

This work has been submitted to NECTAR, the
**Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and
Research.**

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/1238/>

Creator(s): John Harper

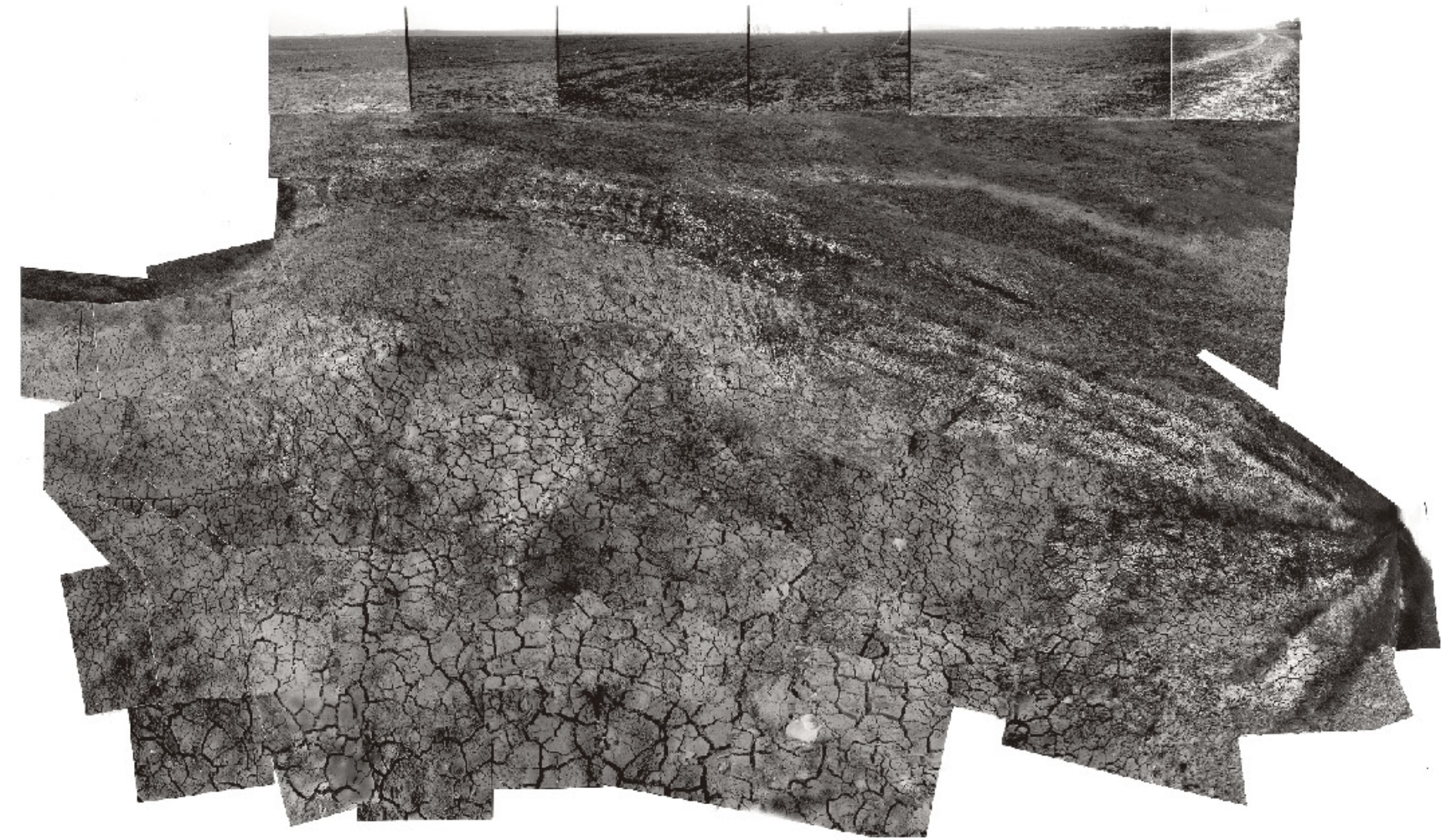
Title: Broken & Breaking Ground

Originally published by: Research Group for Artists Publications

Place of publication: Cromford, Derbyshire

Publication date: 2008

This is PDF file **2 of 3**: Main content of book





& Broken
Breaking
Ground

‘Thoughts taken to and from
the landscape of Fermyn Woods,
Northamptonshire, 2007’

John
Harper



COLOPHON

Published by RGAP (Research Group for Artists Publications)
Commill, Water Lane, Cromford, Derbyshire, DE4 3QH
www.rgap.co.uk

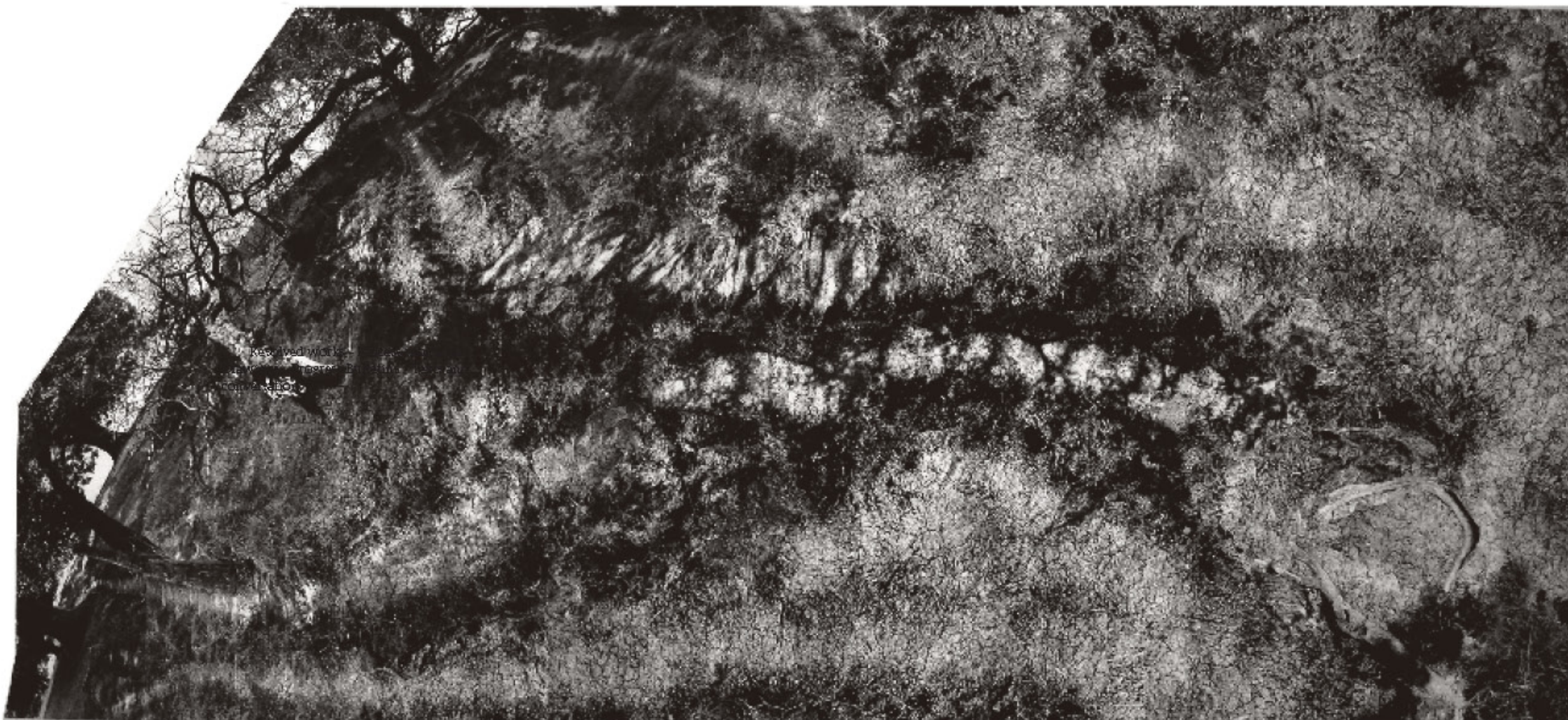
Distributed in the UK and Europe by
Comerhouse Publications
70 Oxford Street, Manchester, M1 5NH
www.comerhouse.org


Book Design by dust — www.studio-dust.com

ISBN 978 0 9558273 1 0

Printed in the United Kingdom

© John Harper 2008

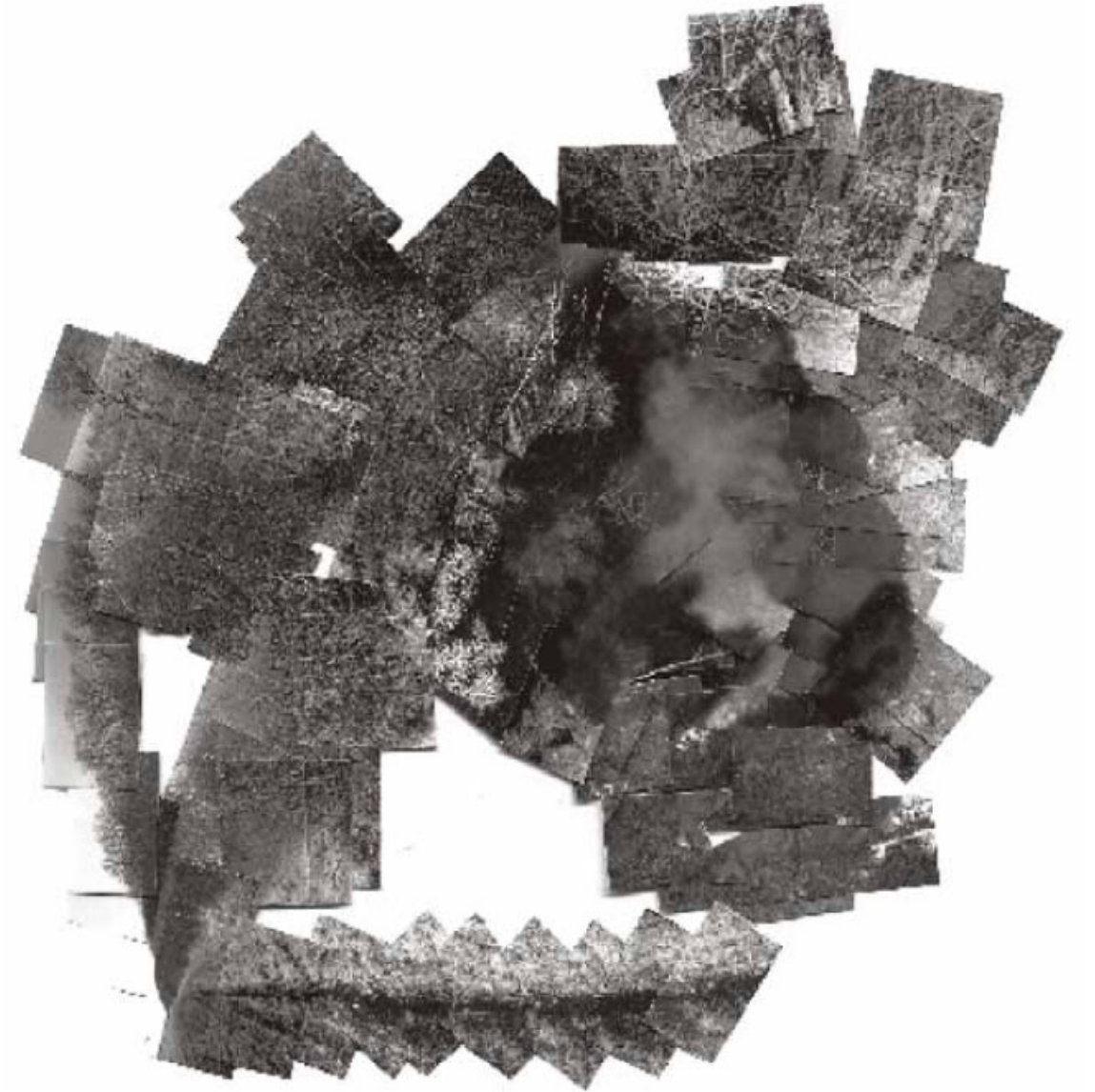
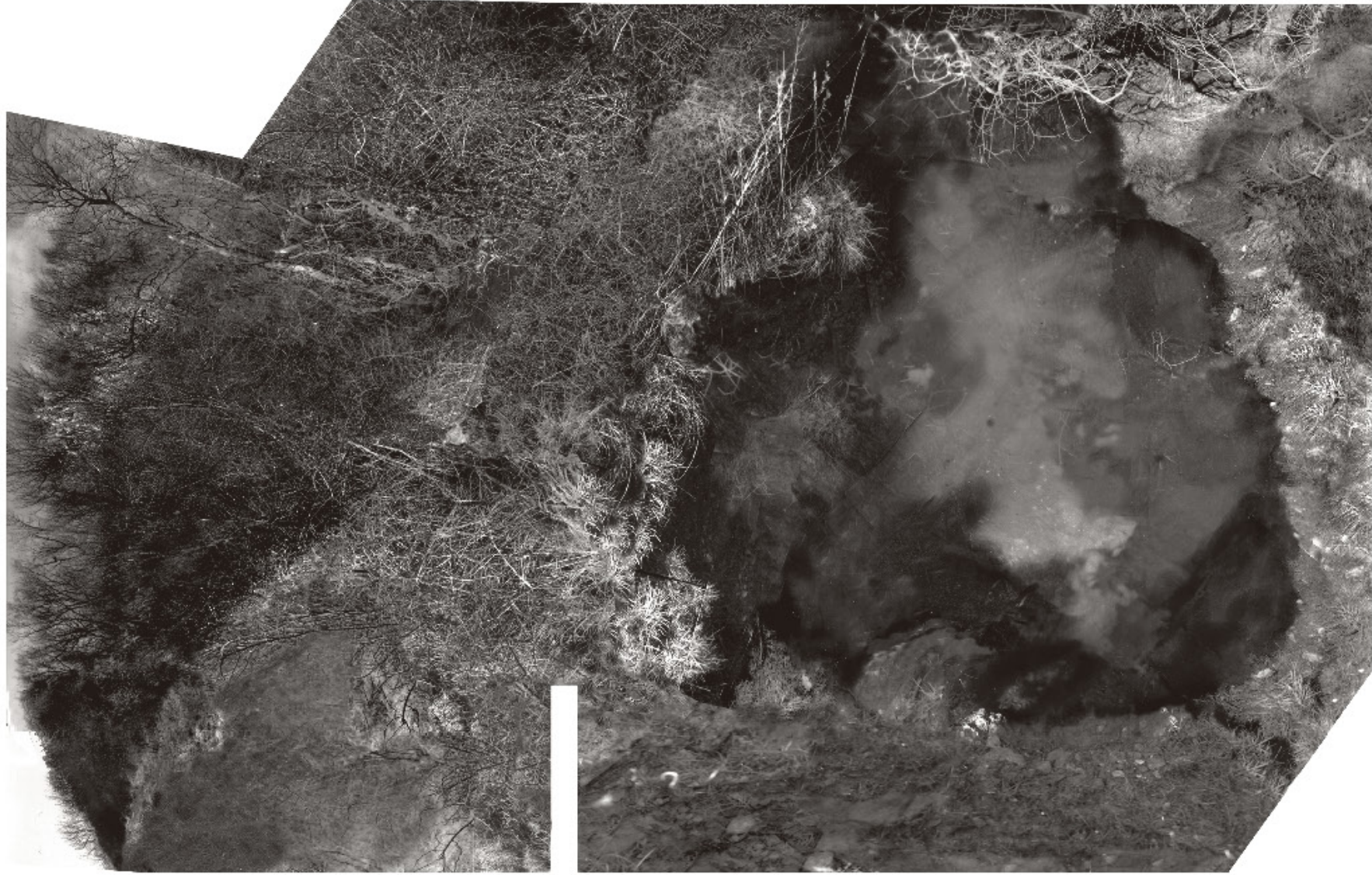




BROKEN GROUND
LANDMARKS
LINES FROM THE WOOD
SHADOWS OF TREES
LINES FROM THE LAND
FIELDS
PATHS
PATHS THROUGH FIELDS
LIGHT WOODS
DARK WOODS

FALLEN AND FALLING TREES
POOLS
DARK POOLS
VARIOUS WOODS
LIGHT ON LAND
LIGHT OVER LAND
PATHS BETWEEN FIELDS
TRODDEN GROUND
CLEARINGS
BREAKING GROUND

