

STERNA

oblique ornithologies

STERNA PARADISAEA – Oblique Ornithologies

Although enjoying the curatorial role in many ways this exhibition has self selected through a natural affinity between the concerns of the artists and a pattern of cross references between existing sequences of work. The opportunity to bring this work together is a rare experience, releasing some of these patterns within a different context. The oblique ornithology of the exhibition's title reflects an unorthodox view on the study of birds.

A journey in May by Bill Colwell and Jennie Speirs Grant to Staple Island and the Inner Farne here in Northumberland met the Arctic Tern in a rare moment of pause in its continuous polar journeying. Flight observations through film and tracking of Sterna on the River Wear intersect the local with the global. The intimate and local, personal and familiar are also intertwined within Mike Collier's work, like maritime flags signalling the hidden presence and significance of birds in the cultural landscape. Language here is freed from the specific to the poetic.

Ken Grant's encoded moment of a chance and incongruous encounter with a magpie amongst cherry blossom, indicates the complexity of perceptual and subjective experience, an exactness of relationships composed of memory and harmonics. Similarly the notational approach to recording birdsong by myself references Biosemiotics – the field of science focussed on the communication of species and cross communication between species. Sonograph recordings for example place pitch and duration but omit space – drawing retrieves the spatial dimension and confuses the picture, reducing certainties and raising questions. Here the subjective experience has a role. The integration of space within the content of the drawing is seen clearly in Ken Grant's linear explorations in the Bird Language series.

In the wider perceptual field a speculative work collides the dawn chorus of birdsong with the dawn chorus of spherics – the electromagnetic traces recorded through space and time at the margins of human experience.

Our thanks go to Professor Stuart Sim whose work *Manifesto for Silence* found immediate resonance with the artists, we are grateful for his contribution. Silence, like nature, allows observation and reflection. To experience insight is to be *like one who waits for birds to sing*. (Milne 2007). We are aware of the fragility of both nature and silence and the defining quality this brings to our work.

Integration into the space of architecture allows some of the work to be both self contained but also, temporarily, site specific. In some instances the architecture physically supports the artistic statements in ways that are also oblique or unexpected. Awareness of the specifics of time and place - the never to be repeated moment – is very much amplified in the context of an exhibition focussed on close observation of the present. Time figures strongly throughout, compressing and extending the work in different ways.

Jennie Speirs Grant July 2010

Silence – Space – Nature – Art

Stuart Sim

There is a long tradition of trying to capture the experience of silence in art, which has led to some intriguing experiments over the last century or so, from Kasimir Malevich's all-white paintings (*White Square on a White Ground*, for example) to Ad Reinhardt's all-black canvasses. Many others have followed their line and a distinctive tradition of so-called 'monochrome' painting has evolved, offering us paintings in a range of colours – as in the Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko's *Pure Red*, *Pure Yellow* and *Pure Blue* sequence.

There is a sense in such art of a desire to escape not just from the weight of artistic tradition, but from a cluttered and noisy everyday existence which militates against the development of spiritual feelings.

Reinhardt wanted his art to be 'purer and emptier', and saw his turn to black as a way of removing all distractions from the viewer, who would find it difficult to read anything into the paintings and in consequence have to experience what the artist called their 'negativeness' instead.

Silence has had those connotations of purity and spirituality throughout history, with many religions regarding it as a method of clearing our mind of trivia and thus coming closer to the divine. Quakers worship in silence; Trappist monks live in silence; Zen Buddhists think that silence is more meaningful than speech. In modern times, accessing silence and quiet has become an ever more difficult task. We are surrounded by noise, our urban areas in particular saturated with it: in Aldous Huxley's thought-provoking words, there is what amounts to an 'assault against silence' taking place in our society. Since the days of the Romantic movement we are conditioned to use nature as a way of escaping from that assault, retreating to ever-remoter areas to find our own version of 'emptiness'. But nature of course is not silent: it is full of natural noise generated by weather and wildlife.

The wind blows, farm animals give voice, birds sing. Yet somehow we can accommodate such noise within our consciousness more easily than we can the urban racket: being wakened early by birdsong or traffic induce very different moods. We become more observant of the natural world in a rural setting, entering into dialogue with its patterns, incorporating elements like weather and birdsong into our personal daily narratives. The composer Olivier Messiaen is famous for drawing extensively on birdsong in his music, finding a religious significance in the sounds of the natural world, which, through painstaking notation of the calls of a wide variety of bird families, he succeeded in making an integral part of his art.

