

Presence and Absence

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“The world is not what I think,
but what I live.”

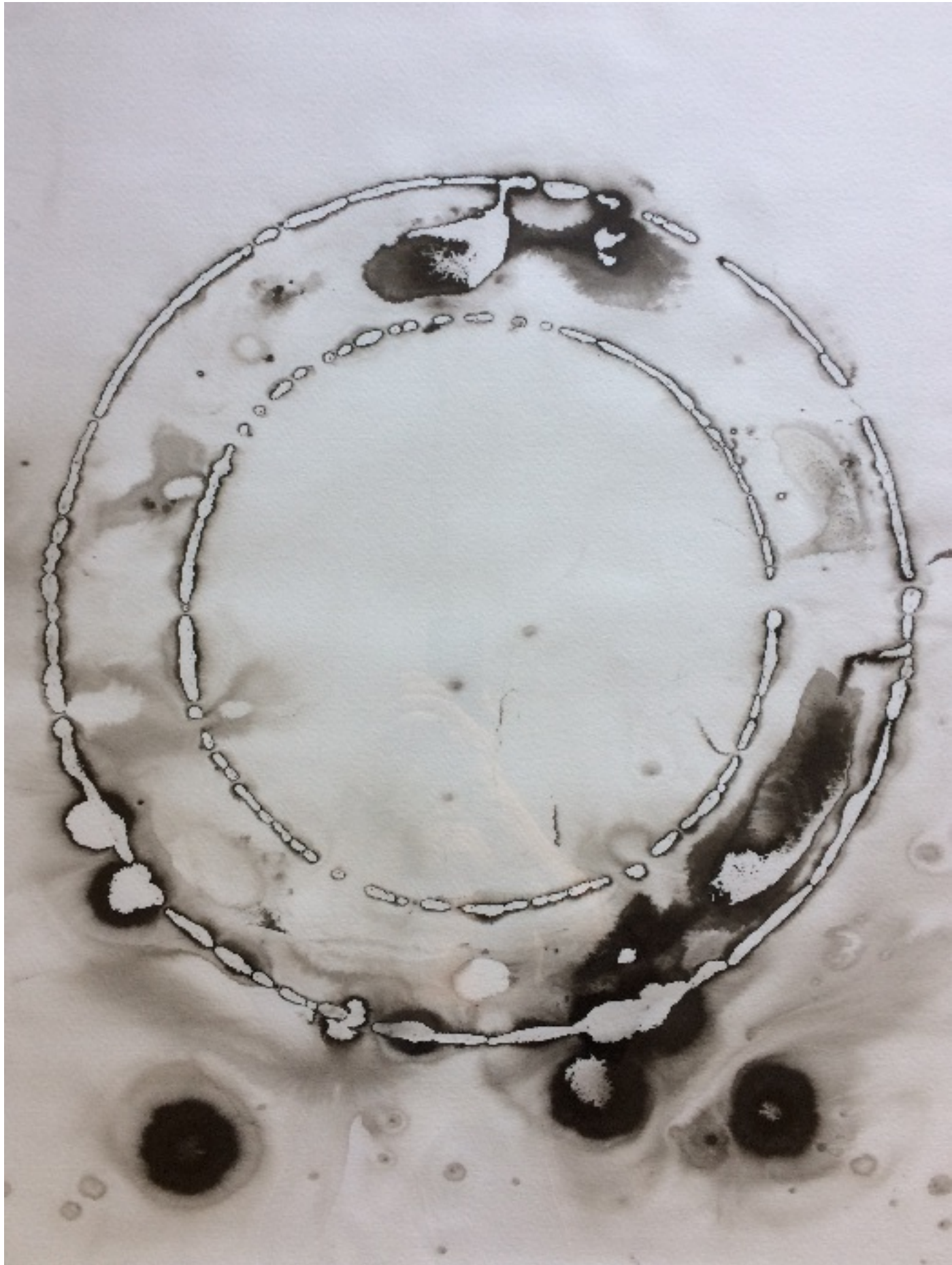
Maurice Merleau-Ponty
Phenomenology of Perception

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An enquiry into the embodiment of the artist in the work addresses philosophy, to elucidate how a person exists in the world, and neuroscience, to corroborate this embodied view, to explicate how experiential and contextual learning inform practice.