i RESOLVED WORKS
ii PROCESS MONTAGES
iii DRAWINGS
iv PROGRESS BULLETINS
v TEXTS AND CONVERSATION

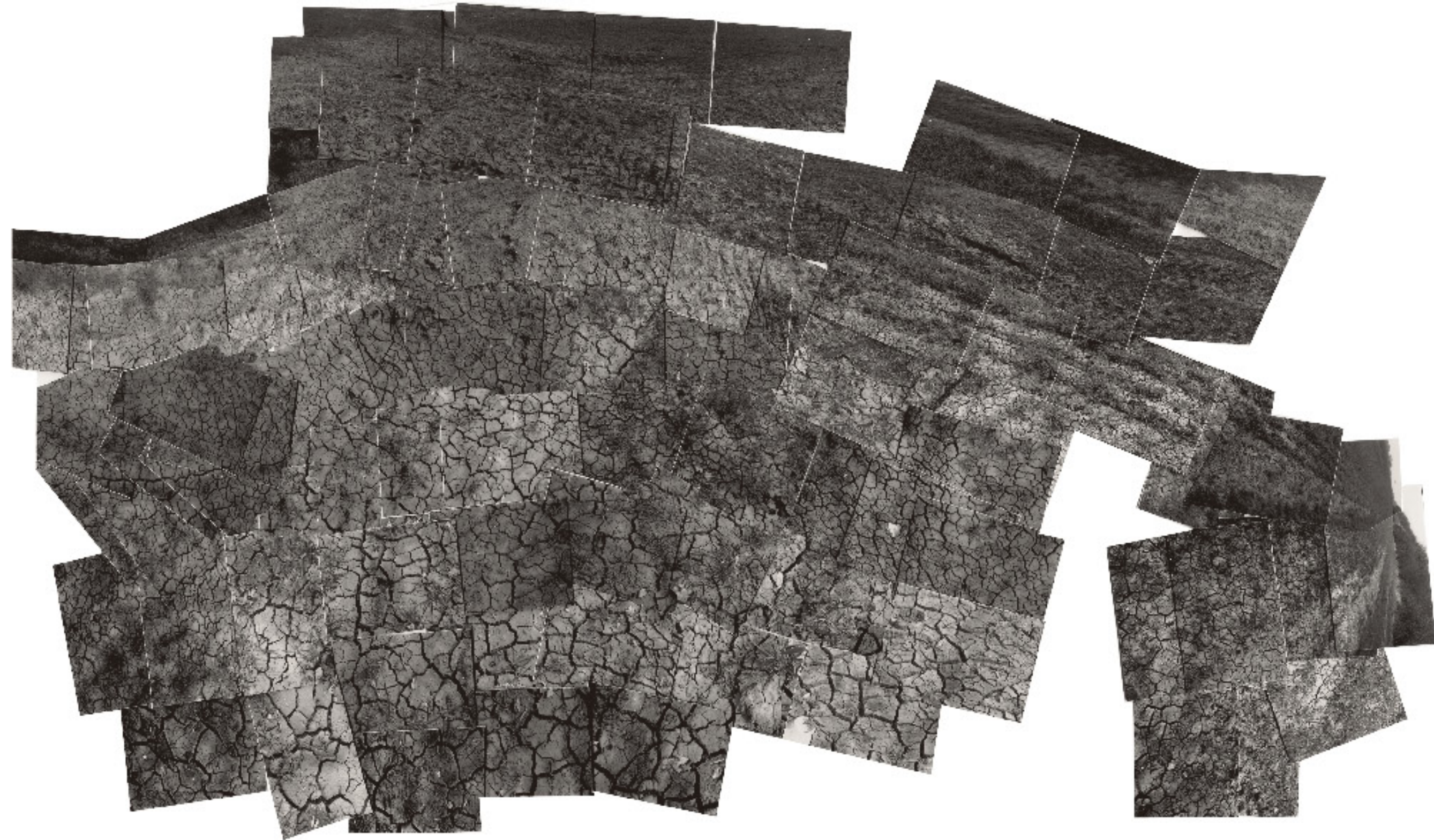


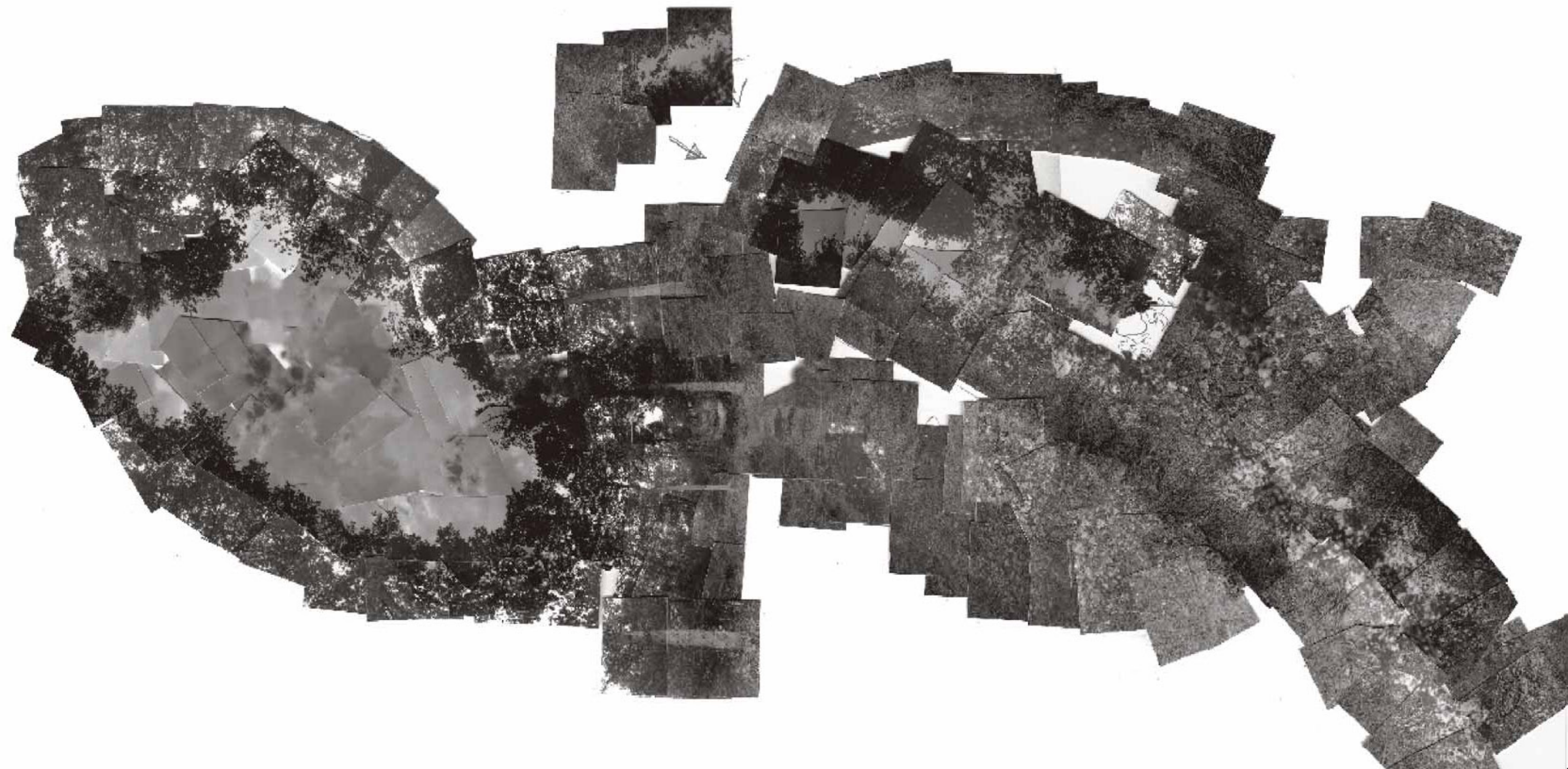


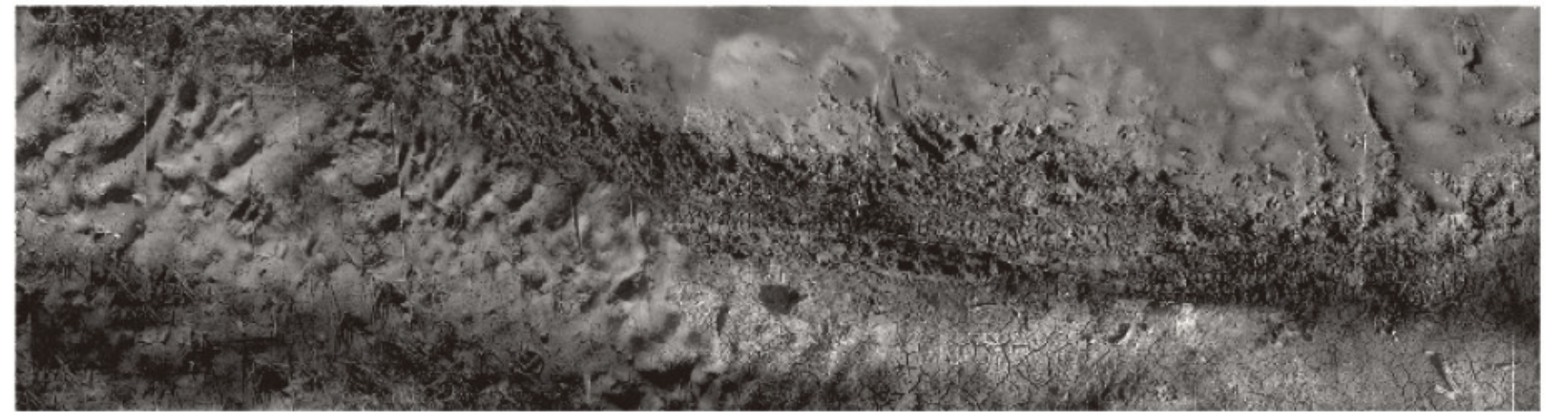
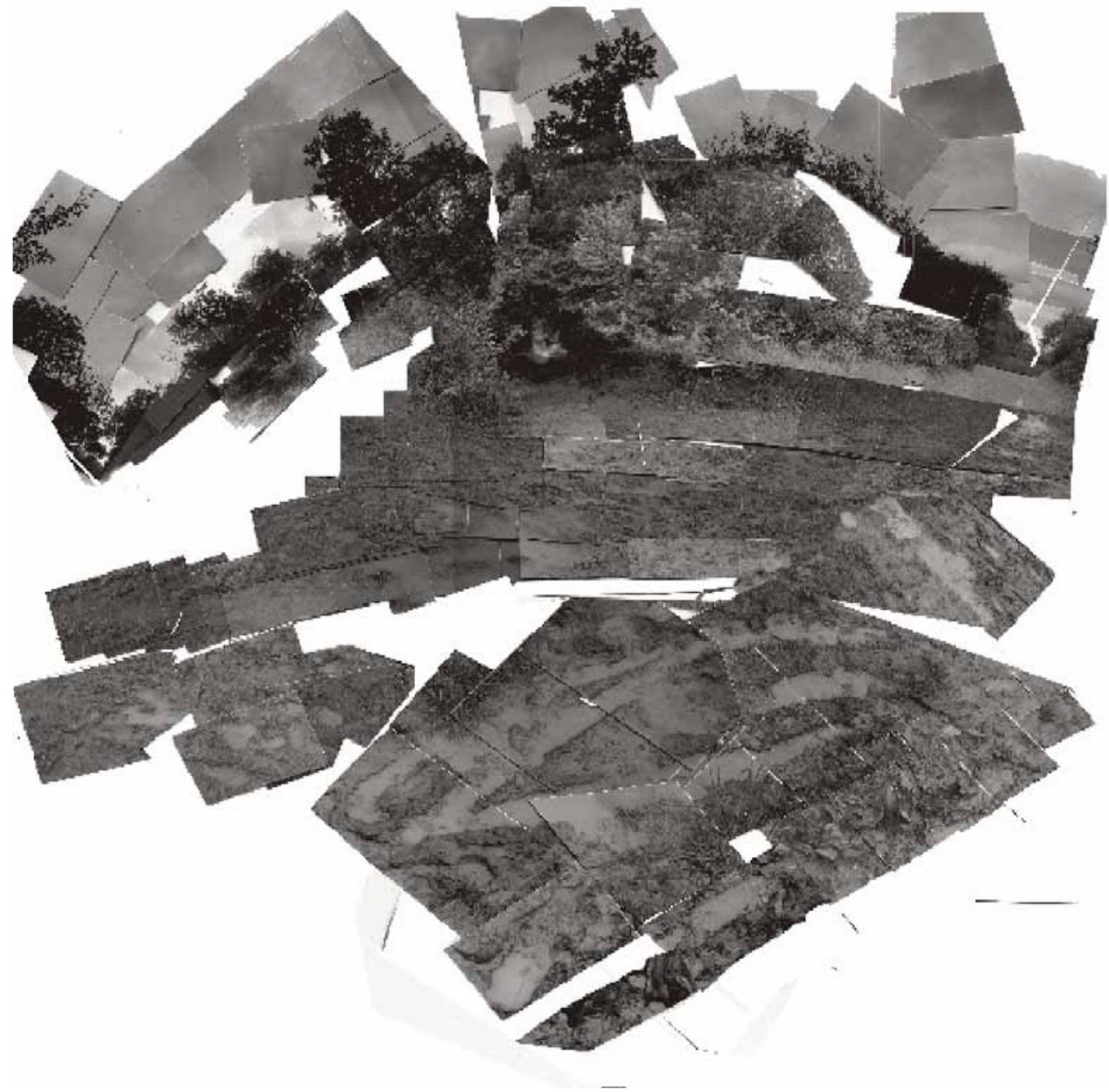


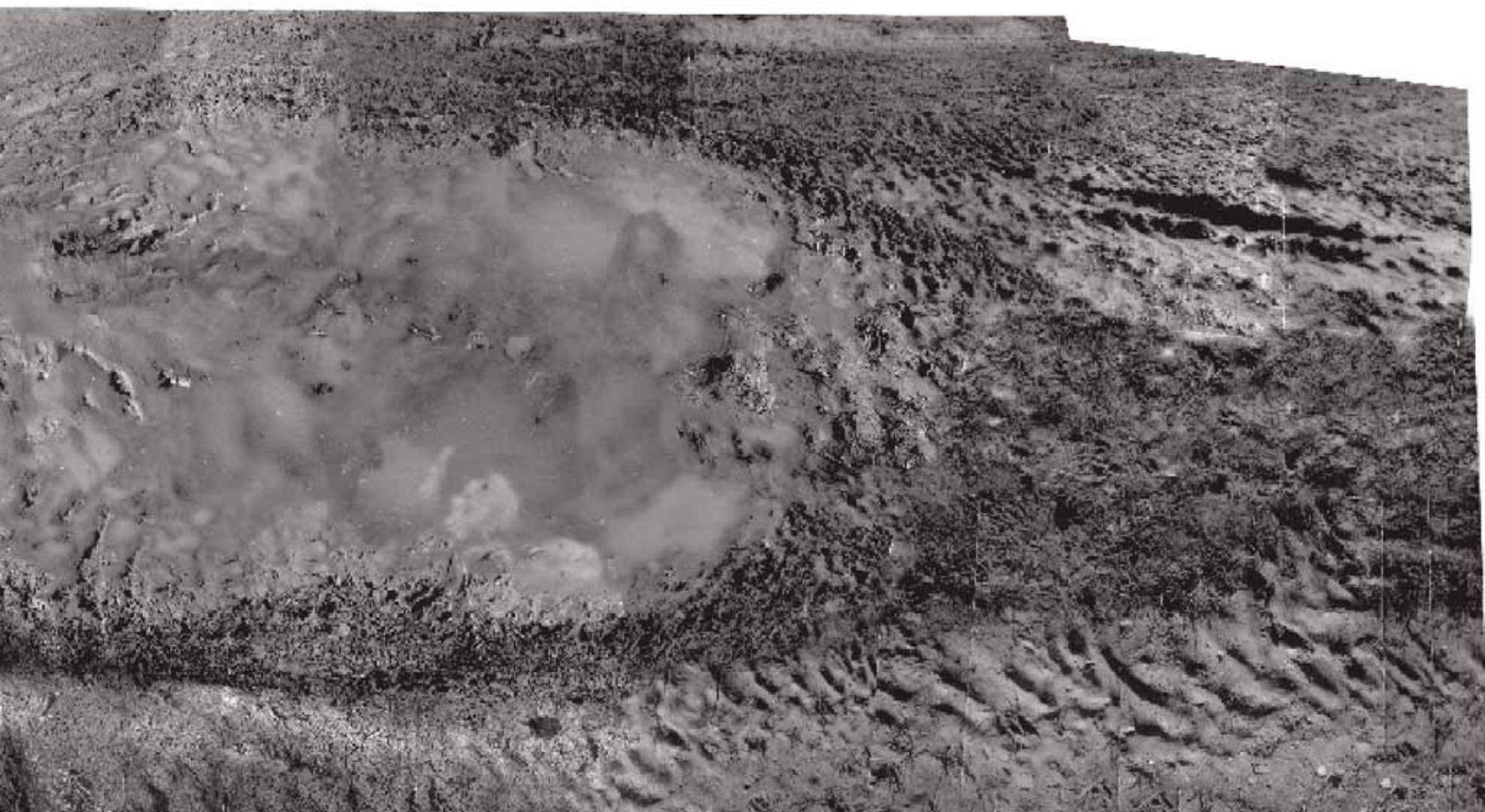


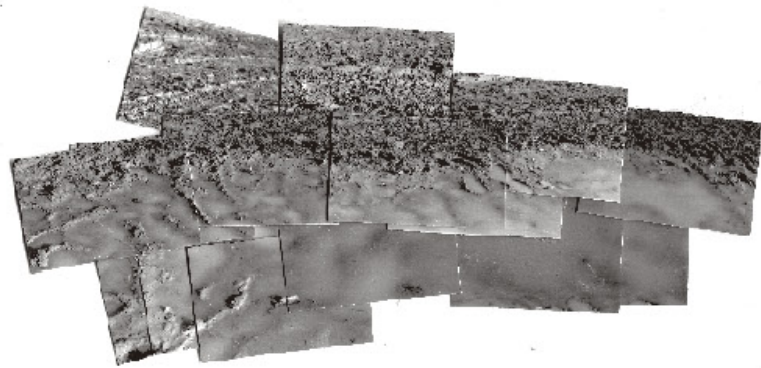
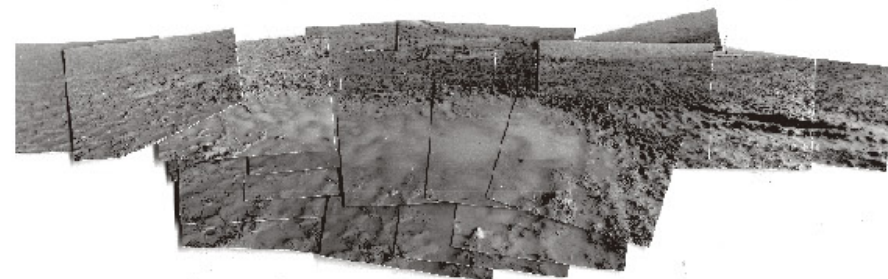
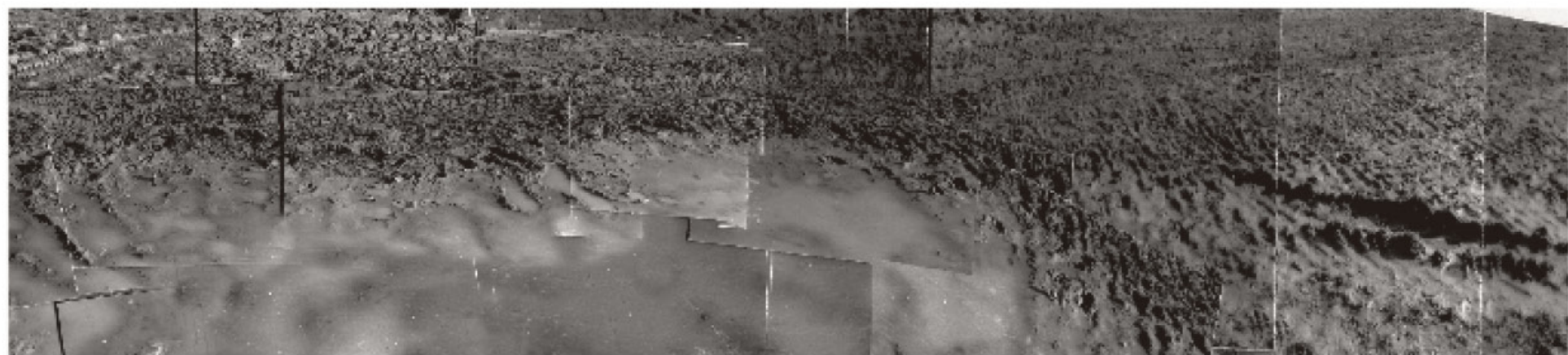
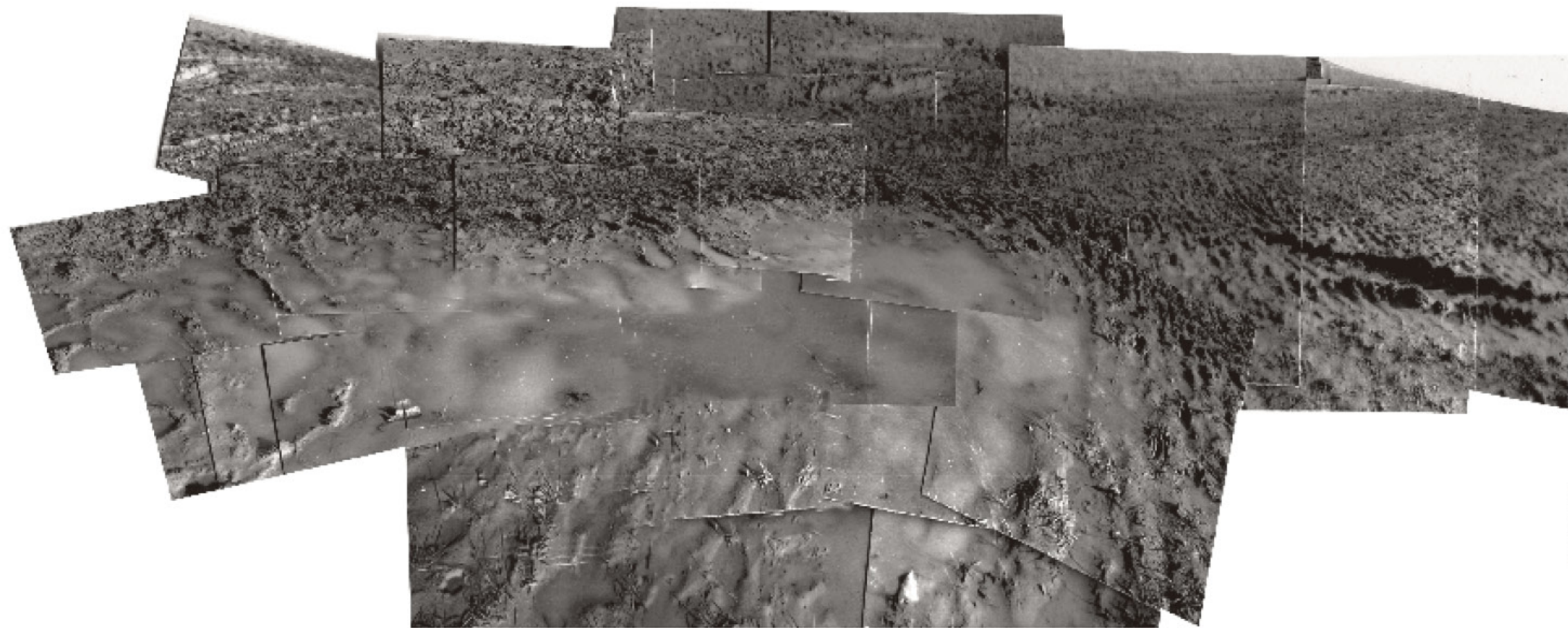






