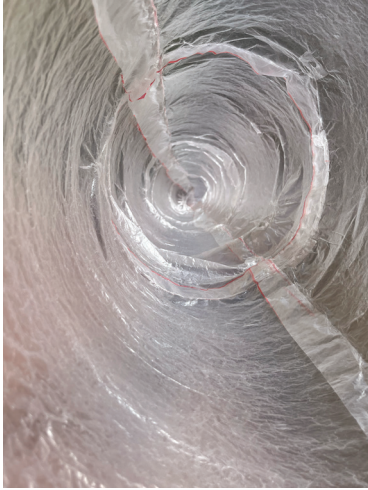






The windsock sculptures seek to create a feeling of tension, of eeriness and exhaustion. Their presence speaks to the multitudinous task of listening carefully and vigilantly to the wind's indications especially in the context of present wariness and ever pending uncertainty. They are stooped, bowing under the sheer weight of their waiting. Their posture is worn down by the deluge of storms past, they stand on the verge of collapse, with just enough mathematical elegance to relay the tipping point sensation of the present moment.

Baldwin's invocation of a never-ending continuum of storms acknowledges that tumult and insecurity are indiscriminate features of a life, however, I would argue an unprecedented scope of awareness in the age of civilian journalism and self-publication sets this moment apart from others. In these times, to bear witness is to process the world's worth of atrocity before breakfast as a deluge of disaster qualifies our state of modern receptivity, without properly harnessing our connectedness to effect repair. The visceral sensation of watching the entire world grieve in pixel ratio, without the effective means of speaking back into the void, is a profoundly paralysing experience. I'm interested in the natural tussle between a duty to humanity and the desire for ignorance that such a world produces. I both long for a renewed culture of collective unity through which concern can become impact and wonder how it is that we claim the space to live our lives in these times.



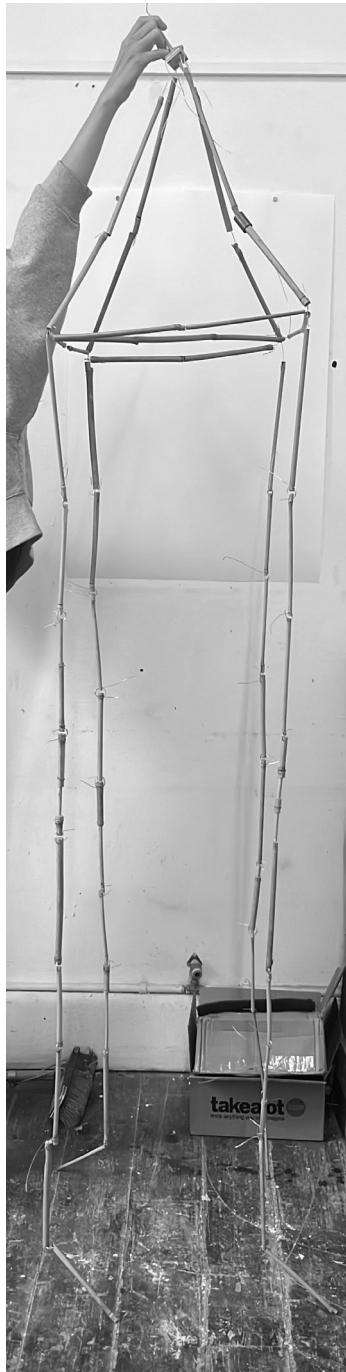
The two umbrella sculptures explore the nature of deconstruction and reconstruction. These works express the state of individual perspective and readiness to deal with one of life's storms. The forms have no base state, and are complete when closed or open, their configuration indicative of circumstance. In times of quietude, they hang on the wall as a reminder to pray even when things are okay. When storms blow in, they can be unfurled into an elliptical door that opens to a clear sky, suspended above the head, soft clouds appear to invite a sense of divine protection and peace. In their duality, I have sought both to illustrate the desire for escape, for something different than the present predicament, and to capture the ongoing act of adaptation that this world and its movement necessitates.