Initially interrogating physical and theoretical touch and presence through familiar methodologies, conditions are then created to encourage the occurrence of the unexpected outcome. Through this exposure of unrealised embodied knowledge and experience, the essence of the artist is revealed.

This research together considers the maker in her process but also how the process is formed in the maker.

“All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively.”
(Bachelard, 1964, p.35).

A practice interrogating themes of touch, memory, echo and capturing a moment in time led to enquiry into how such qualities are embodied by the artist; how the presence of the maker is contained within the work.

By particularly referencing the oeuvres of Edmund de Waal and Eduardo Chillida, and their influences, a relevant discourse was found in Martin Heidegger's Phenomenological Ontology. His holistic approach expresses that mind and body function as one, (as opposed to Cartesian Dualism, where mind and body are two separate entities; the physical substance of the body and substance without volume, the spirit or mind informed by intellect), and that direct subjective experience informs and influences a person. (Heidegger, 1962). Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses the term perception to describe this learning process and maintains that *"perception is not an event or state in the mind or brain, but an organism's entire bodily relation to its environment"*. (Taylor, 2008, p.1,2). He asserts *"Viewing ... not as the self-contained activity of a disembodied eye, but as embedded within the body and inextricably bound up with a broader situating of the body within the physical environment ... Seeing integrates within itself the kinaesthetic and tactile dimensions"*. (Potts, 2009, p.207, 315).

This empirical solution is explained through a framework of stages: 'being-in-the world', 'present-at-hand', 'ready-to-hand' and 'withdrawn from notice', and it is this latter stage, 'withdrawn from notice', describing such a familiarity with tools or process that one's concentration is on the work itself rather than the physical effort and techniques required in its making, described by Heidegger as *"The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically. That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves ... that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work"*, (Heidegger, 1962, p.99), which excited further investigation.