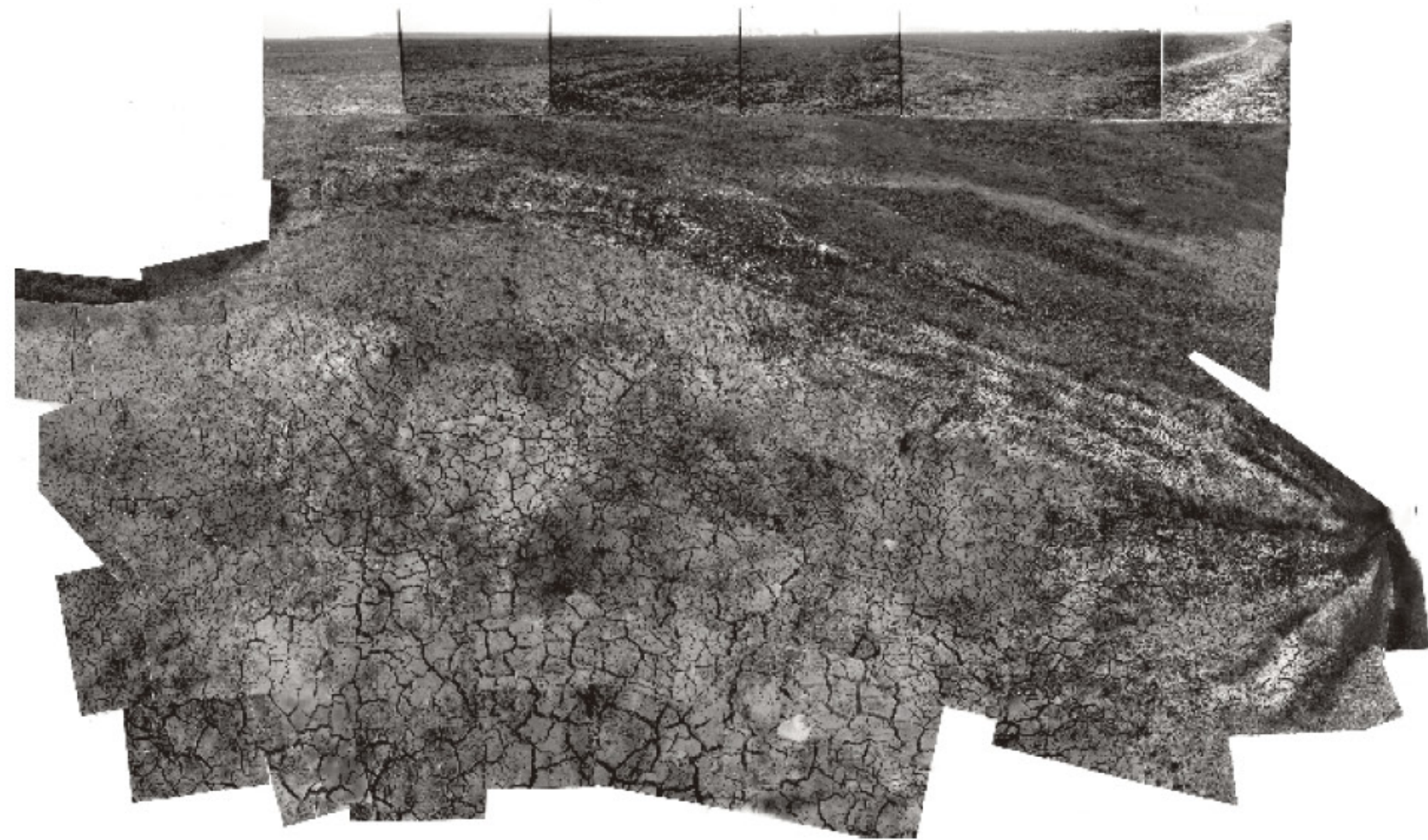




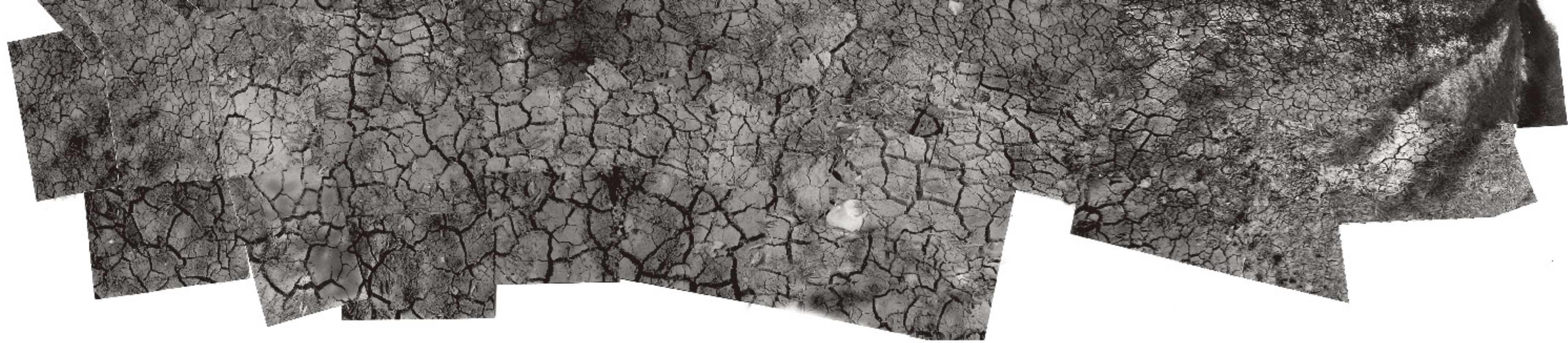






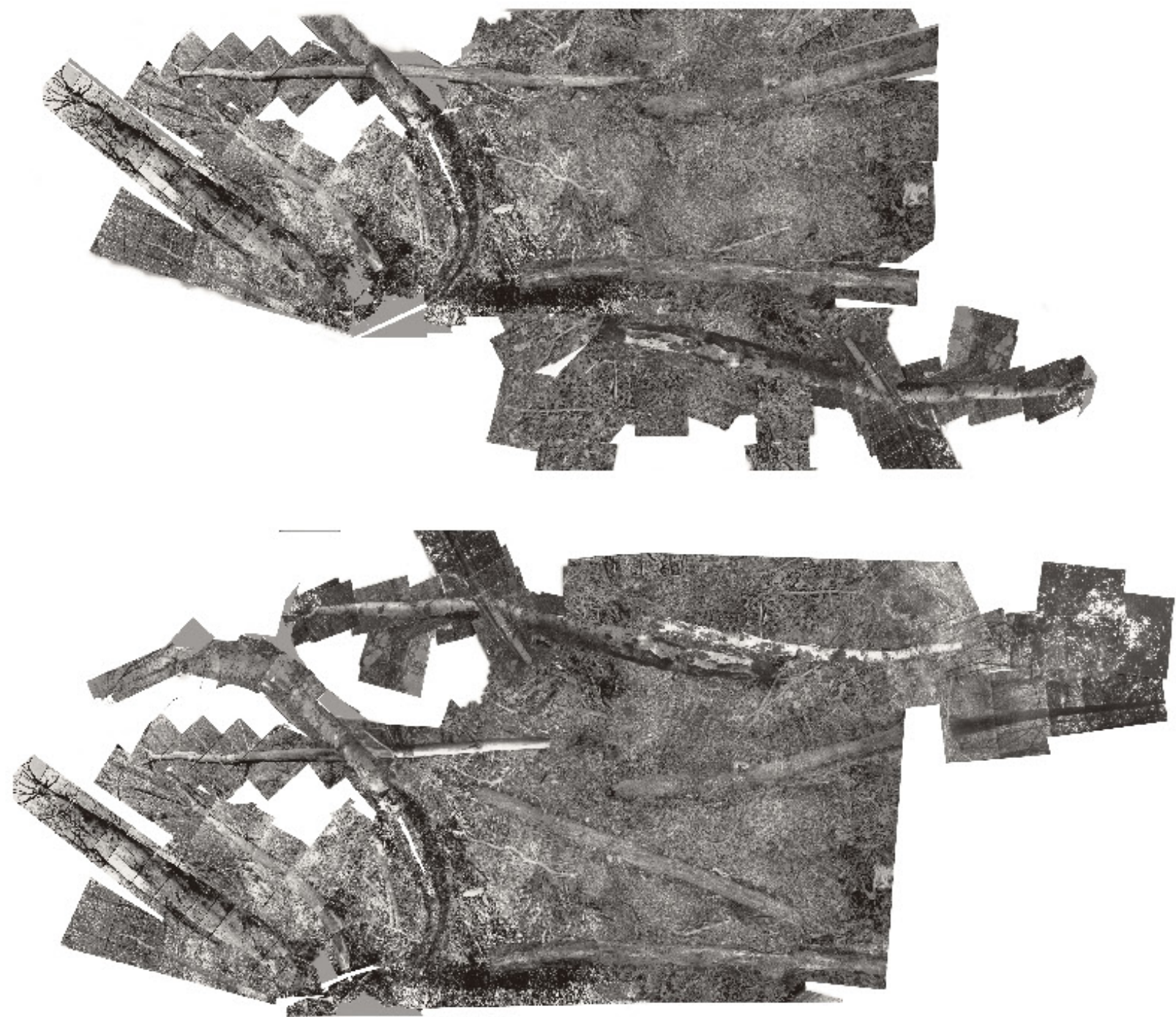




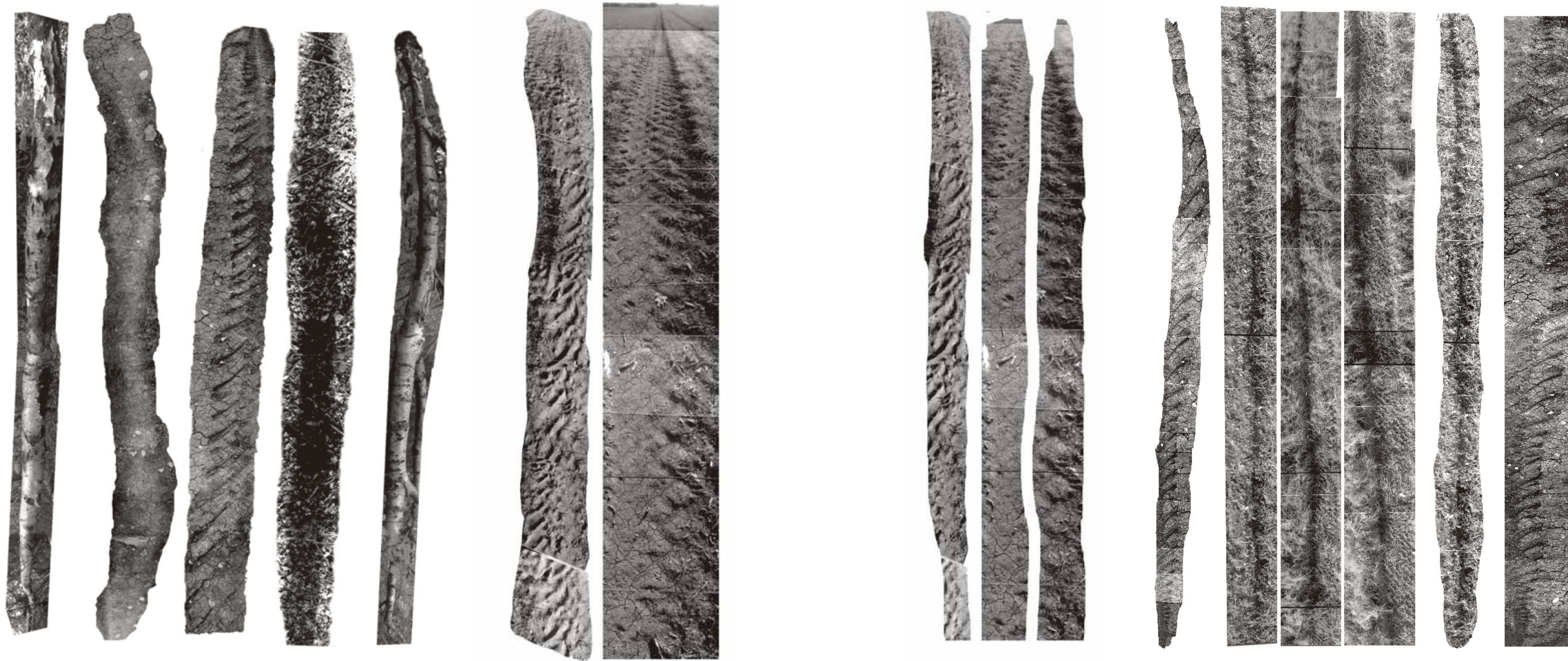


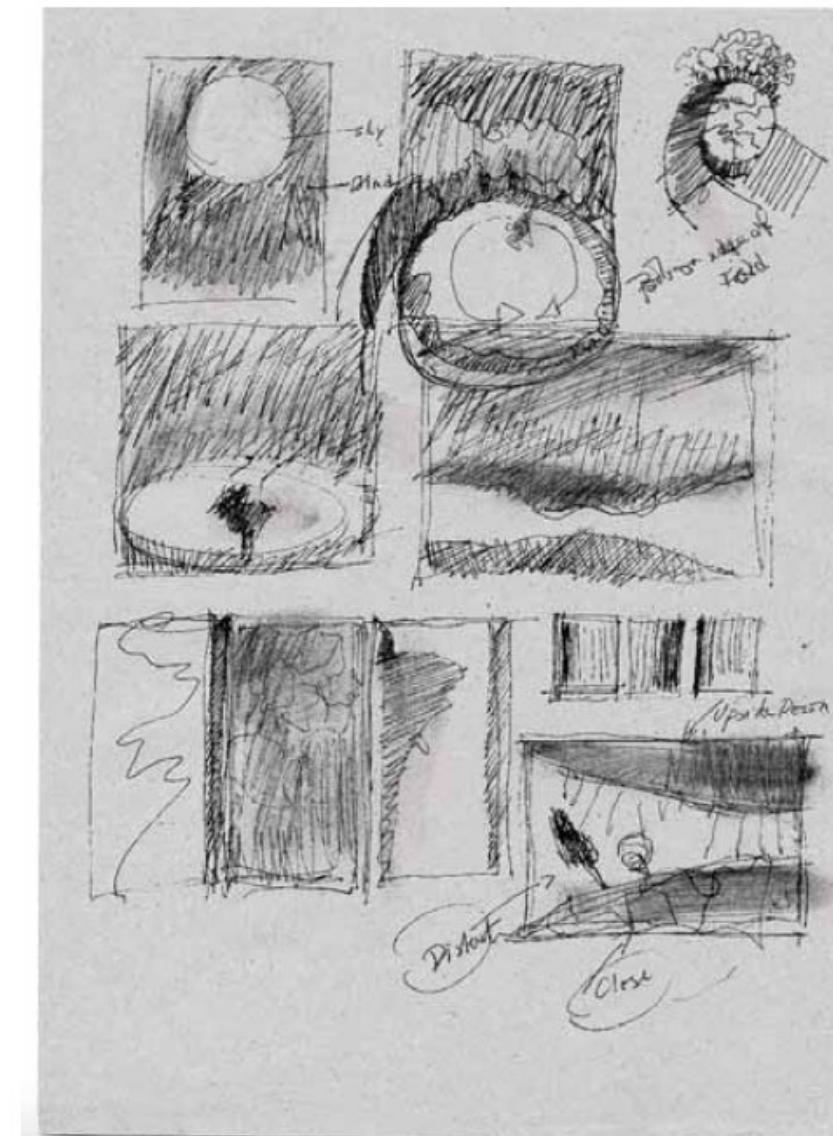
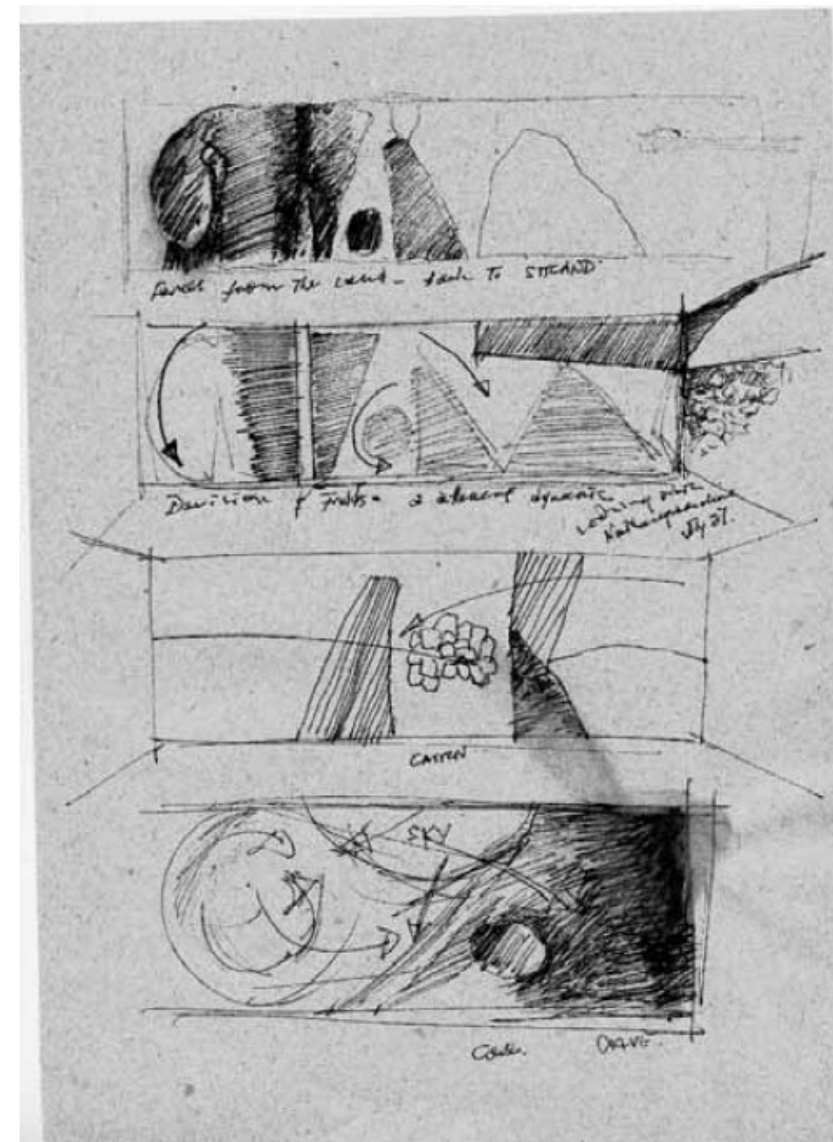
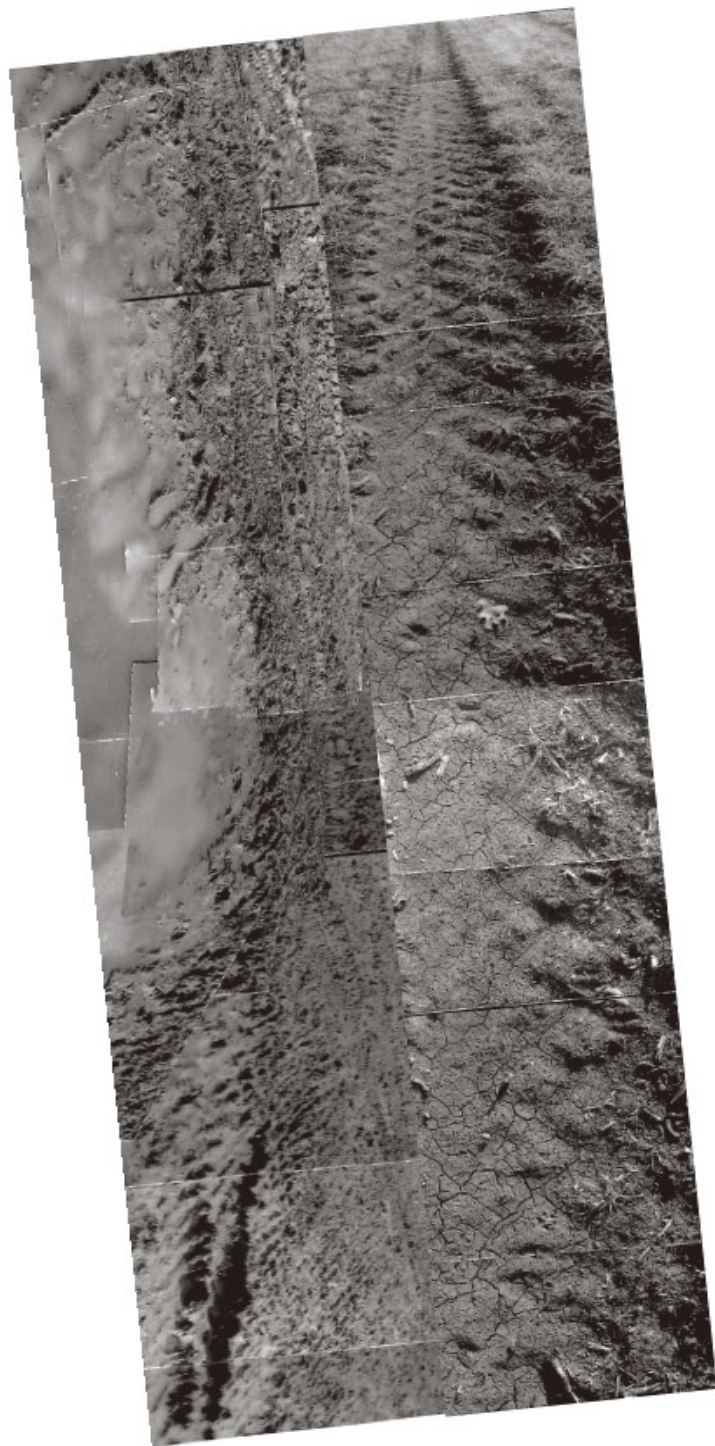


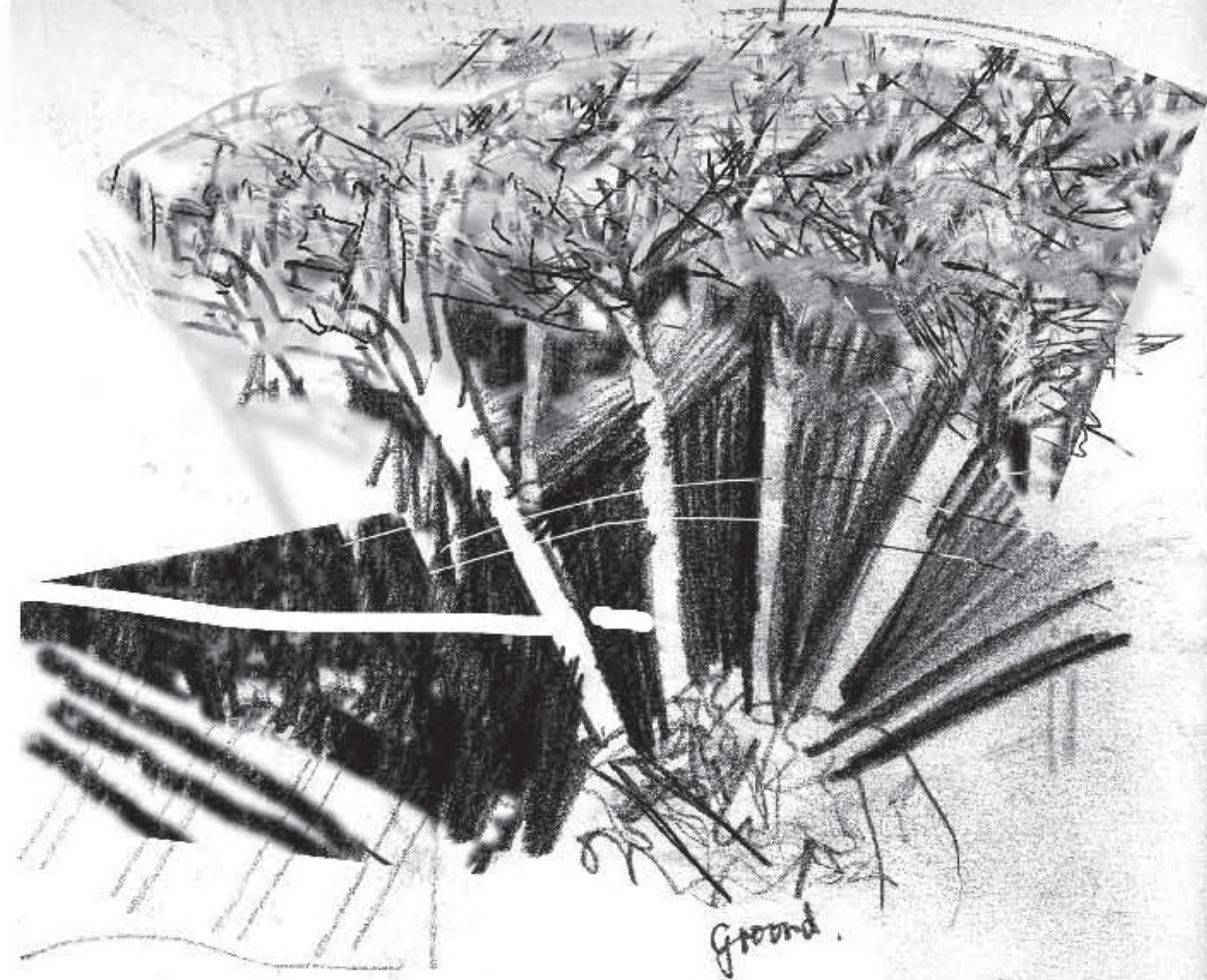




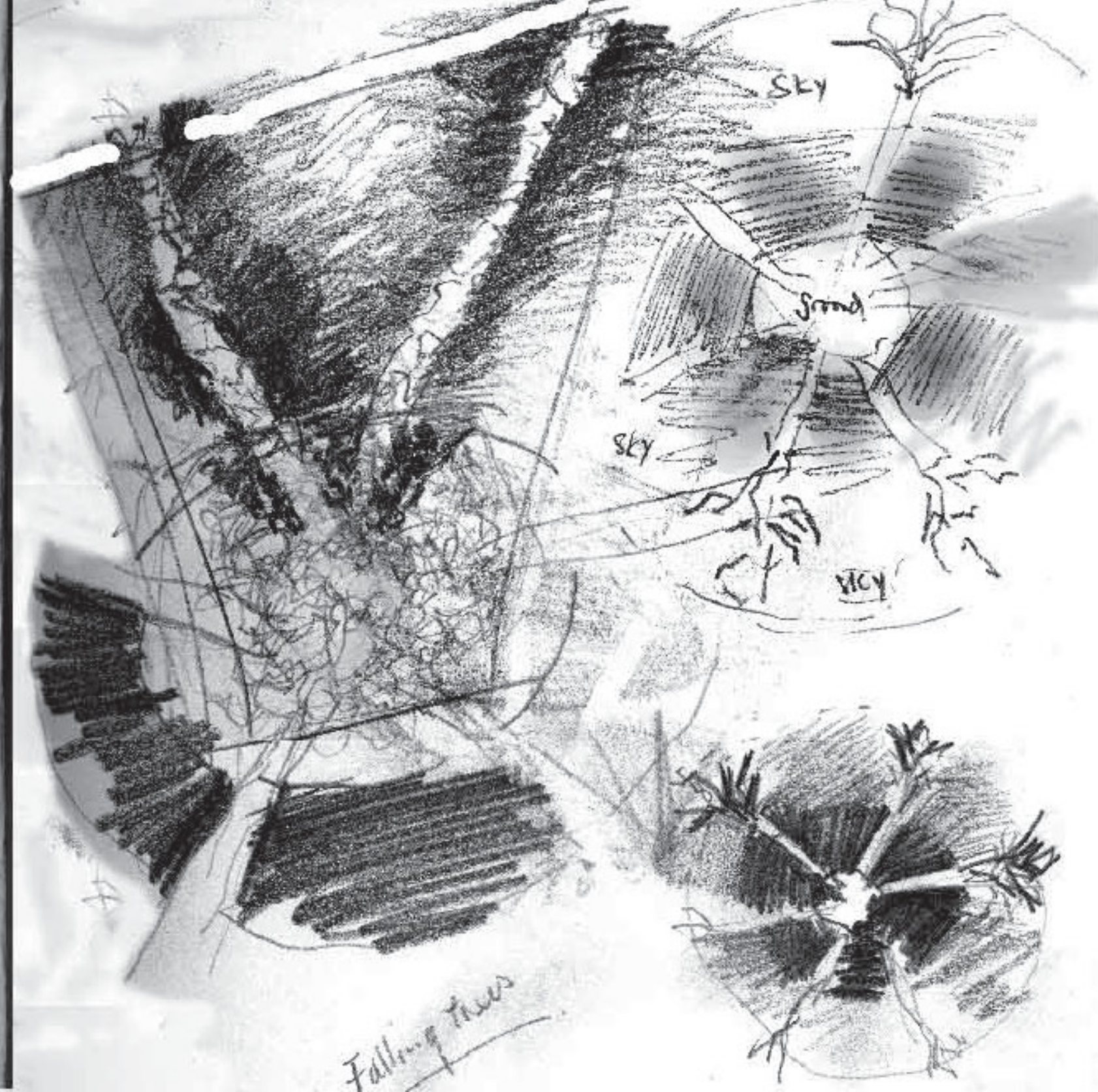






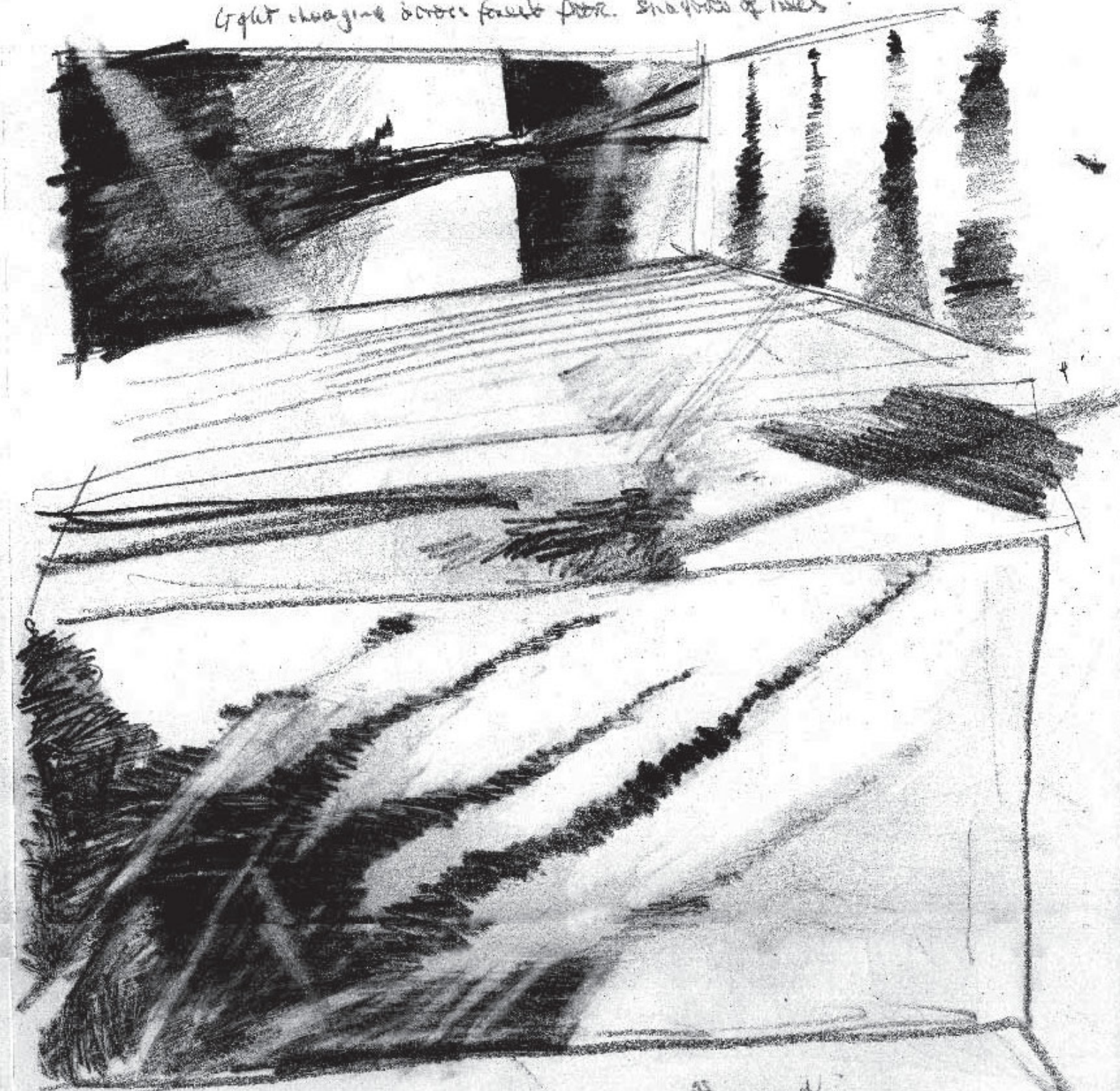


Falling Trees.