As the organisation of sound in time and space, music is particularly well suited to instituting a dialogue with natural patterns. The representation of space is central to the fine arts and film too. From the development of perspective onwards artists have sought to create a sense of space on canvas, and we could see the monochrome tradition, for all its formal differences, as similarly motivated. White paintings present us with the space of light, black with the space of darkness. As this exhibition shows, there are yet other ways of capturing the patterns that are constantly being generated in the space of nature – the space in which birds move and sing, for example. All of us establish our own unique relationship to that world and its patterns, and we need to be as silent as we can to gain the maximum effect from the experience. John Cage's *Four Minutes and 33 Seconds* consists of a performer sitting at a piano, without playing, for that precise length of time. What the audience hears over that period is not silence however, but the background noise inevitable in a room-full of people – coughing, shuffling of feet, etc. But this makes us realise how inattentive we normally are to that background, and how a measure of (at least relative) silence on our part can create a very different, one might say oblique, relationship to our surroundings. Perhaps we should be taking more of that spirit into searching for new patterns in nature – as the artists in this exhibition have been inspired to do.

Mike's work explores the phenomenology of landscape.

For instance, *24 Birds of Fisherman's Path* recalls a popular childhood walk through the pinewoods, slacks, saltmarsh and sand dunes from Freshfield Station along Fisherman's Path on the Sefton Coast in Merseyside.

Craw (Rook), Woofell (Blackbird), Doney (Dunnock), Mawp (Bullfinch), Fell Peggy (Willow Warbler), Bodkin (Reed Bunting), Stanechaker (Wheatear), Chitty (Meadow Pipit), Swat (Redshank), Learock (Skylark), Doup (Carrion Crow), Throstle (Song Thrush), Ullet, (Tawny Owl), Spadger (House Sparrow), Deviling (Swift), Purres (Dunlin), Haggister (Magpie), Snent (Sanderling), Cruchet (Woodpigeon), Whaup (Curlew), Youlring (Yellow Hammer), Crakle (Mistle Thrush), Tewit (Lapwing), Gowk (Cuckoo).

And *Six Birds of the Coquet Valley, Northumberland* pictures the names of birds commonly encountered when walking through this upland habitat.

Wittol (Wheatear), Chitty (Meadow Pipit), Queest (Woodpigeon), Calloo (Curlew), Keelie (Kestrel) and Wizzle (Dipper).

These vernacular names are a poetic reminder that an understanding and feeling for the natural environment was not just the preserve of the wealthy and landed gentry. They are what local people called the birds – closely reflecting the look, sound or action of the birds in their environment.





Bill Colwell: The sketch has it all... idea and action transform in the documented moment. Masterful sketches; events and incidents in words, pigment, HB and movement gave early leverage to my prevailing interests in time and motion. In practice, I claim documentary status... a dynamic somewhere between the arts and the wilderness. In the mix, my more esoteric work often features small things that move very fast in random corners of that wilderness; creatures that experience the crippling indifference of big society. It is natural to explore and champion this with the palette the digital age gives us. I encourage some of the time-based artefacts the professionals must avoid as expressions of techno-failure in remarkable technologies. Despite the digital flavours of process the product is analogue and my prints and projections display a mix of incidents and familiars, to be open to and to call upon... aberration is 'superanalogue'. AST's cryptic, seven-syllable brief for summer 2010, resonates with my wider practice and I grow a little.

Above: Moment of 'Superanalogue' for demii-cupola.
Photoprint on archive paper; digital artifacts.

Right: aggregate stills from 'Visual acapella':
digital projection on plaster.