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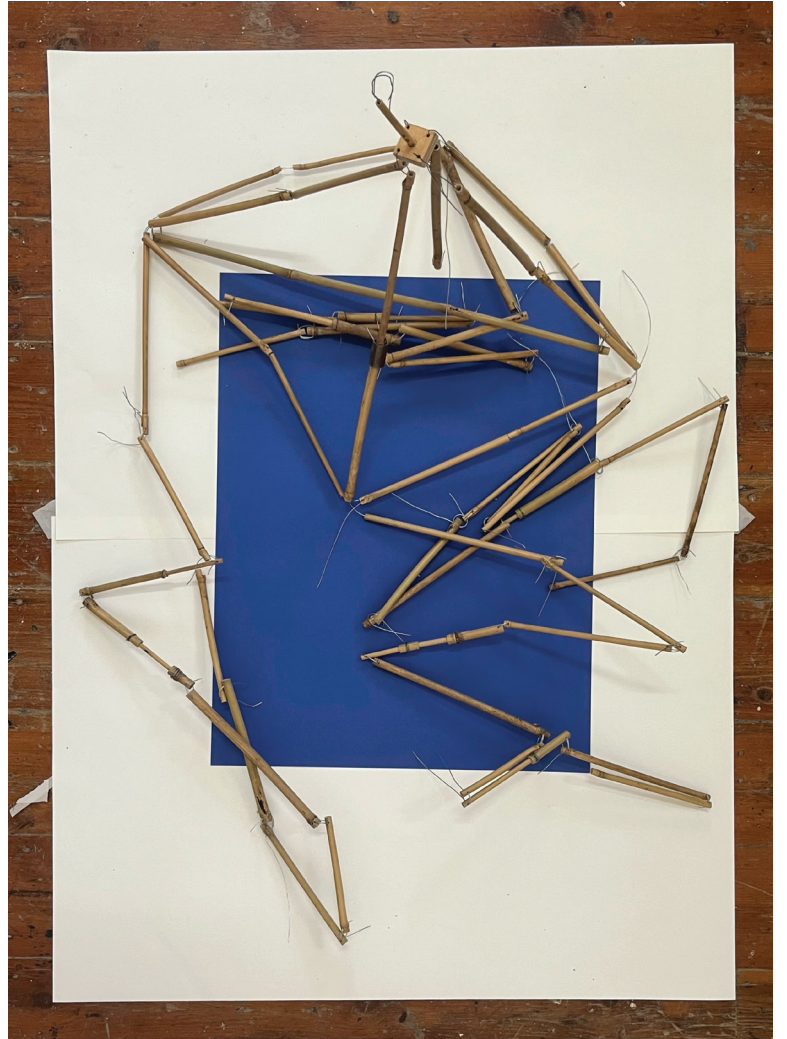
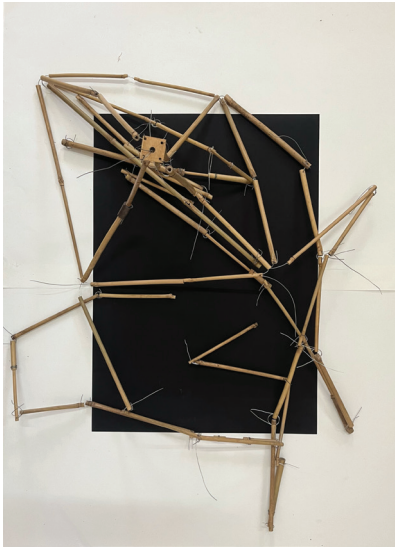
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The hanging bamboo sculpture is an extension of this language of collapse and reform. Tracing fragile illustrative gestures toward constructions, holding space for the possibility of integrity when suspended, and crumbling to the ground in chaotic, graphic compositions. The entangled limbs: a form no longer viable. Bamboo's enduring presence in storm-prone regions reveals a material intelligence rooted in resilience and renewal, and demonstrates that storm-proofing is as much a cultural strategy as it is a structural one; a negotiation between endurance, adaptation, and environmental attunement. This was one of my earliest experiments that inspired a set of compositional studies around the capacity to form and reform infinitely and intuitively. It is the most abstract contemplation of what it means to make something that will be here after the storm; what it means to will an undefined possibility into being so that that it may take up shape, or deeper meaning in the next cycle.



When Baldwin argued that his duty was to craft something that will bear witness to the storms to come, he was dualistically grappling with his grief at the souring of the march towards equality, as he was considering his own vocation and its often-insular requirements. This questioning cuts through societal concerns to personal motivation. In preceding years, his writing had rendered him an unofficial spokesman for the civil rights movement. His voice and observations, be they sweeping declarations or intimate interpersonal gleanings, were amplified to an entire nation. Within that context, his personal practice and the sense of creative responsibility that motivated it had a tangible, direct impact on the world he was describing. At the time of his quote, the infrastructure for direct impact was shakier, the nature of his own, more abstract. Naturally his questions shifted inwards as he began to wonder how to position himself, his offering and his expectations for future.

I see in my own process, this year, a resonance with this dilemma. My inherited values did and still do align with the work of being an active participant pushing the proverbial needle forwards. This material process has been as much about capturing the disorienting inertia of nowadays, as it has been about reckoning with the fact that my most deeply held beliefs and hopes for the future, are no longer demonstrated by this world. The works in their unfolding shapes have captured this atmosphere in all their absurd fragility. They are thought forms, physically imbued with the complications of my own contemplation. Fashioned quickly and refashioned later when their provocations no longer held truth. They physically embody the process of individual ideation but stand no chance in the presence of the storms they reference. As Baldwin so aptly points out, ideas are dangerous in their capacity to spread and impact change, but I cannot conjure energy from thin air. One can simply hold down the fort until a time when their contributions are needed.

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Relevant Readings

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