Falling trees

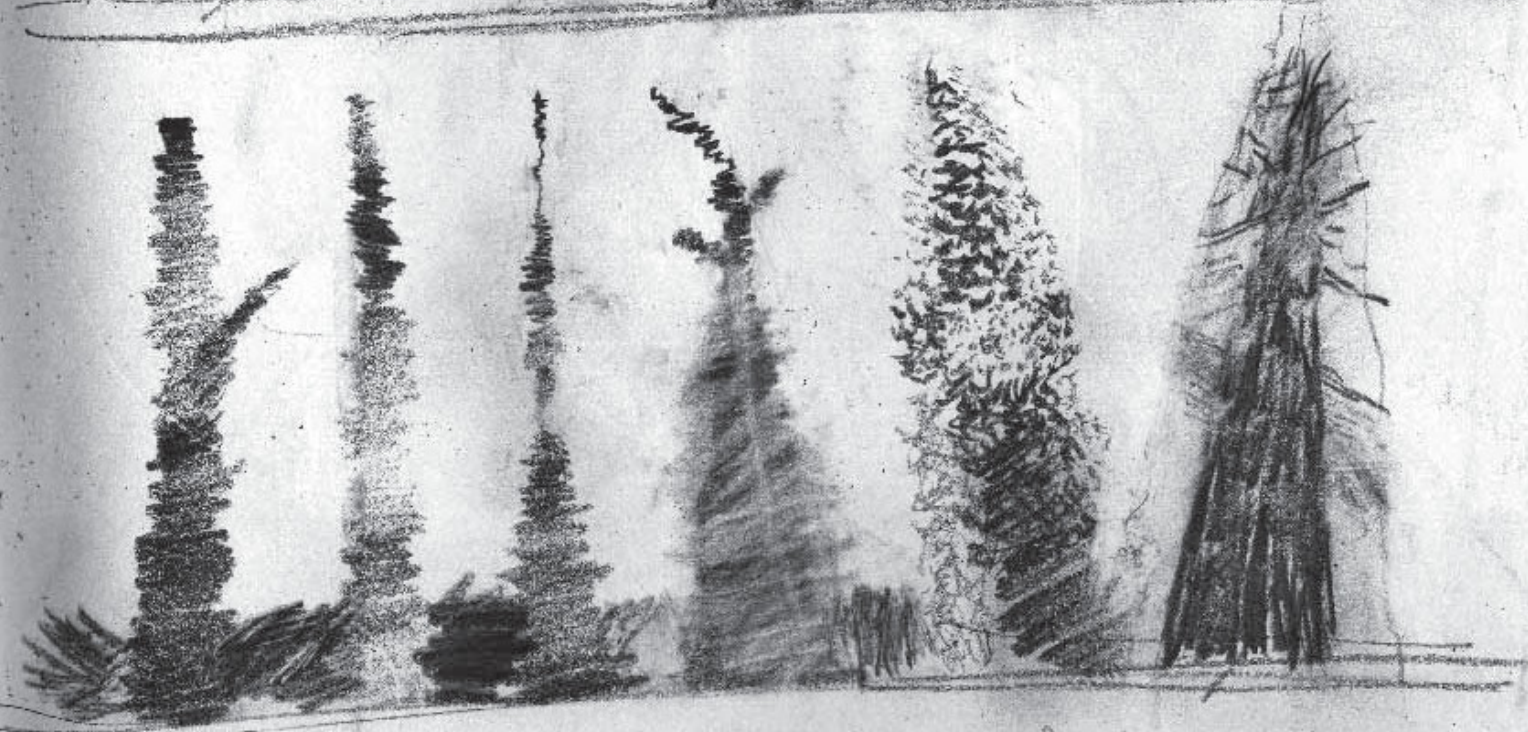
Light changing across forest floor. Shadows of trees



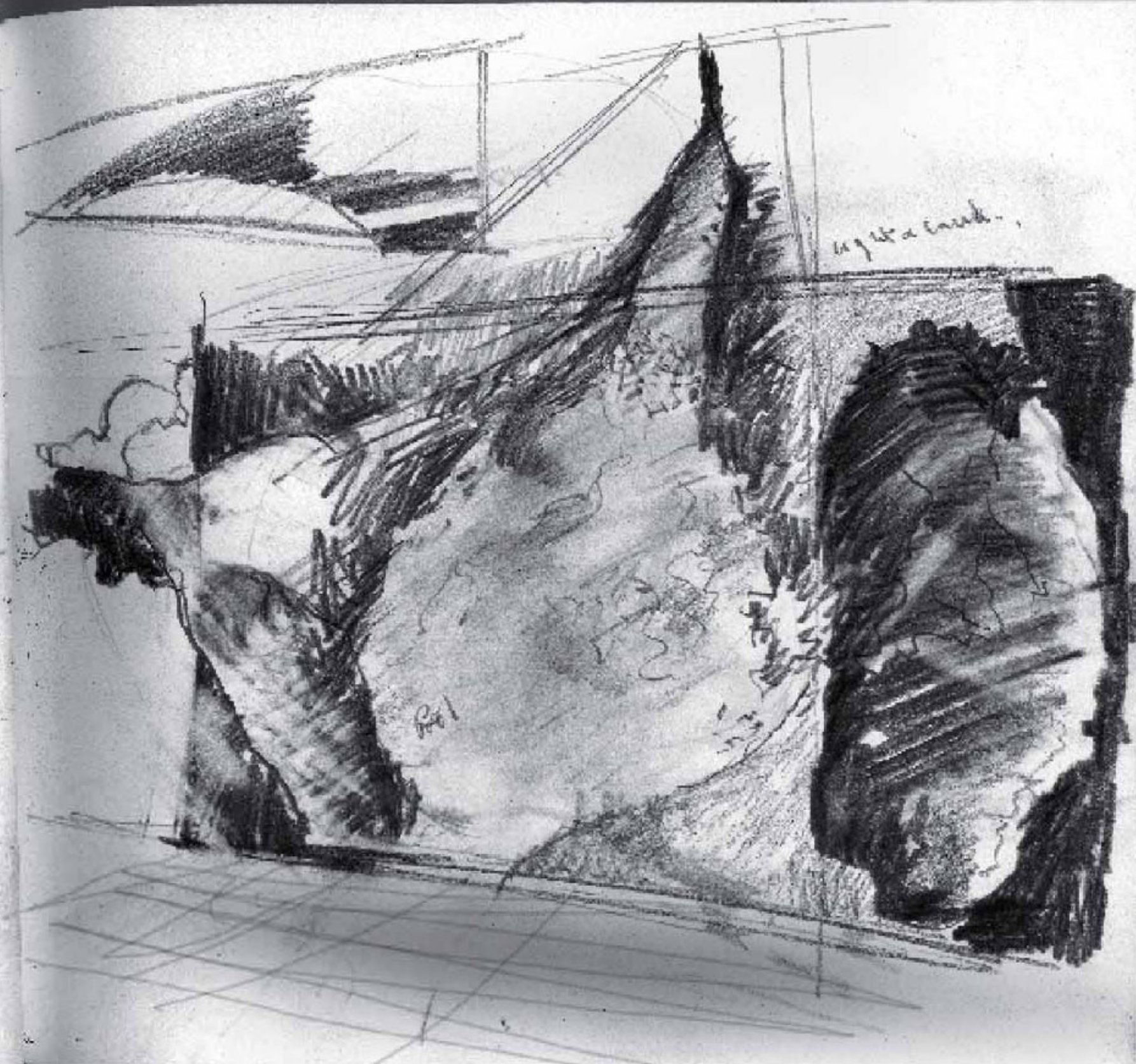
Dark forest floor
Day spec.

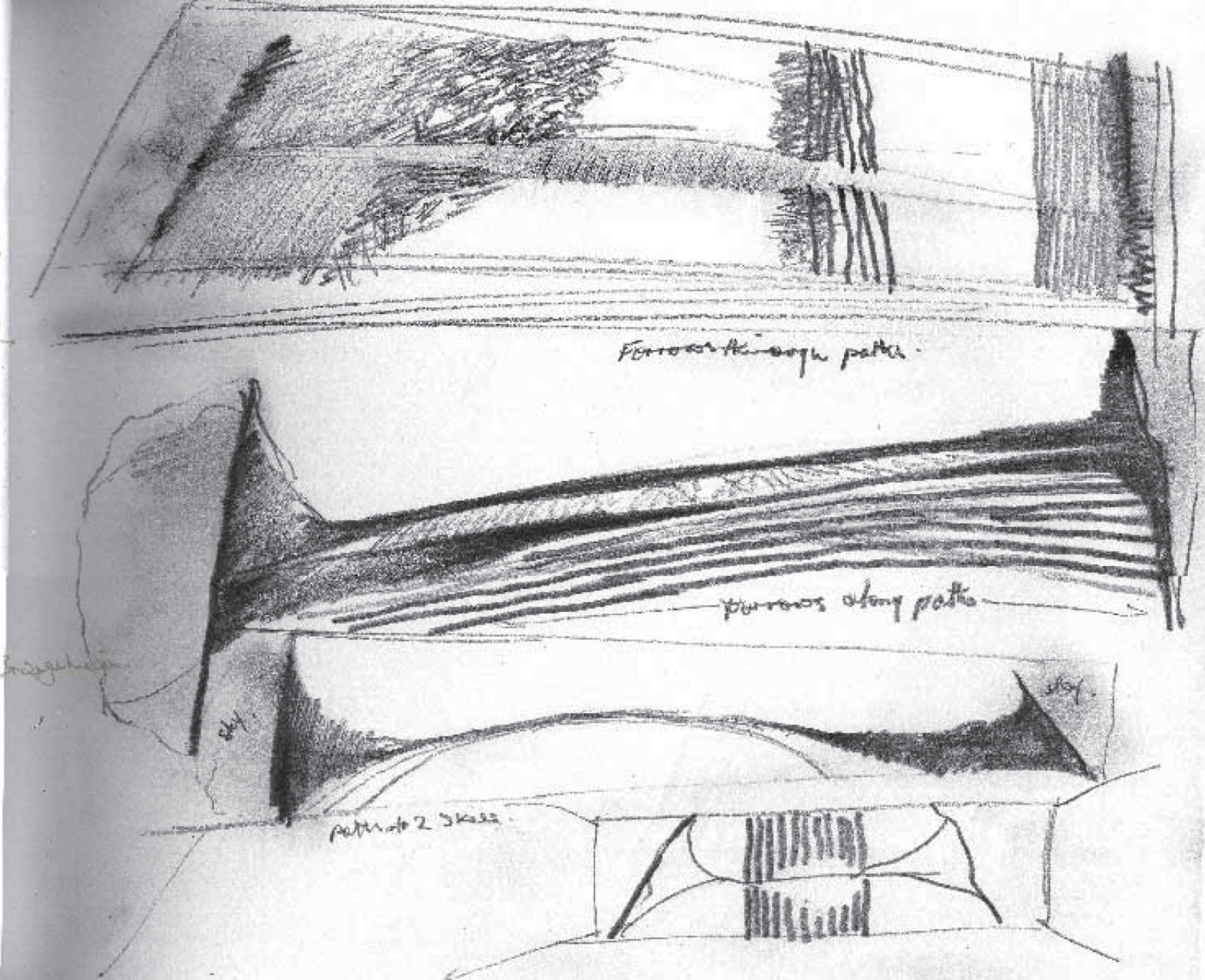
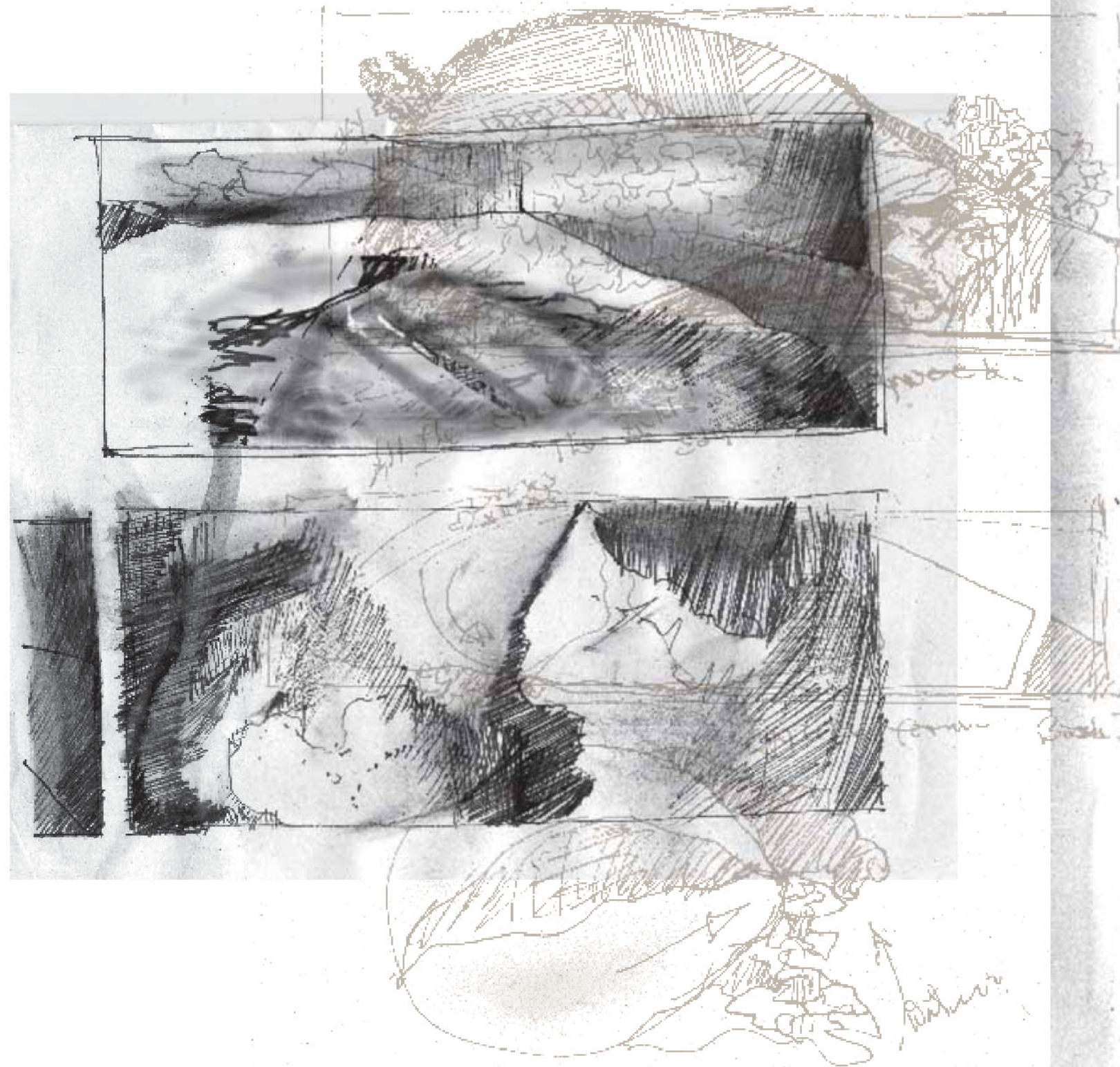
Shadows across
forest floor

Light changing while
fracturing shadows.
Time change - duration



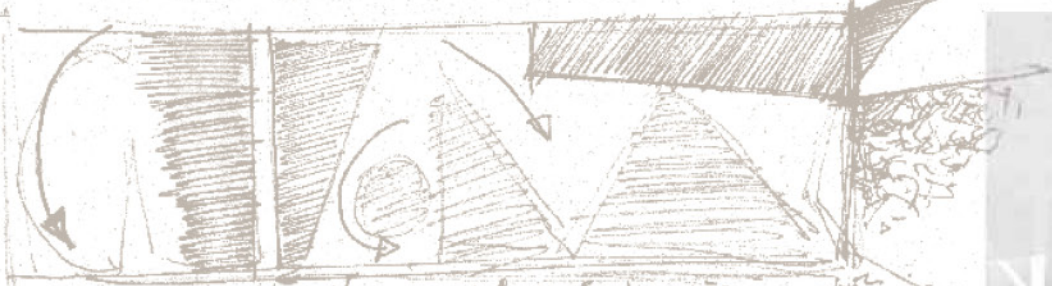
Shadows of trees April and Forenoon.



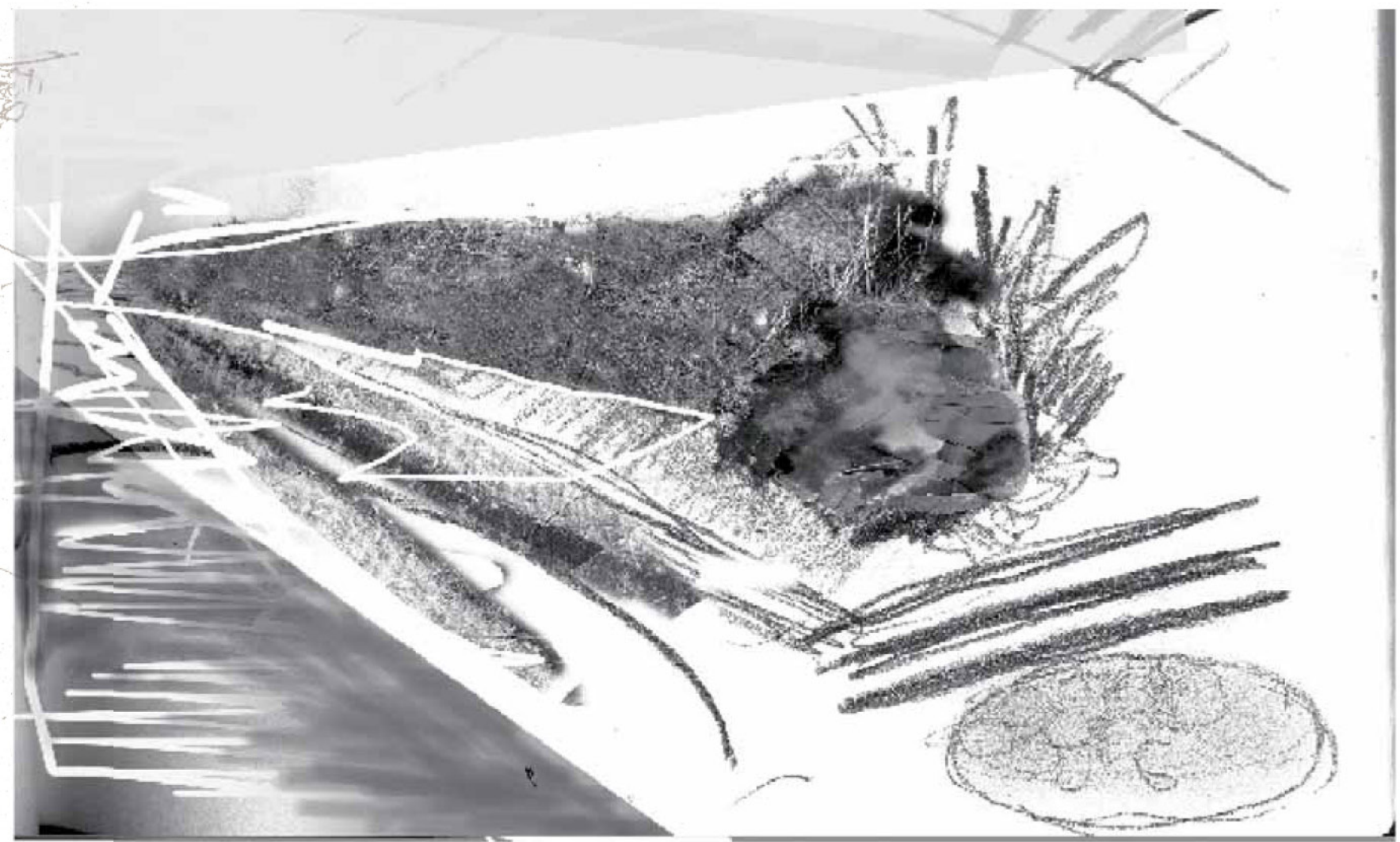
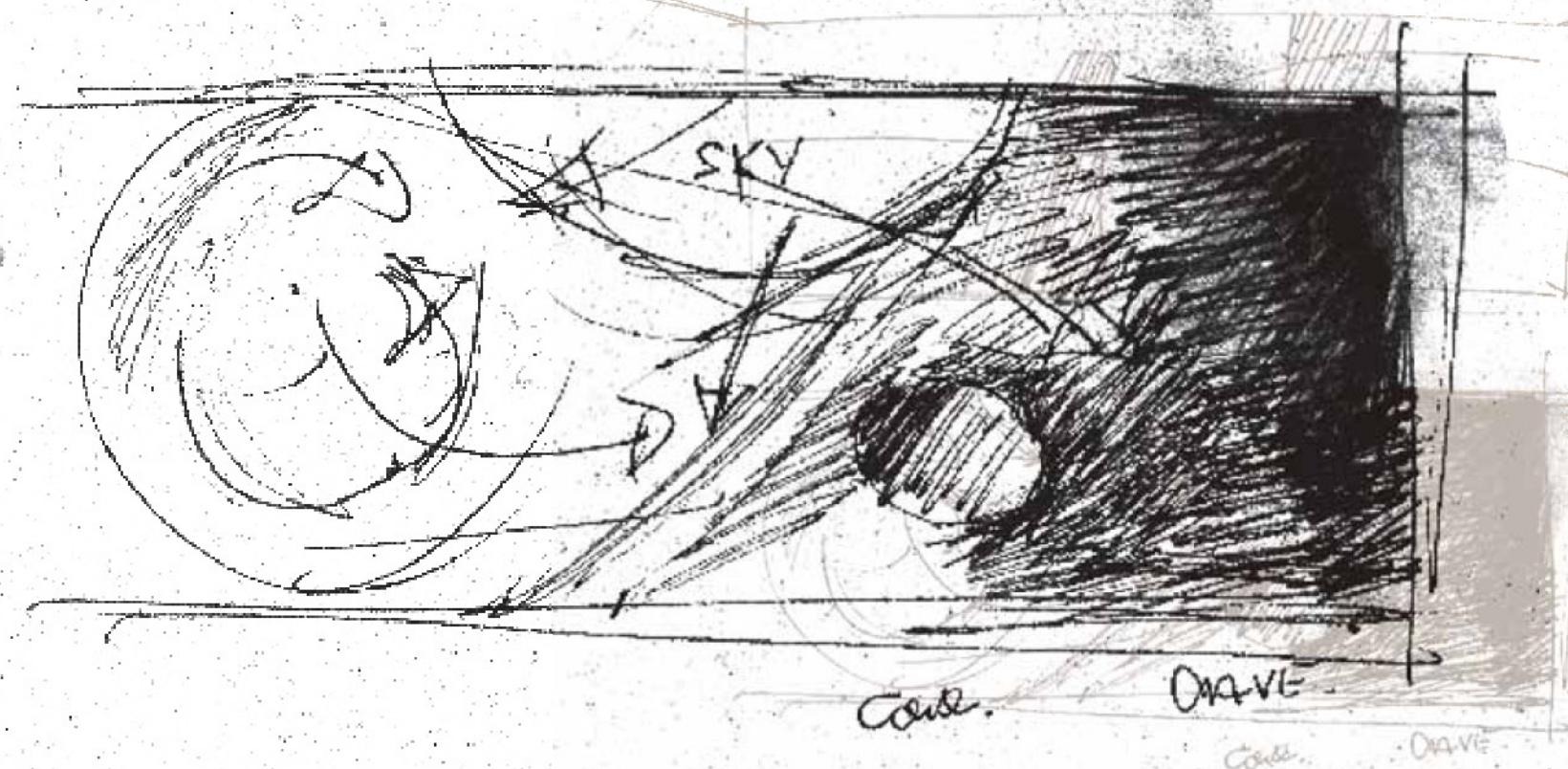