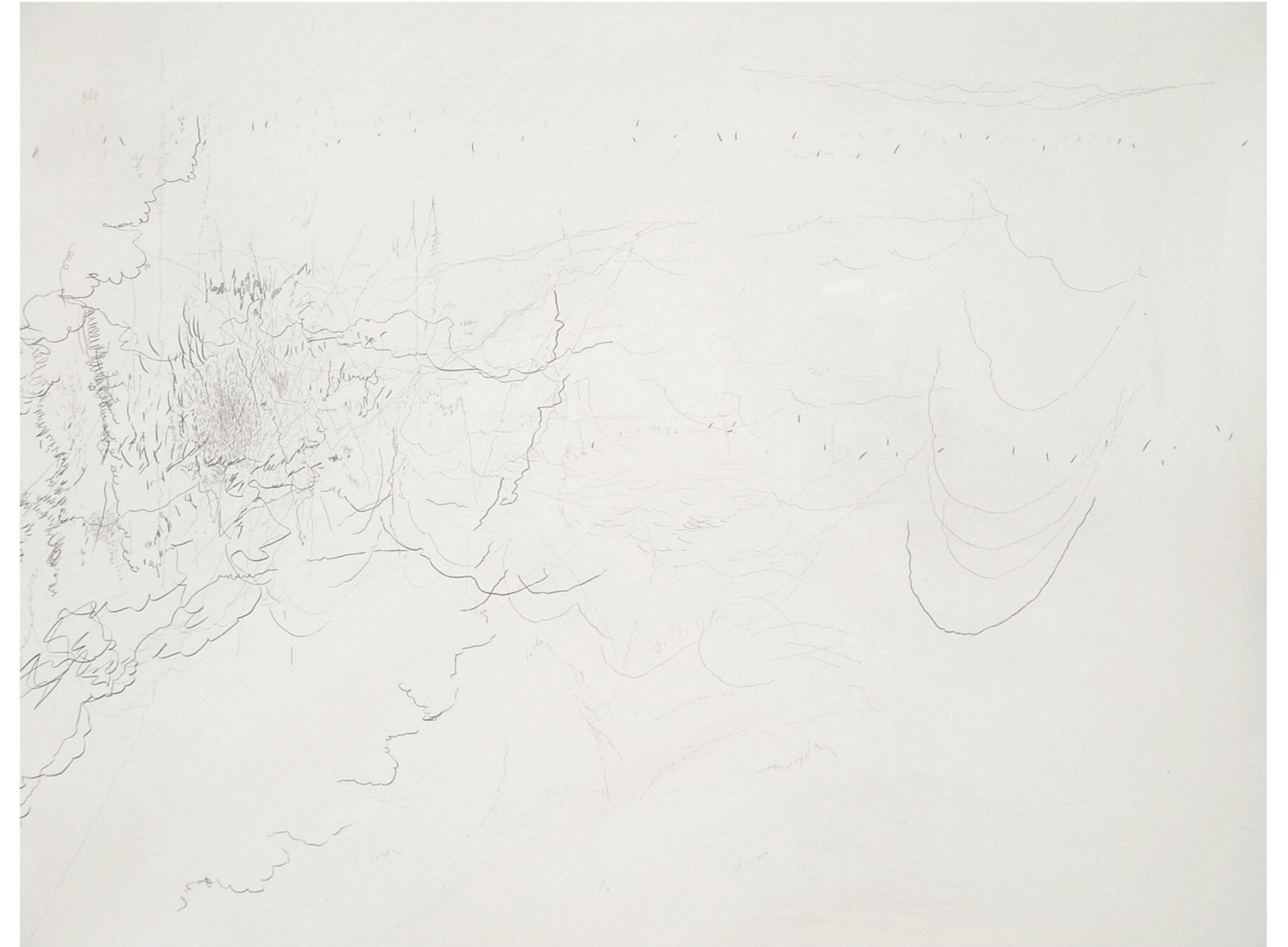
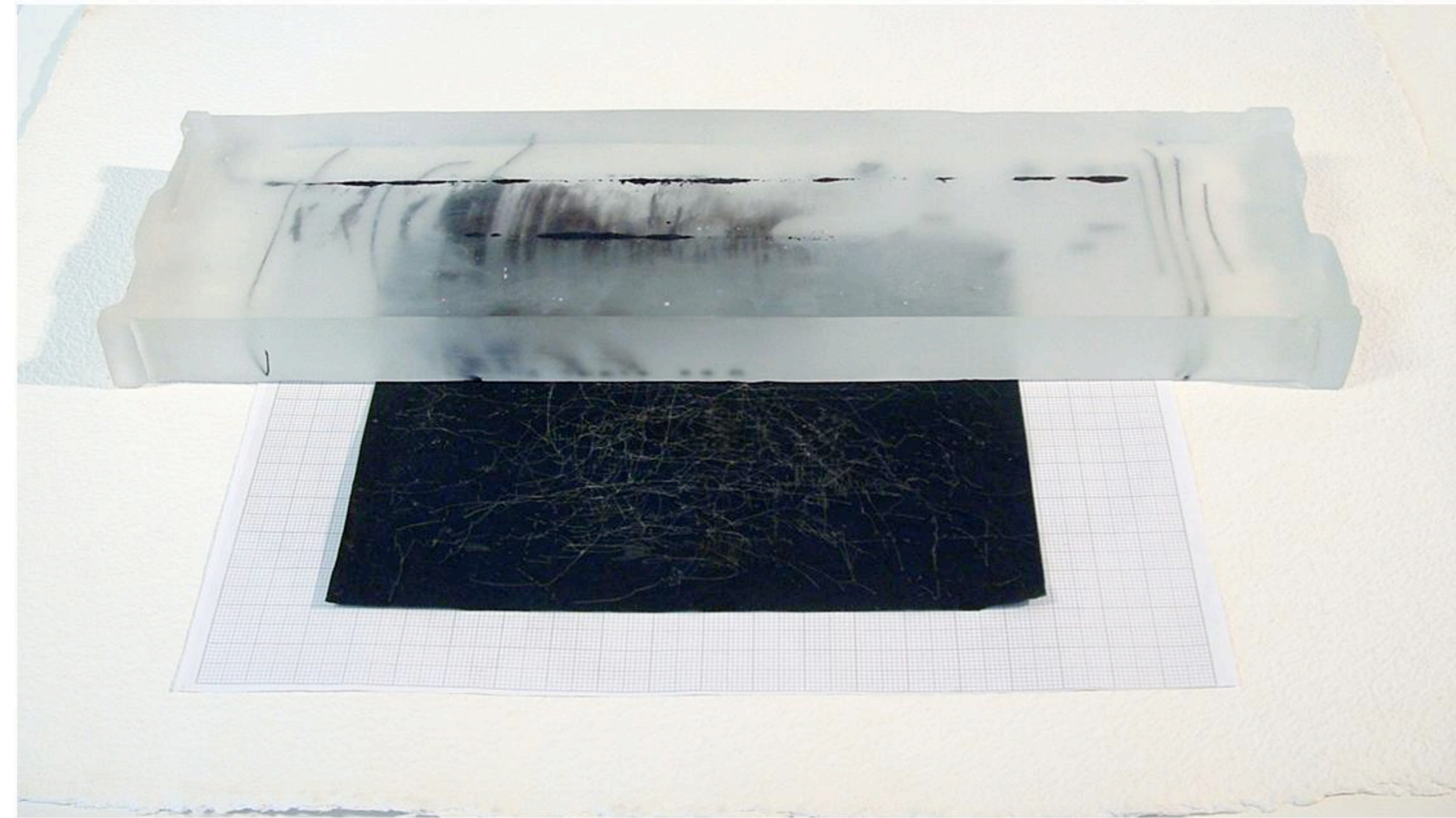
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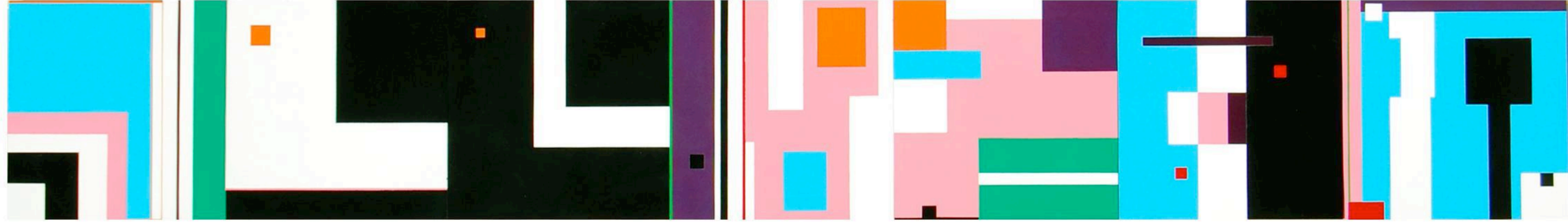