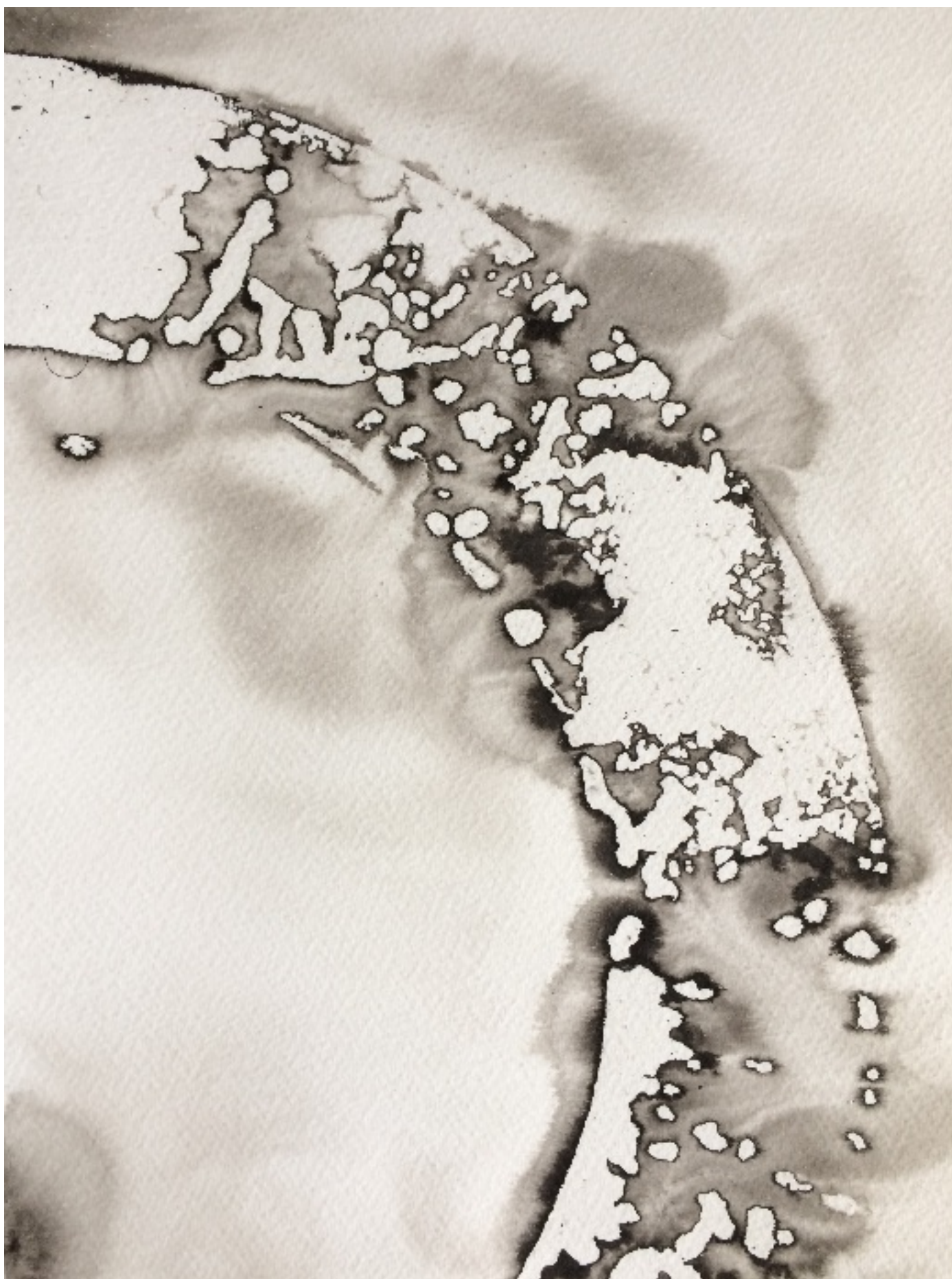
During this phase all previous bodily experience, realised and unrecognised, comes to the fore as a culmination of familiarity between maker, process and material, and this amalgamation of factors can create conditions in which actions, which could not have been predicted, arise. This *"excess of the sensible, the hypersensible"*, (Beistegui, 2012), results in the unexpected outcome, exposing the essence, the embodiment, of the artist. As Richard Long describes, *"It doesn't always happen, but quite*

often the best works come from that state of mind, being absorbed and intuitive, sort of unselfconscious really”.

(Long, 1991, p.76).

Adopting the phrase ‘Qualial Primacy’, (a quale being sense information; referencing Daniel Dennett, Ted Honderich states, *“qualia could not be more familiar to each of us ... the particular personal, subjective qualities of experience at the moment”*, (Honderich, 2014, p.17), and primacy meaning the most important information was brought to your attention), to address this event, validation for this hypothesis can be drawn from research which attempts to replicate the brain’s abilities. Artificial Intelligence algorithms have developed a computer generated ‘deep neural network’ which replicates deep learning, assimilating both detailed and general information. Naftali Tishby’s theory of the ‘information bottleneck’ proposes that the *“network rids noisy input data of extraneous details as if by squeezing the information through a bottleneck retaining only the features most relevant to general concepts”*. (Wolchover, 2017). Similarly David Eagleman explains that all sensory data; vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell, are processed by the brain at different speeds, although it is not apparent to the subject. This also supports the idea that information is being prioritized. (Eagleman, 2016, p.50-53).

Opinion, such as Edmund de Waal’s view given here, that *“Human beings acquire knowledge from the first day they were born, through their bodies, through their touch, through all their senses. And to be a human being is to be alive to all this knowledge, to how we listen, to how we smell, to how we taste and of course to how we touch”*, (Kneaded Knowledge, 2017), is substantiated by the theories of phenomenologists Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It also concurs with current thinking at the Santa Fe Institute, *“Humans are not born pre-programmed with a set of intelligent behaviours ... Rather, we build this kind of intelligence by adjusting to constant feedback from our own bodies and surroundings”*, (Santa Fe Institute, 2017), and draws attention to touch in both its direct and indirect useage, as Howard Risatti defines, *“The hand in craft plays a central role ... for it is more than a simple appendage of the physical body; the hand is a reflection of the entire human organism; it is a direct extension of mind”*. (Risatti, 2007, p.109). Using Richard Long as example, the use of touch can be represented as a physical presence, or the knowledge of it, *“it is also the visible residue or trace of the artist’s activity, which becomes separated from him and continues to resonate as an idea”*. (Long, 1991, p.24)