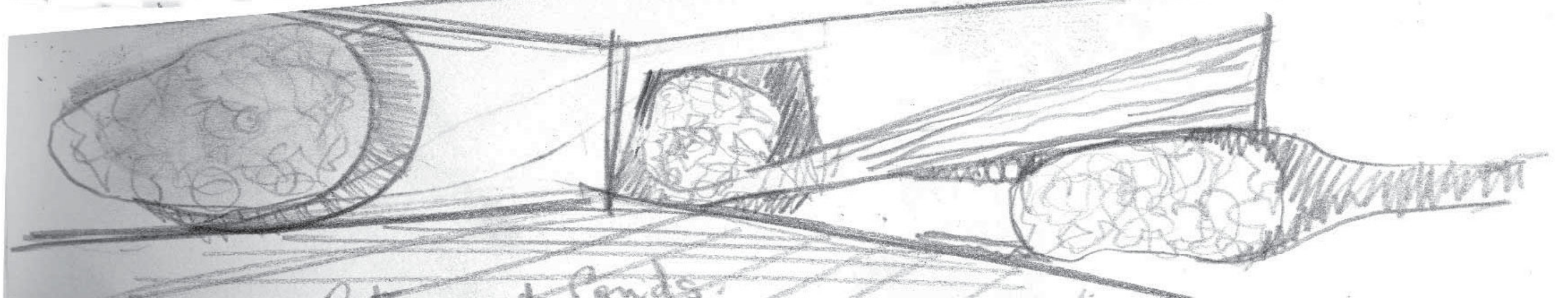
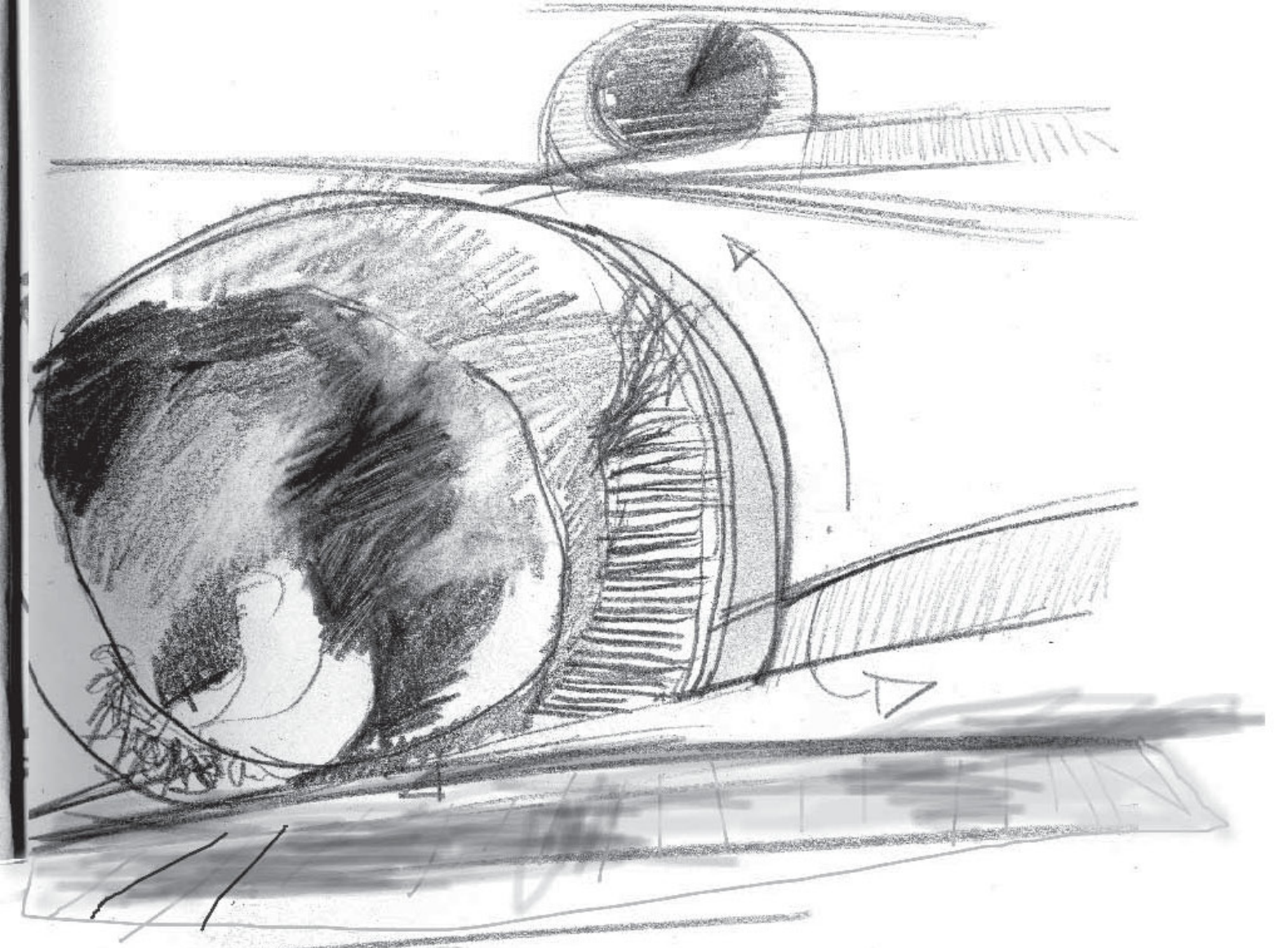
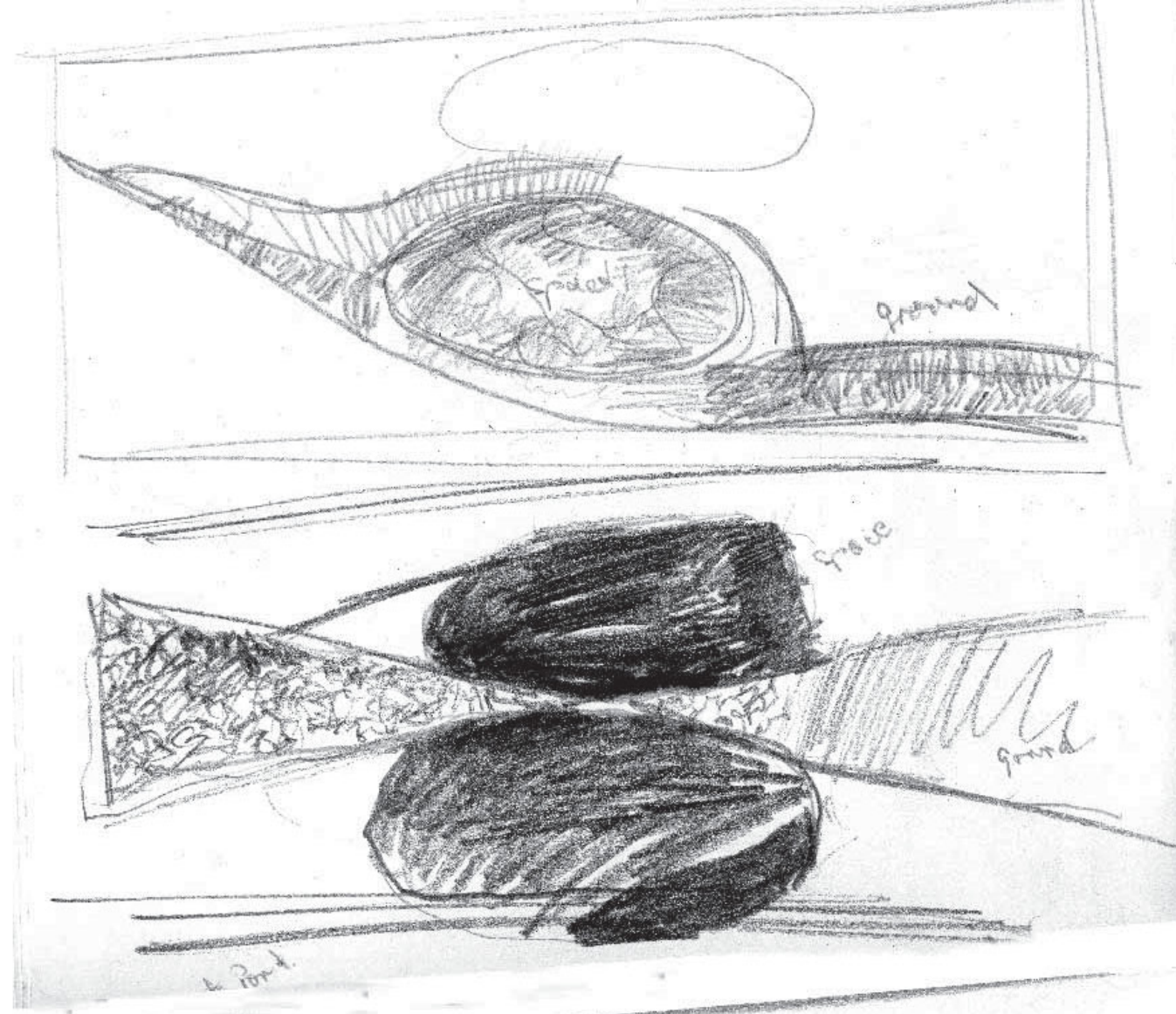


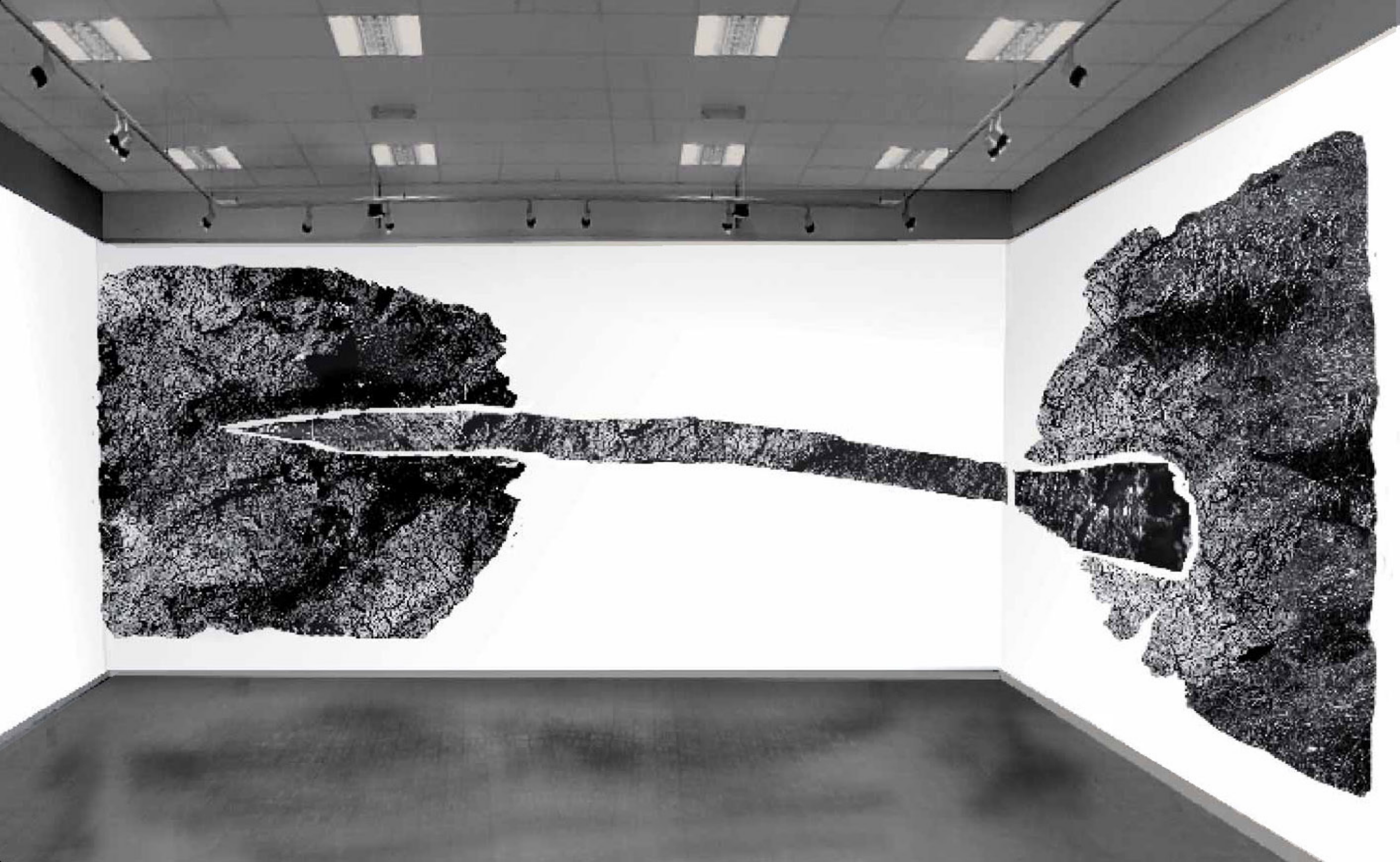
Forest from the land - look to STAND

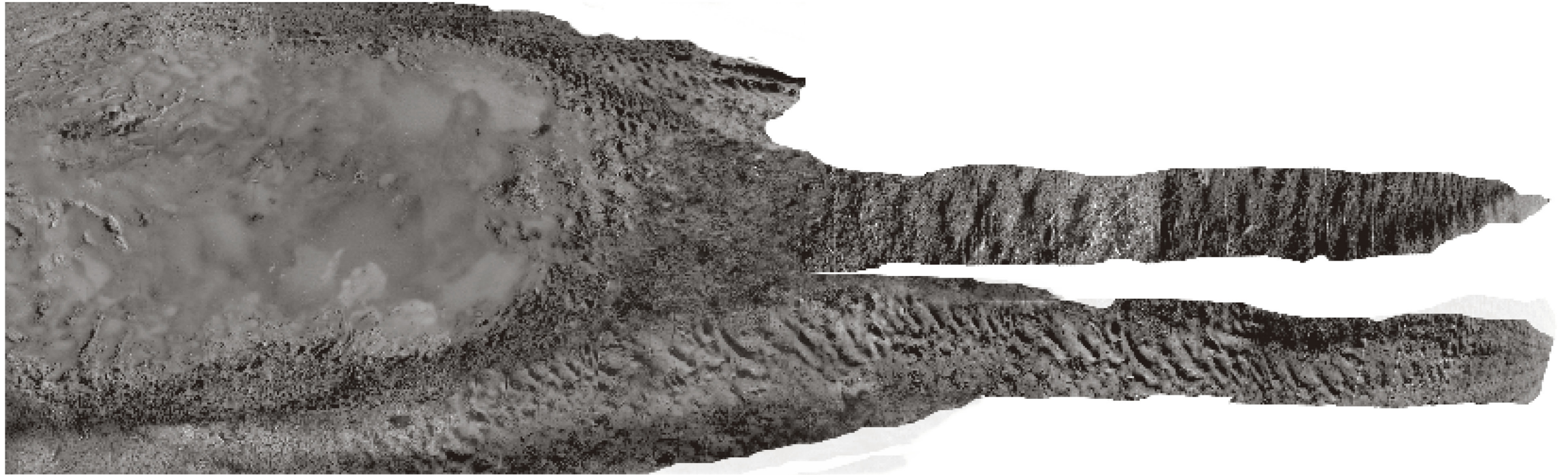


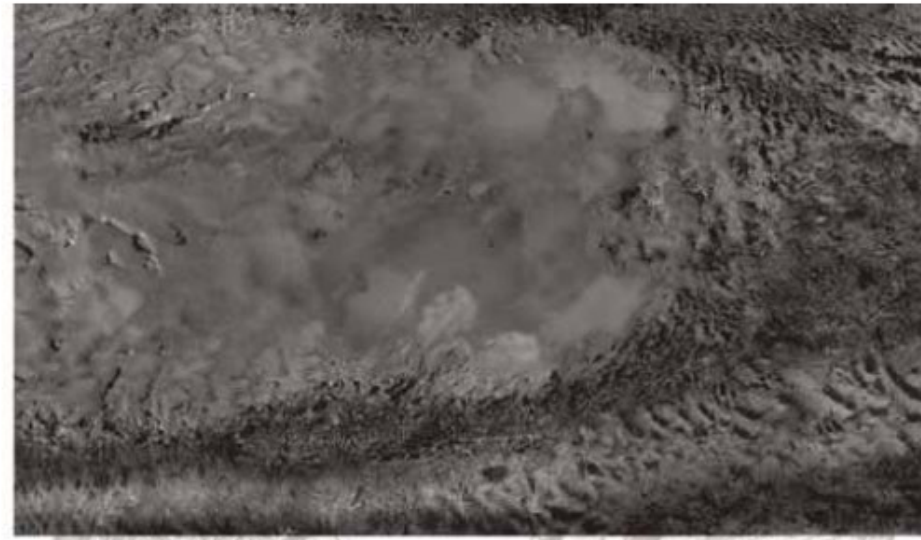
Deviation of fields - a different dynamic
looking over
Walthamstow
July 27.



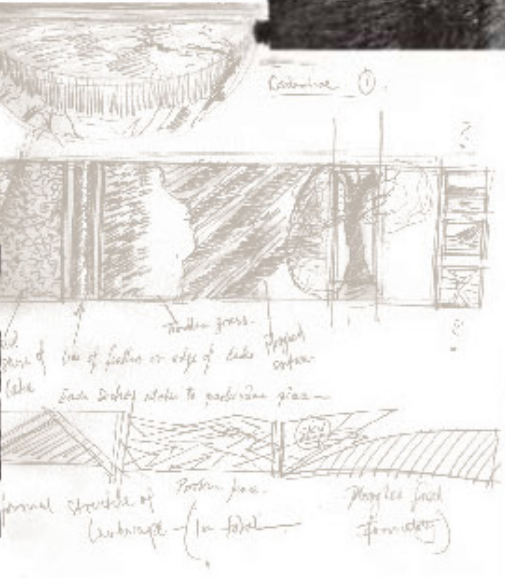
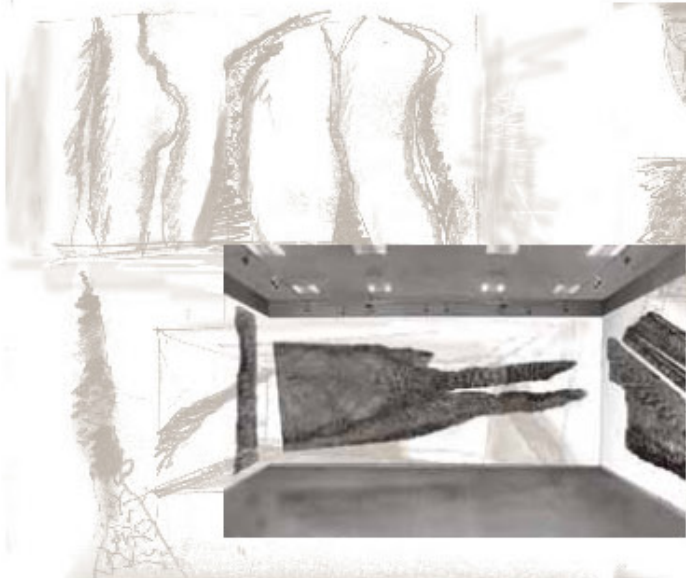




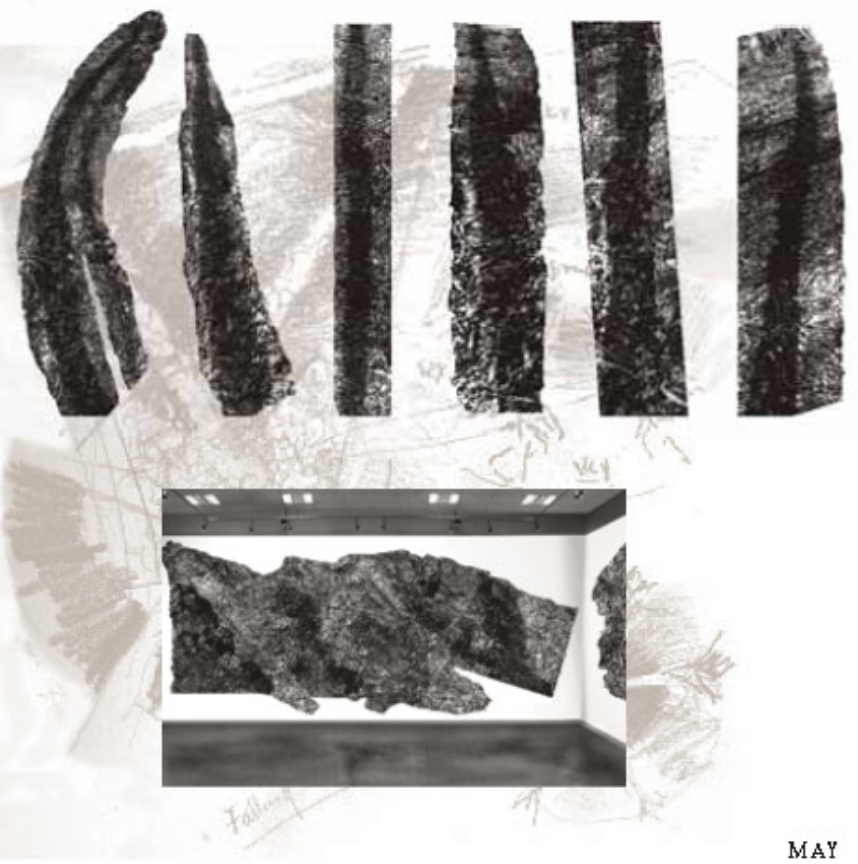
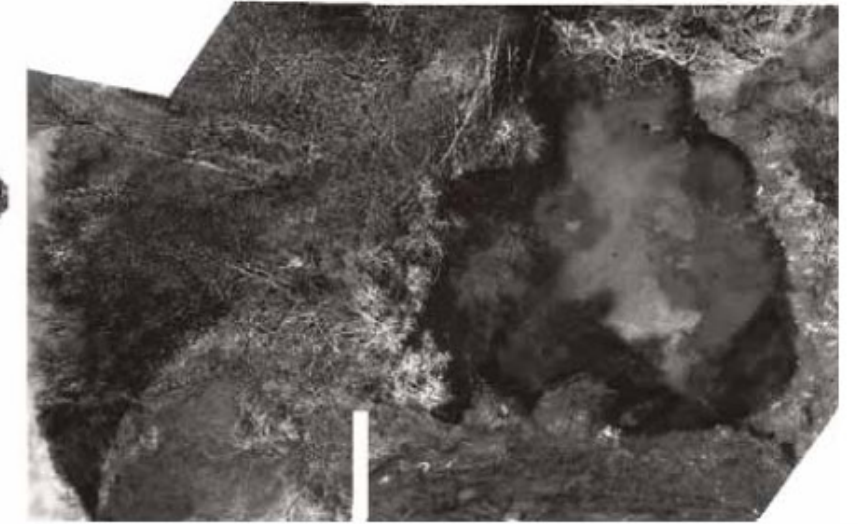




A YEAR OF GENERATING WORK AND THOUGHTS AROUND
FERMYN WOOD, CENTRED ON IDEAS ESTABLISHED FROM
PREVIOUS LAND BASED PROJECTS.
Transient 'Landmarks' formed from memories and perceptions, unfixed on the map
Views without frame or a reliance on the pictorial.
Land drawn from its own material and drawn upon by man and nature.
Various woods that make the forest
Fluid interchange of substance, light and time, akin to the
essential process of photography.
Such thoughts are among the starting points of my activity.