Like any form of observational drawing working from sound reveals layers of information that is unexpected and complex. Drawing directly from birdsong focuses the work in the present moment, seeking a balance between authenticity and subjective knowledge. The soundscape shifts day to day as weather and light patterns change, as individual birds call or are silent for reasons that are often unclear. Drawing brings awareness to the perceptual field, allowing space and time to settle. A trip earlier this year to listen to the dawn chorus coincided with the coldest week in May for fifty years – the birds remained steadfastly silent in protest. Turning to Messiaen for inspiration produced drawings one stage removed from source – birdsong interpreted through music interpreted through drawing. The empty space within which drawing exists is extended also by the use of glass, both physically as a material and through metaphor and analogy.

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Biosemiotic drawing. Carbon, graphite,
silverpoint.
Space Sonograph, Kiln Cast Glass, Carbon.





This work has allowed me to think in an internalised form. The drawings that came about are spatial representations. I came to understand how a bird sound is projected to fill a specific space, in a way these drawings began to map this out. Something of a full circle is made, from the almost too abstract, how to draw with sound, back to nature, a recognisable place. Something else that emerged was a variation within apparent repetition. It would be almost impossible to make the same work twice. There is a link with both serial and system art forms. The work can never represent a definitive or absolute. Yet it has a classical form, that requires clarity, precision and a definite structure which in turn is based in a sculptural search for form in line and colour block.

Magpie Cherry Sequence 2400 x 30 cm
aluminium, lacquer.

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Bird Space,
drawing on screen printed blocks.