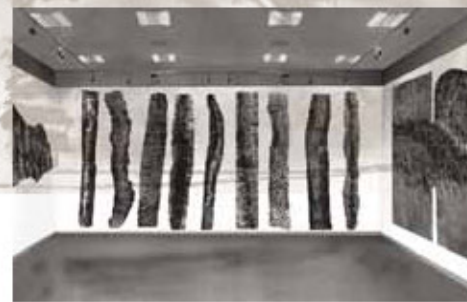
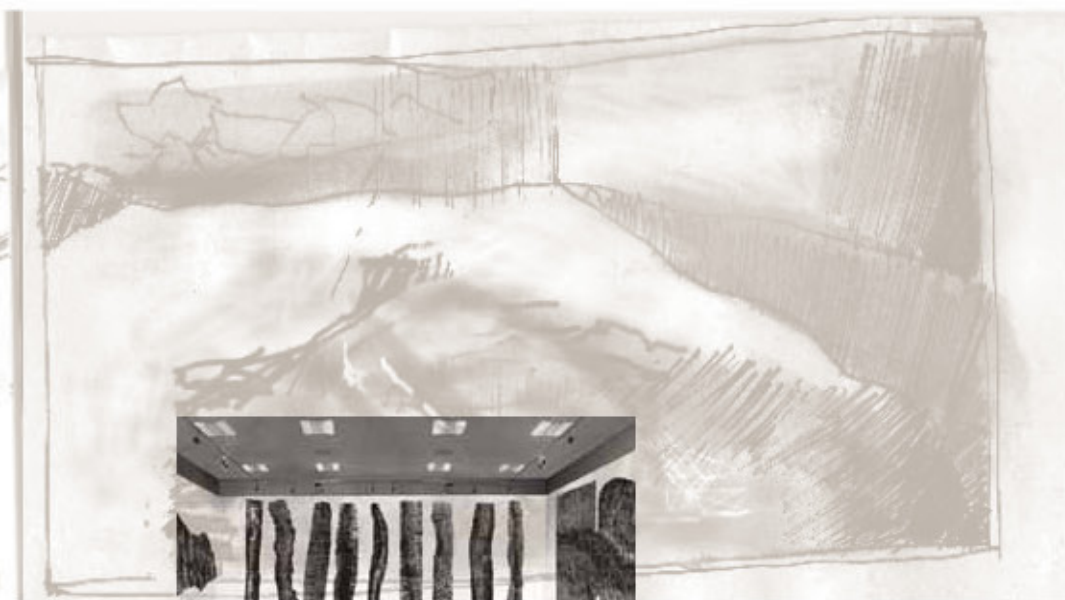
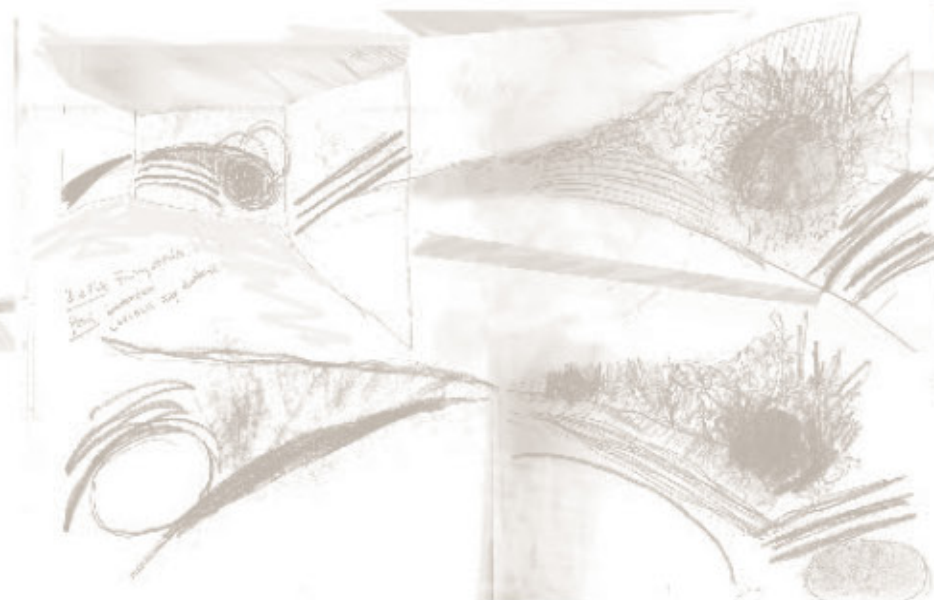
APRIL

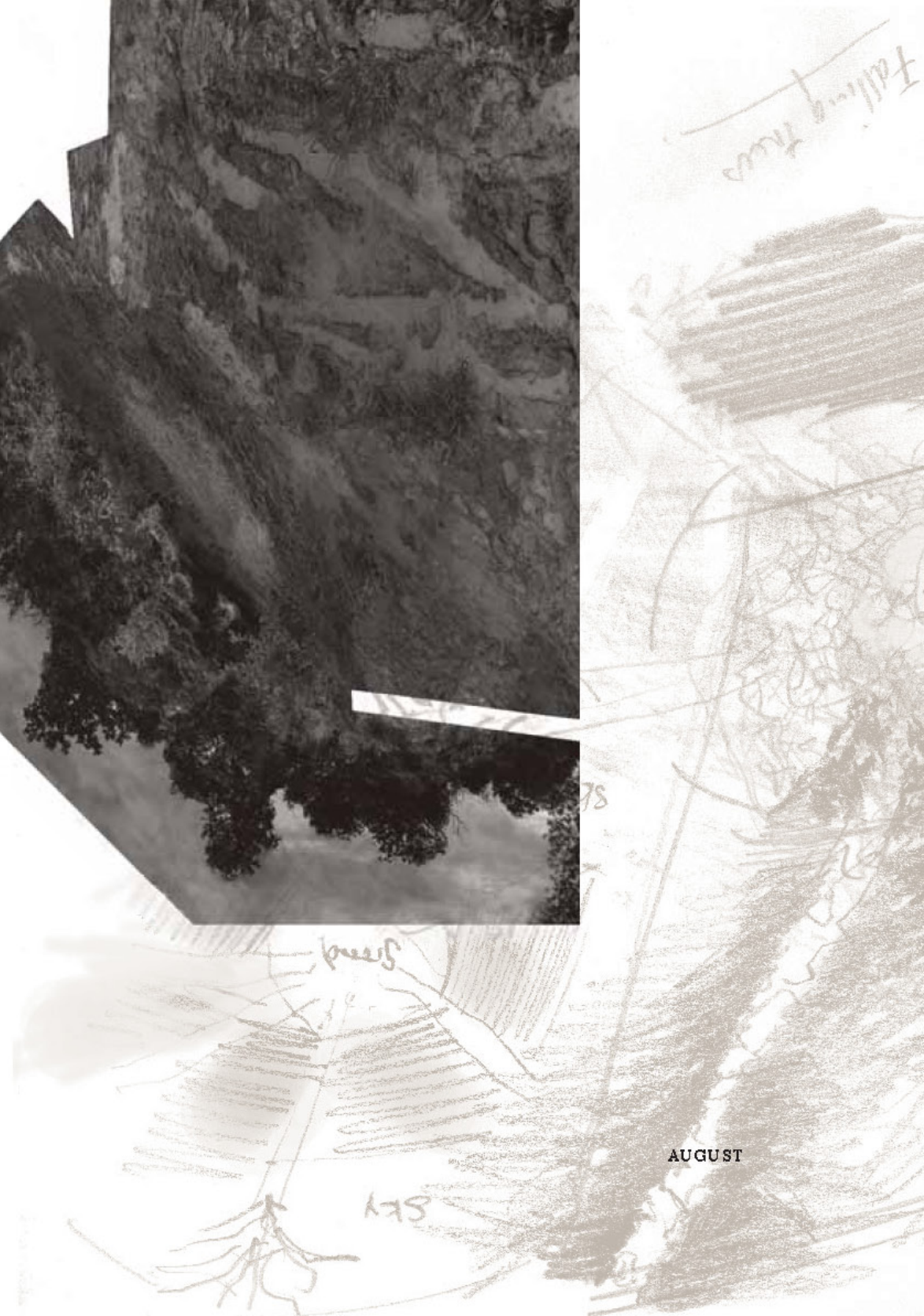
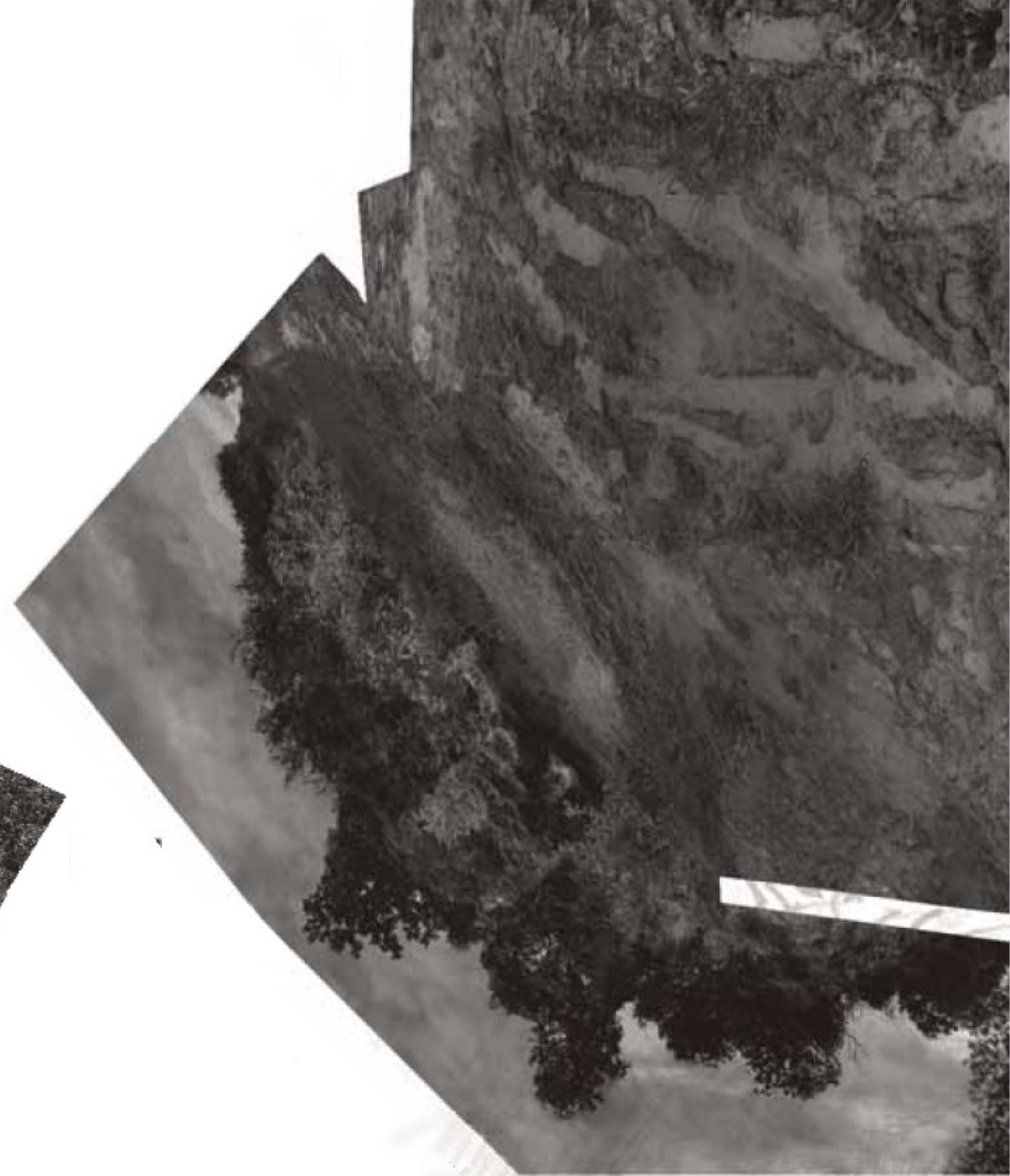
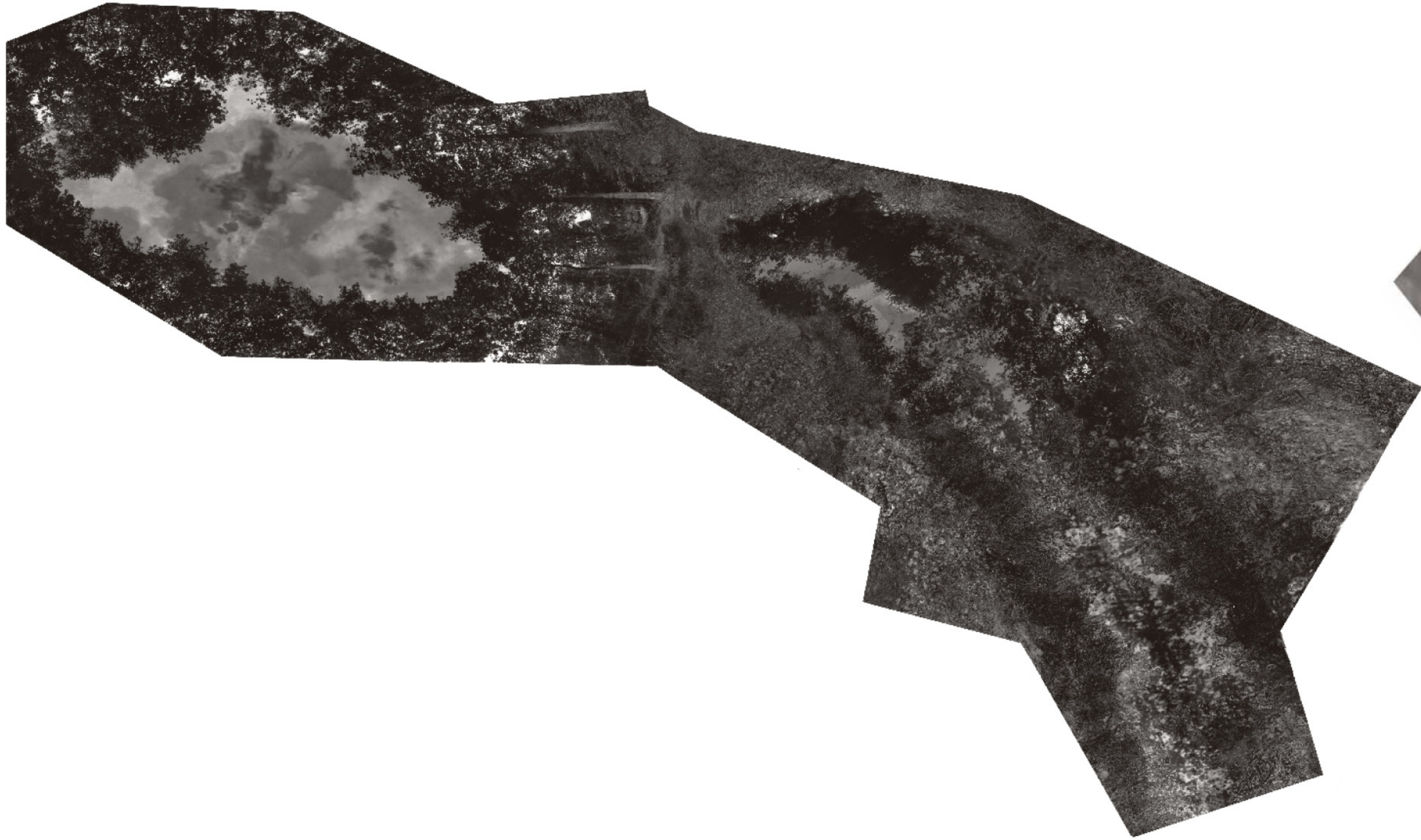


MAY



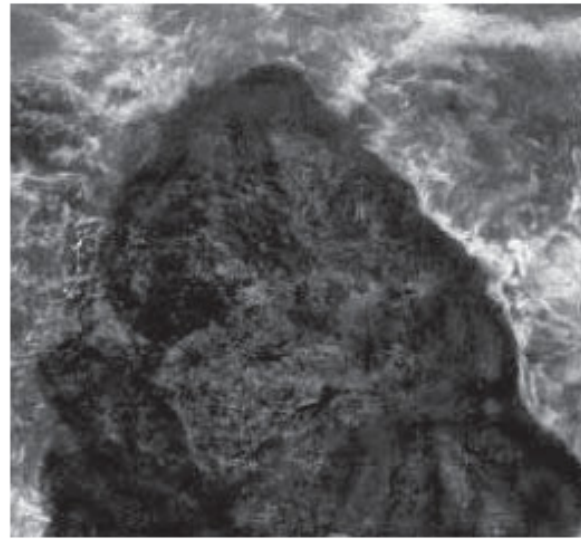
JUNE



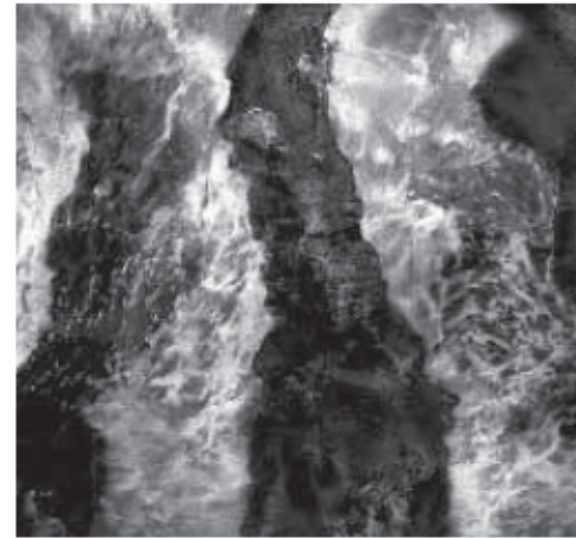
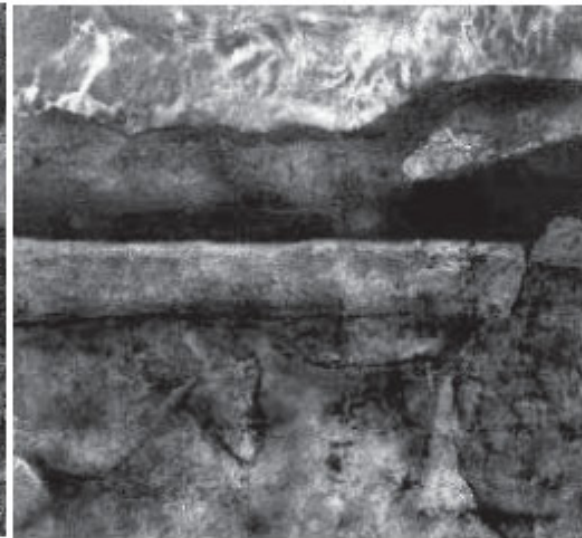


AUGUST





TOWARDS
FERMYNWOODS



We mark the land in many ways through desire or necessity. We structure it for our own purposes and often rely on our landmarks to fix our view or to assist our orientation.

Like the ancients who laid tracks for utility and carried stories on their way across the land, we still sculpt the earth with hand and foot and narrate our trespass in words, marks and images that are free of romantic contrivance.

To bring photography to such thinking may seem perverse since its short history is rooted in the framed selectivity of painting and picture making. Yet the utility of science was the other active force in the development of photography, and science goes beyond the ordered and transfixed towards open enquiry and the unseen.

Somewhere in photography is alchemy akin to nature where light and material meet time to create a sculptural approach to our enquiry through the lens.

Some aspects of photography and sculpture come close to the elemental forces of nature and the 'Povera' attitude to material: man and nature hold a dialogue free of contrived intervention yet resulting in a significant mark or sign on, or about, the land.

Through recent work I have come to consider the 'landmark' not as a physical feature or mark on the map but more as a perceptual construct. We fix a 'view' of our experience of the land in our minds through association and interpretation often associated with memory, instinct and mood. The 'landmarks' we carry with us after a walk are often visceral, internalised and related through generalised description.

Yet there is, in such relating of our experience of the land, a necessary fusion of the holistic and the particular. Our 'landmarks' can be those small things noticed yet unremarkable, or a complex amalgam of many such fragments.

These thoughts were progressed through the 'Landmarks and Signs' series that I carried out for the Nene Valley Way between 2004 and 2006. The five works produced were each perceptual landmarks that took on the guise of a complete view made up of fragments. I made deliberate, but I hope, ironic use of the frame as a means of taking the viewer beyond it and appropriated the form of the located sign to enforce this notion. What is indicated on a sign is intrinsically a pointer to what is someplace outside of

its contained information.

The idea of a work pointing beyond its location and content is of course inherent to most works of art - the whole is always greater than the parts.

However there is much to explore in the idea of fixing the parts of our experience in such a way that the experience is deliberately broken, to create a situation in which the viewer has to spend time both viewing and constructing.

What happens if we present the viewer with a broken experience of the land - landscape without form and deliberately devoid of location or place?

At the beginning of the Fermynwoods project I was playing with this idea - which had to be called 'Broken Ground'.

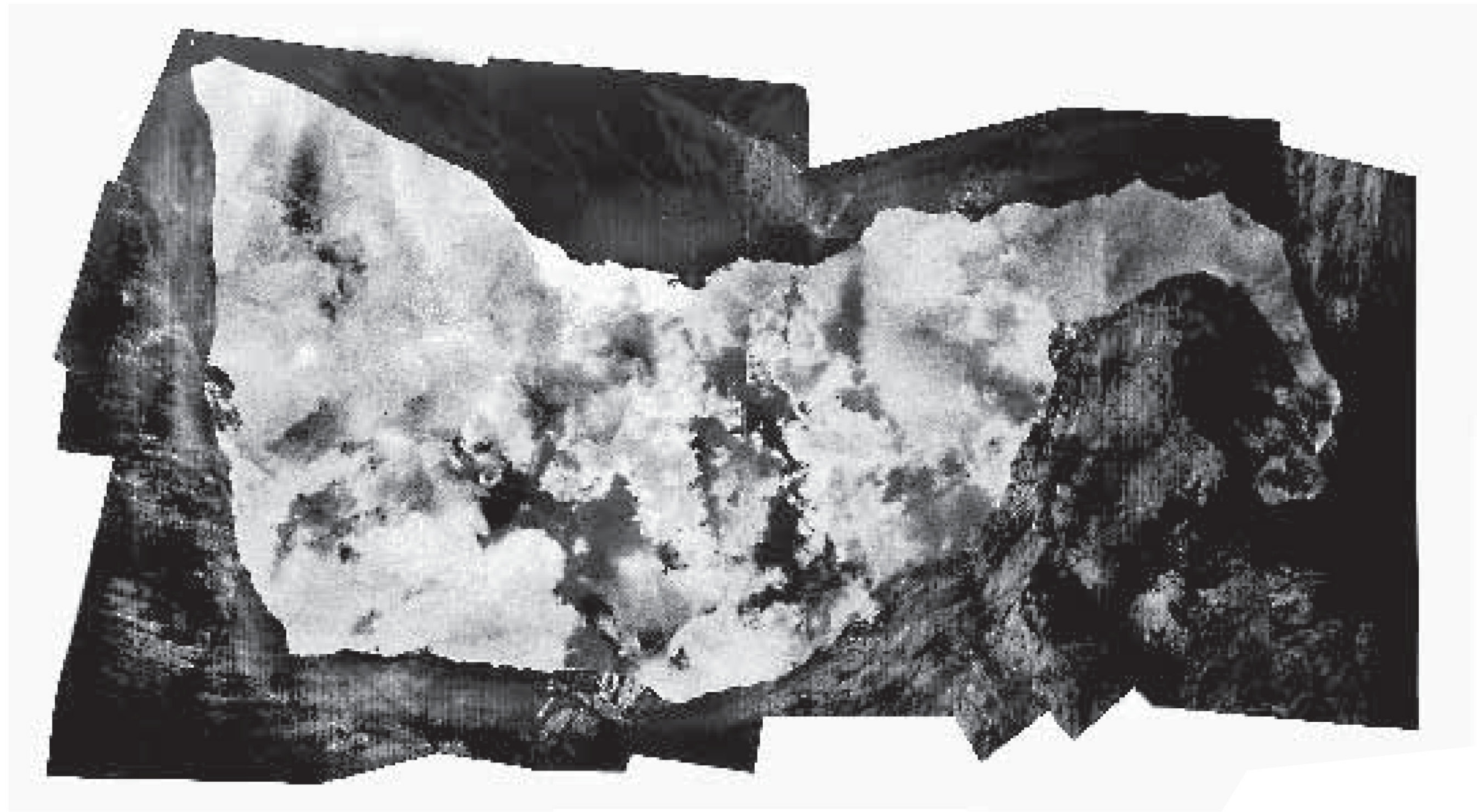
A series of works which were essentially gallery located and conceived as isolated fragments of land, which would encourage the viewer to enter an experience of 'landscape', the frame of which could only be within their own construct or control.

To be presented, at such a time, with a tract of land to contemplate for a year and the open brief of seeing what fragments of thought would develop out of that contemplation was fortuitous and apt.

It was equally appropriate that Fermynwood is that unremarkable stretch of forest and field which sets the tone of much of our landscape. Whilst it has claims of particular interest to the naturalist and the historian, it is blissfully without anaesthetic to set it apart from the wooded arable land generic to rural England. While marked on the map, and defined for me by the central location of the gallery and the form of the project, the area offered an unremarkable landscape that would not impose on my thoughts or condition my responses.

For a year I have been free to consider this place as a catchment area for my thoughts and actions, and Fermynwoods Gallery as a centre to report to through a series of published monthly bulletins and a concluding exhibition. The result is a set of notions, concepts, and occasional words gathered in this book. Their form reflects upon thoughts generated in previous work and lays the ground for work to come.

John Hopper



“THE SPOT FROM WHENCE THE VIEW IS TAKEN IS IN
A FIXED STATE TO THE PAINTER, BUT THE GARDENER
SURVEYS HIS SCENERY WHILE IN MOTION”

Humphrey Repton, The Art of Landscape Gardening (1794)



BROKEN AND BREAKING GROUND

John Harper spent 2007 investigating Fermyn Woods and the adjoining countryside as the raw material for Broken & Breaking Ground. His work not only relates to photography and a uniquely contemporary concern with environmental matters, but also refers to that great English innovation in aesthetics, the philosophy of the picturesque

Interest in the medium of photography in art came of age in the highly experimental period from the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s. The most significant artists of this period, belonging to such groupings as Conceptual Art, Body Art, and Land Art made lively use of this medium not only for documentary purposes but also as an integral part of their works. In his essay, “Mirror Travel” (1969), Robert Smithson suggests that it is the task of the artist to reconstruct our “inability to see”. Smithson sought to de-programme the associative aspects that were latent in ‘traditional’ photography and advanced the poetic aspect of landscape dedicated to exploring how the mind as well as the eye must be satisfied in the man made environment. Smithson recognised that this concern had parallels with the theory of the picturesque first articulated in the 18th century.

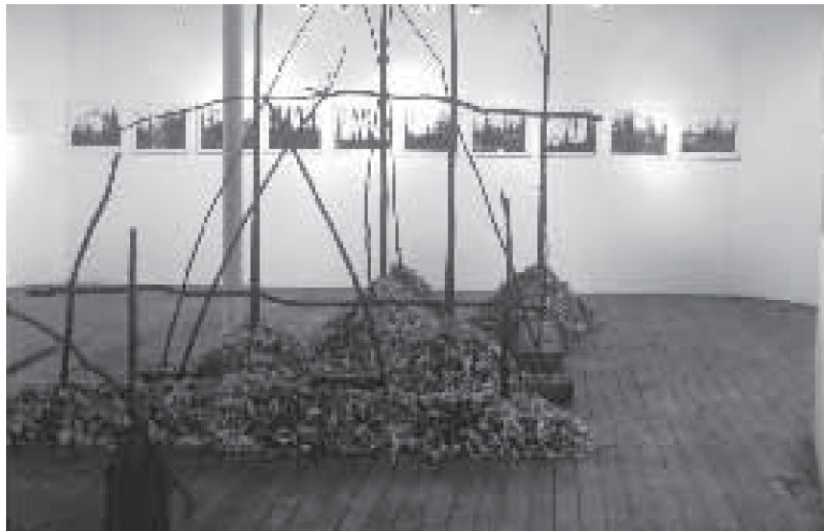
The picturesque aesthetic is founded on boundlessness, informality, locality, and accidental accretion; phenomena which have in common that they are the results of circumstance. Meaning emerges not didactically in the way that it might from the works of the classical renaissance, but rather from dynamic re-interpretation by the viewer, and then only provisionally. For those of picturesque sensibility, meaning creates architectural follies (both real and metaphorical) that always hint at some alternative and

further meaning at greater remove; at more and more meanings that are the product of a variety of shifting interchanges rather than of the divination of any essential nature. Harper’s work interrogates the everyday aspects of the suburban countryside of the 21st century to similar effect, probing the unyielding muddiness of puddles for meanings in a way that finds reflection in works by others as diverse as the melancholy poetry of John Clare and Thomas Gainsborough’s landscapes painted from tableaux of sticks and clay

For Robert Smithson, the photograph tells us what is no longer before us; the truth can only be read, if it can be read at all, in the traces of what is no longer present. A trace registers its temporal remove from the set of conditions that gave rise to it. Harper’s work is redolent with this quality of “having been there”. The works presented here expose us to a proliferation of multiple and fragmentary views of things that no longer exist, if indeed (as composite images) they ever existed at all.

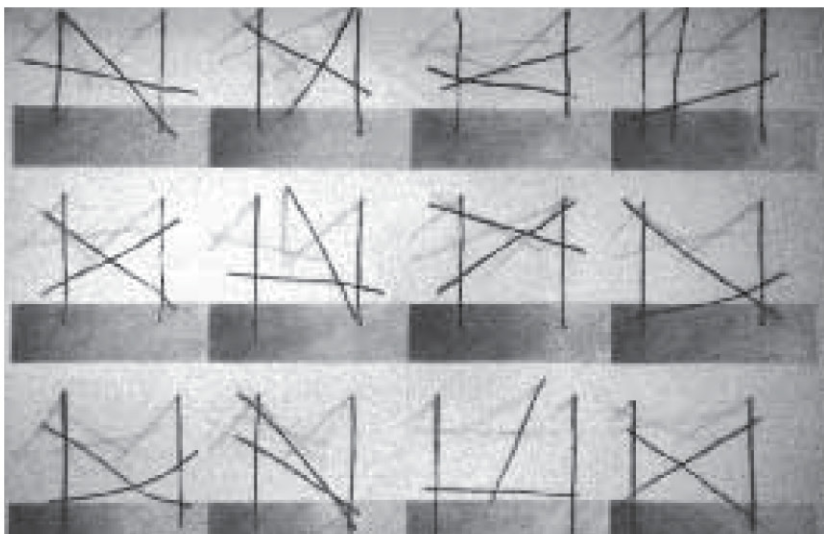
Like Clare and Gainsborough, Harper rejects the totality of an art work in the classical tradition, of subdivisions constituting smaller but still harmoniously related parts forming a single unified and immediately intelligible composition. Similarly in Harper’s work the original landscape emerges in antithesis of classicism’s self-contained symmetry and universality, uniquely trapped and distorted by forms that have emerged from the process of its creation. What we are left with is not a picture of a landscape, but a simulacrum of a landscape of sorts that exists between nature and artifice, between the eye and the mind; a work that takes on an independent existence that is free of the limitations of representation.

Patrick Duerden



IN CONVERSATION WITH NANCY STEDMAN

Transcribed from conversations over the period of a year



MATERIAL

Although you started off as a painter, your early work addressed very directly the physicality of materials – you worked both with and on the land, and brought natural materials into the gallery – ‘sculpting with the material of life’ – and very consciously manipulating spaces both within and outside the gallery.

But for the last 10 or 15 years you have worked almost exclusively with black and white photography, a medium which emphasises the surface, the image – why?

As a young student and prior to art college, I loved one subject... geomorphology, which I covered at A level... OS maps... I loved them, I liked the look of them... but more I liked the way they provided notation, and their schematic quality.

They provided a visual notation that made me able to visualise an actual place, and the form of the land. I would spend hours looking at them and interpreting them into drawings of landscapes that I had never seen. I drew countless river profiles.

I would walk and cycle as far as I could from my home in Burton on Trent, into Derbyshire and Staffordshire, to interpret the form of these maps. The most exciting part of this was the tactile aspect, seeing a drawing become actual form and then being in contact with that form... Rocks, gates, bits of churches – I was always picking things up and taking them into school.

Burton was a place of beer, wood and coal, hops, malt and barley. It was full of smells and textures, and now I know why I love STUFF. All of my relatives worked in the breweries, the mines and the brickyards, and their conversation and stories were threaded with tactile descriptions... how they got scars on their knees and arms, what it felt like to be up to your waist in malt, how to make barrels in coopers yards... and of course all of the stuff they talked about came from the land.

...A lot of my family lived in Stoke, and that place had even more tactility than Burton. I would stay with my aunt... the house was an incredible museum of a terrace, so small and cave-like that you touched everything in it and it was built onto the edge of a marl pit and open cast clay works. Everything was black with soot... this is one of the most formative and pleasurable memories I have...

When I chose to go to art college I chose a place that I thought would be like Stoke... so I went to Manchester. I wanted to be in the north and I wanted to be able to get into the moors. I just wanted to be somewhere hard and gritty.

Before I went there I was at Burton School of Art, playing with clay all

day... They wanted me to be a potter. In some ways this made sense but to me the idea of craft did not appeal. This I think matters, and it has stayed with me throughout my career... the relationship between art and artisanship... its roots are back then, but there was something about being involved with craft that did not fit. Perhaps I was too close to it or perhaps the idea of the functional was too corrupted for me.

What interests me now is how important some aspects of this contradiction are still stimulating in my work...

I tried to make paintings at Manchester, but the artifice did not interest me, the stuff did, and printmaking was OK as long as it did not involve pictures... Norman Ackroyd taught me etching, no one could have been better. He used to take plates and acid up into the hills and burn them on the spot. He would talk to me about the elements doing the job, and the direct relationship between the subject, the material and the place of nature within it.

...another guy introduced me to Arshile Gorky and the story of Gorky standing in a river to make his first abstract communion with nature. I think that is the one story that has made me think more than any other. It sums up so much of what matters to me.

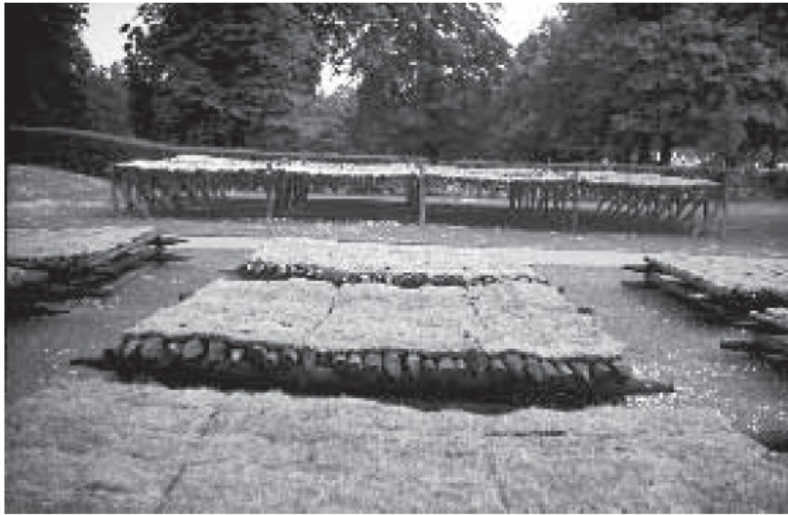
Everything I did tried to speed up what nature did... I arrived in Northampton in 1971 with the contents of a kit – etchings made of rain and smoke, paintings made of rain, bird shit, straw, etc., prints of burnt metal. I made some drawings for sculptures that people could make themselves. They would catch the rain in tanks and circulate it over canvasses leaving green stains and algae on the surface.

In my basement I started to weave all of the grass cut from my lawn into thatch-like surfaces. I made drawings of these surfaces as they developed, they became by the nature of the process, cyclical and sequential. Everything was to do with harnessing nature to make my work for me. I started to walk in rural Northamptonshire... I found thatchers and fence makers using the natural material of the land in ways that seemed totally in tune with nature itself.

I found the idea of cyclical changes in a rural landscape pleasing to me, it was all so complete and purposeful and truthful – artisanship without the awful intrusion of decorative craft. This was essential craft that was so deeply rooted in the very beginning of things that it had not been despoiled or corrupted – a bit like making beer and bread and digging coal or clay.

And now, yes, I have moved away from the physical processes but I do not feel as if I have. There is plenty of physical handling in my work that compensates for the touch of matter and I am very conscious of the contact with nature as I work, especially on location.

I like the ‘nature’ in photography that allows a certain aspect of contact to come through. like etching, which is speeded up rusting, an accelerated natural process. I try to get my students to think of photography in terms of natural alchemy.



A SURFACE OF REEDS HARVESTED IN 1973

This was the first work that you exhibited in a major gallery and it seemed to set the tone of your work for several years. It was perhaps a ‘Povera’ work or land work. There were three other shows and commissions that took on that form of working and you were definitely producing sculpture.

Perhaps we could talk about that period and how you gradually moved to the use of photography.

For some reason the Arts Council selected me to put on a one man show at The Serpentine as part of the Sculpture 73 series (those were the good old days...!).

This was a turning point, and my career started. I was scared... my studio basement was a mess and became a bigger mess because I went to a thatcher and the thatcher took me to Norfolk where I collected Norfolk reeds in the way they should be collected, each bundle fitting the arms of the harvester. The bundles were delivered to my basement. Trees felled in a local forest were cut into fencing stakes... Out of this collecting was born ‘A surface made of reeds harvested in 1973’ and other similar works, and they were shown on the lawns of The Serpentine Gallery, and the drawings – which gave birth to the work – were shown inside the gallery.

I was called a sculptor. But was the surface a painting placed parallel to the ground? And were the other areas of raised turf cut from the lawns and raised 2 feet from the ground on pine logs also paintings?

I liked the way the turf turned yellow throughout the show and the way the yellows turned back to green when the turf was put back in place. I liked the way the grass under the reed mats could not be cut and grew to become part of the work. I liked the fact that I had to construct on site to a very

logistical plan that I documented as sequential photographs... and that those photographs became another piece of work born of the first.

So there was work before the work – documents – and there was a work after the work that was documented. All sorts of cycles were set up...

I wanted the process of making to become an intrinsic part of my work. The process of the archaeologist was also interesting, in that continual documentation becomes outcome. All stages of my work were photographed and videoed. The procedural drawings and the documentation were always shown alongside the resulting form.

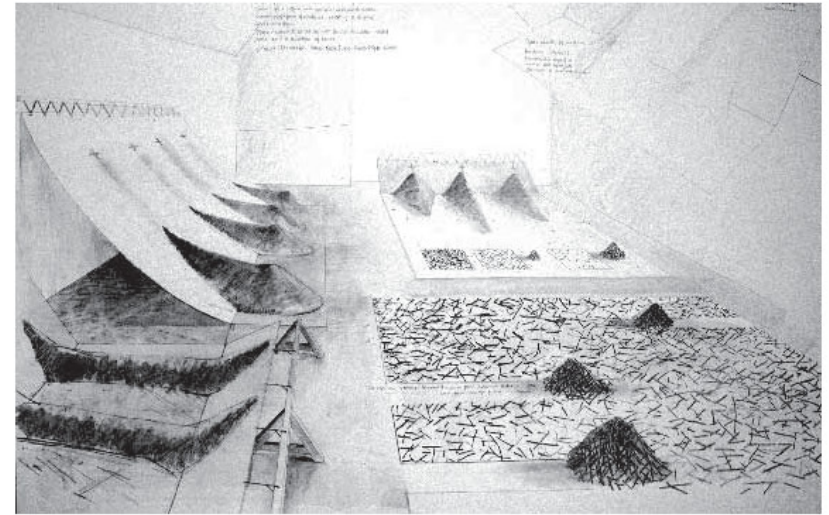
Photography had now become an essential aspect of my work, but I was not satisfied with its supporting documentary role. It had to do more than that. I also realised that handling the stuff of life was what mattered to me.

What happened in this period has stayed with me ever since, even though the work has changed.

Somewhere between ‘Arte Povera’ and conceptualism is me... and the land.

Maybe I want to change the shape of the land: leaving marks on it is not very satisfying. I realise that I have more in common with artisans than artists, but the conceptual aspect of art is all-important to me... some evidence that I have touched the land is not like leaving a mark on it.

So at this point photography saved me; it became an agent between myself and nature. It was inevitable that I would become interested in the perceptual aspects of the medium. How do we see something as holistic as the land? How are we as one with it? How does the pictorial relate to it?





PHOTOGRAPHY

So what are the cross-overs between the different forms that you work in, and between notions of painting, sculpture and photography?

For me photography is a sculptural form because it relates to spatial perception. I think I use the camera in a filmic way, away from the norms of pictorial space or structure.

Perspective is a contrivance that has no relation to the way we see or perceive; it's an invention that seems to suit architectural space and has resulted in the conspiracy of the rectangle.

This is what began to interest me as soon as I started making full use of photography. The thought is of course not new – the Cubists and their reference to 'simultaneity' were obviously referring to this in ways that linked vision to a wider use of the senses and of memory. I was not trying to refer to

Cubist space though I was interested in it.

Film seems to be a completely 'sculptural' form in the way that it involves us with space and perception. How do we deal with a holistic approach to vision and sensation, the fact that we become as one with our environment when we think like this? I wanted to question the conditioning aspect of pictorial construction in relation to image making. I wanted image-making to fuse with a more sculptural approach. The dilemma of vision strikes me as an interesting phrase. I don't know where it comes from.

So I was moving from making to using photography. Photography was an agent for perception... the camera became a chisel or a means of deconstructing nature. It was intrinsic with making. It would allow me to chip pieces off the natural world in order to reconfigure those pieces.

Through it I could transpose the physical to my studio. Each piece was not a photograph, it was as close as I could get to having the actual rock or water. So I was enabled through photography to sculpt the land.

The 'Physical Drawing' and 'Catchment' series were all about this thought and process – and also the concern with drawing and the mental space of the surface on which the drawing was created. But the work was carried out in a very sequential and systematic manner. The use of photography as documentation was still there.

Time seems to be very important...

Time is of course implicit in the use of photography. The reference to the filmic makes that more apt and evident. I cannot consider cycles and nature without time and I cannot say what I have said about visual perception and memory without time being a key factor.

... the editing of natural time through material is transferred into the filmic editing of time. Film implies a continuum, the linear, but it also allows for the fragmenting of time into single, almost indivisible, units. To make a holistic vision from disparate and indivisible units is fascinating to me.

The gathering of time is as the gathering of material and light: all are as one, and all can be dealt with through concepts of perception... and photography brings all of these things together.

And evidence?

The authority of the photograph, the evidential – this is a key factor that has entered into my concerns more recently. I can relate this to earlier work in retrospect. Now it seems obvious.

While I thought of my work as sculpture through photography, I did not have to make a point of this. As the work has taken on a more painterly form it has become an essential concern. Sculpture always IS; painting never IS. There is no evidence in painting...

So the argument of evidence in photography is interesting to me, and the irony of handling photography as painting becomes a perverse challenge...

I want to keep to the physical evidence of matter. To photograph a darkness – the darkness denies the photo and the only evidence is darkness, but it has to be evident.

PERCEPTION

You have said that you are interested in how perception works. How does this interest manifest itself in your work?

Perception is at the centre of my work, more so than landscape or any other subject that I use. If I look back over nearly all of the photographic work that I have done, everything has been driven by perception.

I am intrigued by the way we are always at the centre of our own vision, how we compile and construct our vision to relate to our understanding, how memory is a construct and an ever active force on our interaction with place. More than just place but our interaction in general... our communication with the world in both particular and holistic terms relies on an interaction of immediate reaction and memory.

This of course relates to the conditioning that we accept in relation to the fixed frame and what has become almost a genetic acceptance of the picture.

We carry this fixed central view with us as a constant, and in an extremely fluid way. We build composites all the time that involve both complete and partial visual perceptions. We do not think about the shape that we look through. We do not think about the way we use focus, or the part that continual recall plays in the building of a personal frame that has no edges.

Peripheral vision is incomplete but always present.

There are many questions raised by such thinking. Where did the concept of frame come from? And why is it predominantly rectangular?

The process of physical perception is a subject that pervades my work. I think of it in relation to the frame, to the composite view of the selected moment and the intangible aspects of memory.

I find it easy to relate such thinking to the constructive forces and actions of sculpture, and I enjoy arguing with them when I take a more painterly approach. This is why I move between the two in my work... I like the dialogue between them. Previously I have said/seen this as a linear development that was happening in my work, but now I accept that it is more of an interchange.

To make visualisations of place – in which I utilise a multitude of centres of view – is a continuum in my work with photography. I am at the centre of every fragment and 'frame' in each piece, just as I am in each moment of my life. I carry this central position through every moment of my life.

Every fragment is evidential... because of the nature of photography. The compiled fragments become personal constructs, yet there is an undeniable truth about the construct. It is relocated evidence of being in a place.

I think of perception in these terms... the relocation of the already existent, a reformed understanding, or a transmitted under-standing. I'm

interested in the way we look away yet continue looking, and the glances away become part of our seeing. This way we build a picture that includes association. This is a force that has been employed throughout the making of pictures. You cannot take us away from place or possession.

As I have progressed through my work I have become more concerned with point of view – how we are always at the centre of our own vision. There are times when I have played games with this and taken the camera away from the eye to the eye of an object or as if suspended in flight.

I had to go through the sculptural phase before I realised all of this, and it was in the period of seeking an alternative way to transpose or transport the sculptural that all of this became important to me. But I must say that starting as a painter helped.

Photography allows me to deal with present, past and minute particles of time. Existentialism is of interest to me but I do not know much about it. The one central concern – that we are in control and ownership of these tiny indivisible units of our existence – is the most fascinating aspect of the philosophy to me. It helps me to understand how this relates to the idea of being centrally fixed in the singular picture.

If I push this further I start asking questions about the actual mechanisms employed in perception. When I use a structured order of composite frames that follow strict rules (I do this more in my figurative pieces eg 'From Time to Time' or 'The Penetrated House') each image is placed back in its place in a strict order.

'The River' started like this but slowly broke away from that 'stricture'. More recent works have broken away from it completely... or have they? 'From light' at the Mappin Gallery still hung on to it in places, while 'Strand' relied on not having any element of it.

We rely on some order in the way we reconstruct the elements of our perception, in that a linear chronology is employed... so what happens when we take that away? and how then do we construct an understanding of what we see?

This why I used a frame in 'Strand', to give the viewer a false recognition (or cognition), to give them a place which in fact they did not have. What I did not do of course was give them the question, and this is what you argue with in this work.

I must step across to the viewer's place and the reading of the work. Do I presume that the viewer employs the same reasoning as me when reading the work?

At that point of transaction I am playing a game with their conditioning in relation to the history and contextual understanding of pictures.

I have a continual battle with this. How much do I give the viewer? This is why I usually include preparatory or developmental work in my shows.

I want the viewer to fill each place that I have occupied. In 'Strand' they couldn't. It would be like saying... being on the end of the brush for each of its applications.



THE FILMIC

Tell me more about you interest in what you call the filmic. Is it direct reference or a more general idea of film structure and form? You can see it in some works and not in others. Is it still there in the more painterly work?

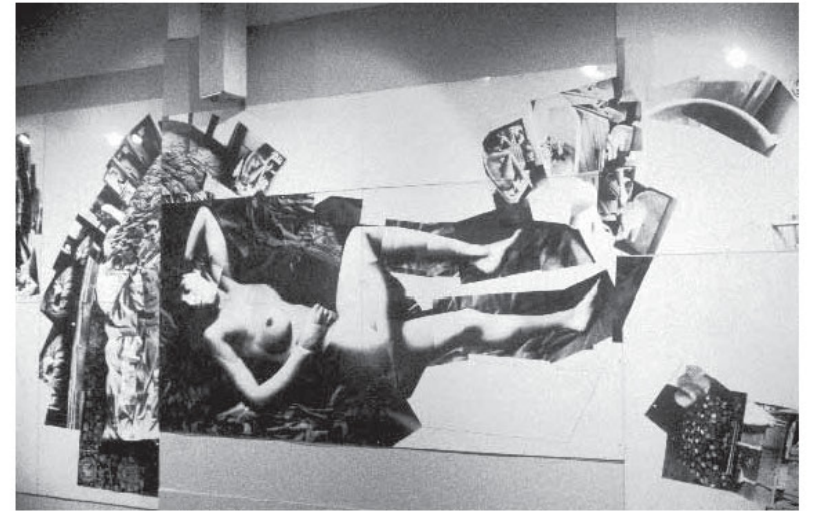
I think it comes into all of my photoworks.

In both 'Physical Drawing' and 'Catchment' the camera was very definitely an intrinsic agent. The resultant work could not be without the photograph and the sequential nature of photography was as one with the cyclical and procedural aspect of the work.

The camera became my chisel. With it I could chip pieces off the world, then those pieces became mine to work with as I liked.

The camera is about being fixed and flying at the same time. How do we transport experience? How does the camera assist this?

I have always been intrigued by such things as simultaneity of vision even before I studied Cubism. Before I employed film in my work I would go to all night viewings at the National Film Theatre. It was always the



formal aspects of the films that interested me, the camerawork and the temporal construction or the art direction. Tarkovsky, Godard, Chabrol, Bergman, etc: the masters of the photographic, films that take me through places and spaces in terms that I can relate to, or that seem to place me in them. I was particularly interested in the movement of the camera, how it negotiated space. 'The Conformist' – what a great example that is. Bertolucci's cameraman, whoever he was, I loved him. The camera would cling to walls as it moved and pivots round corners and doorframes...

Stand in a doorframe and see two people in different rooms at the same time, look out of a window and see the inside of the room at the same time... We do these things without thinking about them. Personally I am super-conscious of them, and it became natural for me to employ them in my work. What I wanted was the sculptor's curiosity about negotiating space and more so because that is too fixed.

Much of the time, whether working with landscape or other places, I collect images that go into store to be used later and when apt – although of late I have worked to specific projects or commissions and used the locations in pre-determined ways – my ideas are forming as I go along. Perhaps this is because a particular landscape is not giving me enough form to work with and I have to return to another place in order to see a new place clearly.

The contacts get manipulated into small collages that then get reformed as I work through a project. The way I see the forms in the work is often very fluid and the eventual form is revealed to me as I work through the collages and drawings. In the most recent work the final form has not been decided until I have worked at full scale.

Sometimes the form that is revealed requires me to go back to a location

to gather more material or to rethink the work. Sometimes I go back into my negatives and contacts from years before. I regard time as material, and the idea of working with time is something that has been in my work from the beginning. Early sculptures were cyclical in relation to times within nature (and processes applied by man to nature).

As my work became filmic there were other ideas related to time that came natural to me. I suppose that the editing of natural time through material was transferred into the filmic editing of time. Time, of course, is a key component of photography, in obvious ways. Film implies continuum, the linear, but also allows for the fragmenting of time into single almost indivisible units. To make a holistic vision from disparate and indivisible units is fascinating to me.

This may refer to the detached and scientific (approach) or it may refer to Zen. It certainly relates to some aspects of Existential thought.

I do not set out to seek deeper understanding of these things. I'm just interested in them.

I may be analytical but I am not scientific in my approach. From Zen, the notion of the long view before the action does appeal to me.

There is certainly a long period of gestation in the way I work, and I always say that I don't see a work until I am in the final stages. This may seem odd as I do a lot of preparatory work.

I might not have said much about film as such but I know I think and progress my work like a filmmaker. Digital techniques and video

are pushing this forward for me now and I see them coming into my work more. But retaining that physical and elemental aspect of photography is essential to me.



THE FORMAL

So are you trying to ‘say’ something about our relationship with the land? Is there some personal expression, or do you have a more detached, almost scientific, approach?

I’m not certain about the scientific. I’m not an artist that wants to get involved in that dialogue of the relationship of my art with any aspect of science.

Yes, there is a detached rather forensic force employed. . . formal and analytical. This often comes out more in the work with interiors and the nude and has caused me some critical problems. My intent is always to look at the body as material so there are bound to be problems. Why does this have to be a problem? My concern is the relationship between the form of the body and a variety of containing spaces – the room, the bed, the bath, etc. This led to concerns about quite intimate interactions of perception: the girl stepping into the bed that I occupied. . . simply as a perceptual exercise. Entering the space between two people when I am one of them – how do I deal with that? I want to analyse the space, not the people, in ways that make the space a tangible element.

I want my work to be about the way we are with things. I feel that art should be what it is and I tire of a world in which issues corrupt art. There is so much baggage that artists take on these days. How are we with things? How do we continually interact with the stuff around us? How are we part of the stuff around us? Perhaps that is why the nude has interested me as much

as the land. Material fusion: I strive to achieve a sense of material fusion, between myself and the viewer.

There is, of course, always an implied narrative aspect to using the figure especially when you locate the figure, (or in the case of the works you refer to, the naked figure) to place. Often the places used were the living environment of the person involved.

But I dealt with the figure in the same way that I dealt with the objects and space involved.

I tried to deal with a holistic view in the same way as I do with landscape.

I did for a period allow narrative to enter the work but it was always a generic action or common event, similar to the way the Impressionists used domestic edits from life.

The bath, the bed – transactions from one state to another so that the nude was seen as in the short glimpses that most of us see in our normal relationships (not always of course). I did my best to avoid the static view that becomes voyeuristic. I admit the work became rather confused in this respect, which is perhaps why it has lain fallow for so long.

I still have a studio full of incomplete work that I intend to return to even after several years.

This does not worry me, I like to think of such incomplete and collected material as just reserves in a reservoir. It does not matter what time it came from and I will return to it.

I do the same with all of my work. I have masses of land related material that I will return to and re-employ. This is quite important to me and the way in which I work. If I use all of the material that I gather immediately, then I will not have time for the changing processes and concerns to filter through the work. It is something that I often have trouble explaining to people, but perhaps it is just so generic that it is self evident. It means that I see my work as one continuum, and it explains why ‘The River’ is a constant thought in my work.

Back to your question, I see all of my work as having formal and rather detached qualities. I distrust expression. I am a very objective artist, if not a very objective person.

This can get confused when one subscribes to a conceptual approach as I do. But then concepts seem to have a very formal inference to me. My first reaction to any art is an immediate attraction to its formal aesthetic – to its actuality and physicality. Sometimes my work starts like that – I see its form before I know its content. Though the content is always driven by a present concern or conceptual consideration. I know what I want a work to look like – but it’s always a surprise to see the evolution of form through the process. I have some forms for work that are waiting for an idea to come along to give purpose to that form. I think a lot of this is to do with liking painters like Kline and Motherwell or more process-led painters. It’s certainly a lot to do with the basic black and white disposition of shape and surface in very elemental drawing, especially when drawing meets nature .

more tactile. Also there were the influences of a more complex abstraction that came through Gorky and Yves Klein.

Inside me there is a love for the form of my own landscape, but there are all of these other forces. When we look at a landscape we have to filter all of these forces.

I know that when I look at the land I see the big morphology. I see in the big simple terms that come to me from formalism, which is perhaps rooted in classicism. I see simple divisions of tonal areas and shapes. My eye goes to a formal view, almost abstract, if that is possible with the land. Then I fill it in with physical details. I’m not certain in which order this really happens. . . it may be that the sequence of processes through which I work actually contradict this.

The romantic that interests me is transportable. I can look at Brandt and I can look at Adams and I can see the obvious differences – a close horizon and a sense of enclosure against a view to the moon and horizons that are to be explored until the next ocean is found. I understand the social forces at work in these differences. But I see the same formality in both. When we strip this down, both places are made of the same stuff and the forms of both places are the results of similar forces.

There is a personal romanticism that we take with us. This seems much more interesting to me than any academic view of the romantic.

I feel that there is a contradiction between the way I see through English eyes. . . which has conditioned the physicality that I employ, the formalism, which is without boundaries. On the other hand you could say that the physicality is also universal in that it relates to basic human forces and requirements. More contradictory is that I see this as ‘Romantic’, something that takes me back to the essential roots that I’m sure are in ‘Povera.’

I had a discussion with Richard Long around similar confusions. He also was plagued by ‘the Romantic’, especially in relation to his use of poetry. His process also seems too formal to allow ‘the Romantic’ to be applied. Perhaps that is what I have been saying: I’m too formal in my work to be romantic in my view.

But some say that I create very romantic images. Others throw that word ‘sublime’ at me. I can see it and perhaps I can’t help it. But I don’t think I am looking for it. I argue with the word and concept of pictorialism. I try to work against it, therefore I am not concerned with the picturesque. I think I am closer to the classical but I may be misinterpreting that.

You talked about ‘the Romantic’ when you wrote about my ‘From Light’ series for Photo98 at The Mappin Gallery, I think just because I produced the ‘Gordale Scar’ piece as part of that. I had no intention to refer to that northern wilderness romantic view of the land. Gordale was just a great form to work with and it presented me with a perfect organic spatial frame for the central intent of recording changing light. It worked as you said -it became vortiginous. There was no point of view from which the frame of the scar was stable – it was an experience not a picture.

ROMANTICISM AND THE PICTURESQUE

Your recent work has used natural locations as the focus – rivers, coastal strandline – but previously you did very intense spatial and temporal explorations of interiors, the personal and intimate spaces of others. In working with issues around the landscape, you have to acknowledge the long and loaded history of Romanticism that underpins our attitude to the landscape, and its use as a genre within art.

How do you deal with that history, or do you try to avoid it, or leave it behind?

I have never been certain about Romanticism. Until recently I had not considered it or its implications, only through the inevitable sojourns into it as a topic within the academic world of teaching. My personal understanding of it was in strict terms a misunderstanding of the ‘real’. For me it related to a love for the inherent aesthetic qualities that make up one’s experience of the land – this is of course very complex and multifaceted.

I relate it to nostalgia, in that a personally held romanticism is rooted in one’s love of one’s own landscape – it’s almost genetic – and how can we separate this from the conditioning forces of pictorialism and the deep and very fluid history that conditions us and our ‘view’? I have had a struggle with this through most of my working life.

To be taught at a time of an overt American influence, being instilled with formalism, minimalism and scale, even though my eyes were being opened to the conceptual and ‘Arte Povera’, I formed a liking for minimal formality. Ever since, I have battled with the confusion between this and the



RIVER

...started as a way of holding together the disparate elements of other things that were happening in my work. I needed that, I needed that thread of some sort. There were so many ideas going on.

And it struck me that the linear nature of a river was the ideal thing. It referred back to things earlier in my work which are quite complex. I had worked with land sculpture – this also dealt with the idea of catchment. I had felt for a long time that the way an artist works is a kinship with the nature of a river: it has a basin through which it flows, so that there's a catchment area and material from that area comes down to a central thread, and that's very much how the artist works.

Our minds, our forays for information, our researches go out into the environment. We bring it back to the studio. We re-form it and in that new

form we carry it along in some way.

I realise now that the metaphor may go further than that – it could be about the way we gather knowledge through our lives, how we gather information and pass it on, or how we process our understanding of things. This may seem over the top, but it comes from feedback, as I observe people with the work and their reactions to it.

We tend to invert metaphor. A story develops from a fact or a force in life; we create a picture to explain experience. Does the picture remind us of the source, or does the source take us to the picture? Once a common shared metaphor is in place we tend to be stuck with it. The river is a prime example of this. Not everyone who walks a river is aware of Greek legend, but it doesn't mean to say that they don't have thoughts that relate to them, things that are in our common psyche.

'River' has changed quite a lot over the years. It started very formally, as a private chronicle. I wasn't going to show it. It started as a series of small collages, and like 'Topsy' it started to grow...

I started with a tarn in Curn bria – it was a spot I went back to a lot. I'm never quite certain what I'm doing when I'm collecting the material. It's when I get it back to the studio and start working with it that the content of it begins to develop, and as I worked on it I began to get the notion – associations between cloud and water, the broken island, reflections in the tarn, and so on. It gave me an ideal starting point.

I was working on journeys into trees – I took the camera into a tree. It ended up being a 40' piece of work... and of course what I didn't realise, should have realised, was that it wouldn't necessarily be about the interior of that tree, it would be more about photography. As the camera went into the

centre of the tree – set on a certain speed – it went into a darkness... so I got a set of photos that were black, and then it came out in to the light...

But I think that's important – even though I don't see myself as a photographer. The visual language of photography is important. As with any of my work, I want it to be about the medium as much as the content.

'River' is deliberately rough and ready. I see photography as an agent, with my roots being somewhere back in sculpture, back in the 70s, and as a painter before that: the sculptural aspect is very important. So when I'm handling the photograph it's vital to me that I'm handling the material which is depicted. I feel like I'm actually sculpting with the material of life, and that is the central philosophy.

And that's why I don't use colour – it makes it too synthetic. I feel that there's a natural sympathy between the graininess of black and white: it gives you that tactile quality, which I find more akin to the nature of stone, or the nature of water... black and white gives me the feel of the materials.

There are ambiguities in my work: it gets deliberately abstract; in places it goes completely blurred, it fades out cinematographically and fades back in. I don't want to give the viewer too many clues, I want them to stand there for some time working it out.

That relates very much to the way people look: it can be taken as a complete panorama, or it can be looked at section by section, like chapters, different places, or we can go right in and look at the individual photograph. There are 6000 separate images here. I feel like I am there 6000 times myself.

The process is: I go out and collect on location – I might take 20 films on just one very small section of the river – go back to my studio, process them, and work on very small collages (I print at contact size) that will give me a



rough pictorial form for that section.

It's not the story of a river; it's a river of my making... so a piece here can be from Yorkshire, next to one from Langdale.

It's not the story of a river, it's a river of my making... so a piece here can be from Yorkshire, next to one from Langdale...

It becomes about the feeling, about being there... When you come back from a place like that you bring a feeling with you, the sound of the water, the feel of a stone – you don't bring back specifics... a memory, not a picture, memory is to do with feeling, mood, touch and so on...

The technique of collage is very important to me. I think collage is one of the most vital media for our generation, this period. We live in one massive collage. We can't go anywhere without east meeting west, history meeting the future, changes, meetings of things. We can pick up different scales and put them side by side... we live in a collage state. It's the visual language of now.

The other reason I work with collage is that it is about cutting, deconstruction, re-construction – it's a structural event.

There are three layers of sculpture in this work. One is the cinematographic – I see the passage of the camera through space as being on of the most sculptural forces... the sculpture of the eye cuts the surface, which is allowing it to pass through planes, which is a mental sculpture; and of course the sculpture of the land... what could be more sculptural than a river carrying material or a glacier carrying material, making drumlins, moraines, carving the land out...

This boulder here – I was actually standing on that boulder to take the photos and of course the thing that is missing is me... What's at my feet stays

in focus, but the speed of movement – as I reach out over the water – takes over.

Someone once said that my work is like Friday's footsteps – she meant that when Robinson Crusoe found the footstep he just knew that 'a man' had been there... I work like that, that philosophy still means a lot to me.

I just want to play around conceptually with what God gives me, with nature...

This is an example where there were just all these textures that fascinated me, so I've used more highly focussed techniques on it...

There was a whole series of these long panels, 2 or 3 of which have been included. I walked across the river, and when I was that side of it – it's only a wee stream – it was a day when it was a mixture of cloud and brighter clear sky – we can see further down under the water... but by the time we get here the sun and cloud is blocking out the surface... These are like time cuts across the river.

From this point the whole thing changes quite a lot... whether I've got more turbulent... certainly other aspects of my work have got more abstracted. I certainly got less bothered about the photos being cut just so and placed in the right place... We go through a series of sections that are much more to do with the power of the water, not so specific.

What I was hoping was that as the viewer gets to this point they just begin to enjoy the stress and strength and turbulence... Why have I cut, and ripped... is it to do with the peacefulness of nature? probably not...

Drawing – for me it is a terrific mental process. It's not about graphite on paper; it is about thought, and can take place in any form. So the idea of drawing with light... phos is of course light, and then graphos – writing,

drawing. The brain has got to think before the eye sees and selects. There's a terrific cycle going on there...

You have on a number of occasions talked about your perception of the role of an artist as a gatherer, a collector of information and material that you then use, or carry with you for future use. What is this process? Do you see the river as a metaphor?

Rivers are very complex in relation to time. What flows before us now, was born of its source some time ago...

It has become fused with all that has been contributed to it since.

It has picked up the times and experiences of the places that it has passed through since.

It carries a history of its journey.

We watch it pass to a future of similar gathering.

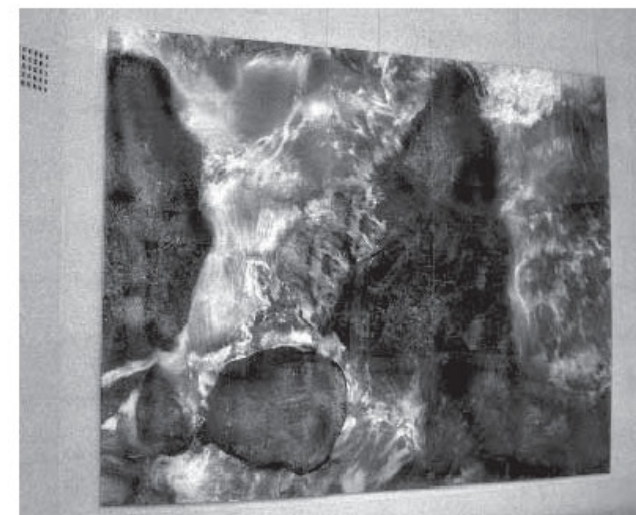
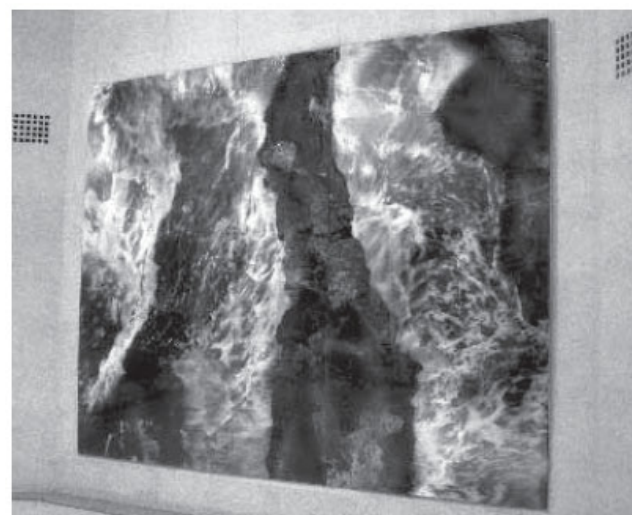
At the same time it lays down some of that experience.

Our reflection falls upon this passing mirror.

Is that like the way we reflect on art?

How nature makes its form without our intervention is a key factor in the work. Earlier I wanted to construct like a filmmaker, to an order with a purposeful, prescribed, and deliberate structure.

Now I want to construct like a natural accretion. That is what very much happened with the making of 'Strand'. Perhaps the forces of the sea and tide were washing the fragments of photo into the form that they took on. I was working with much smaller fragments of photo than I had before and I was not too concerned with the way they came together... I was working in a more painterly way, and in this context it becomes clear that the forces of nature that I was working with were much more important than that. And probably more truthful.



STRAND

Since 'The River', all of my work has felt like a continuation of it. I intended at the start that it would be an ongoing work with no end. That seemed inevitable in relation to what it was and my thoughts at the time.

'Strand' had obvious connections to it, being about the very edge of the land and its meeting with the sea. I made some amalgams of the five pieces from 'Strand' and they began to look like related islands or a map of continents.

Also, I used the term 'Landmarks' while I was making 'Strand' but I meant perceptual landmarks not fixtures in a landscape or on a map. Nothing I make is about fixture or stasis, even soil and rock are fluid.

The landmarks of 'Strand' referred to ever changing features on the shore and thoughts from that series led to the 'Landmarks and Signs' I made for The Nene Valley Way just before starting the year in Fermyn Woods.

Now ten years on from 'The River' I look at the work for Fermyn Woods and see fluidity in the ground, the light, and of course the pools. Perhaps the book will be an attempt to explain how thoughts flow through the land, change direction and by doing so flow into each other. The difference between this and 'The River' is that it is not linear. Perhaps trying to find that logical line was wrong. The more I make art the more I realise that development is not a line, it's more a temporal fusion – ideas and actions come back from much earlier work to be taken forward.

I want the book I make of the Fermyn Woods project to reflect that; I want it to show how you take ideas into and out of a landscape and that they evolve in a similar manner to the land. Older layers are always being uncovered and revealed as new on the surface.

Transcribed and edited by Nancy Stedman.
The Landscape Research Group.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ros Stoddart Artistic director of Fermynwoods Contemporary Art
Patrick Duerden Fermynwoods contemporary art
Nancy Stedman Directorial board member of the landscape research group
Martin Rogers RGAP
Patrick Walker dust
Di Harper Assistance throughout the project
Printed by Deanprint, Stockport, UK

Fermynwoods Contemporary Art is a visual art
charity based in a rural location in northamptonshire and delivers
exhibitions, outreach projects and educational activities.
www.fermynwoods.co.uk

fermynwoods
more than a gallery