A selection of primary and secondary sources in the form of words and images gathered at the outset of this investigation informed visual language, highlighting the qualities: touch, texture, monochrome, multiple, timeless and key traits: abstract, naïve, minimal, tactile. Chosen artists work displayed something of their maker present, whether the artist's touch, the visible signs of their physical interaction, or its result, the revealed surface after process; ceramicist Edmund de Waal's pots evoking the physicality of his presence, the knowledge of artist Richard Long's interaction in the landscape, artist David Nash disclosing the sculpture held within, blacksmith Tom Joyce's experience of process on material.

Visiting Tom Joyce's exhibition, 'Everything at Hand', (Joyce, 2017), in his hometown of Santa Fe allowed for personal encounter and engagement with his work. Impressive in its boldness of scale and simplicity of form the extensive energy needed for the massive material movement was unassumingly contained within the naïve organic shapes which exuded a timeless presence. Heavily textured pieces placed on the wall belied their scale and weight. Particular elements of interest within his practice; process, abstract, texture, monotone, and scale, were available for scrutiny; attending in person overcoming the detached viewing of a photograph or screen discounted by Richard Serra, *"Everybody reads images through the virtual ... The virtual denies tactility. It denies your physical presence in relationships to something other than a lighted screen. We don't receive art through our total senses in terms of walking, looking and experiencing and touching and feeling"*. (Serra, 2015).

Involvement in workshops with blacksmith Pat Quinn, (Quinn, 2017), gave lessons in familiarity of bodily experience and physicality of engagement with process on material, demonstrating, as described by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, *"the fundamental distinction between knowledge that can be described in words and knowledge which can only be shown"*. (Dormer, p.229). His work comprised many pertinent characteristics: naïve, abstract, monochrome, tactile and minimal.

Oral Response

Bringing together an existing process of printing from the forged surface and the favoured qualities identified, a first body of work came together entitled 'Oral Response'. These two sets of prints were shown for one day at a pop-up exhibition at Guy's Hospital, London, the largest dental institute in the UK and Europe, and transferred to the Inigo Rooms, Somerset House, London, for a further three days.

The outcomes of a collaboration between student Lucy Blandford who was completing her doctoral thesis at the Division of Mucosal & Salivary Biology and the artist, were realised as a result of the King's College, London, Cultural Institute's project which pairs researchers with artists and designers to "pique the interest of the public into the diversity of research undertaken in the Kings College, London, Dental Institute". (Oral Response, 2017). Lucy's project took the form of a mind map entitled 'The Role of Bacterial Strains and Putative Tumour Promoters in Gastrointestinal Health' upon which she expanded in her 'Three Minute Thesis: A gut feeling about a cancer-causing toxin'; the nature of the research, essentially an evolution of process, was a fit to the artist's practice.

Using this information and further investigating photographs of bacteria and colon cancer to understand its implications, two objectives were decided upon: to produce work which was detached from the negative connotations of cancer and to use shape and texture to communicate the evolution of the process. At the outset, testing of samples was considered in indent, (embossing), print and forged outcomes. Indent, using watercolour paper and plasma-cut steel was quickly discounted for the roughness of edge achieved. Print, however, captured and conveyed the subject matter well. Realised using plasma-cut steel and forged steel surfaces, a simplified narrative was created by borrowing from the forms present in the various stages of this theory of the development of cancer: B fragilis, (the multiple shapes), emits toxins, (the spreading ink), which facilitate indeterminate bacteria to be drawn together and absorbed inducing polyps (circle outlines) and then tumours (circles), the degradation of which show the progression of the cancer.

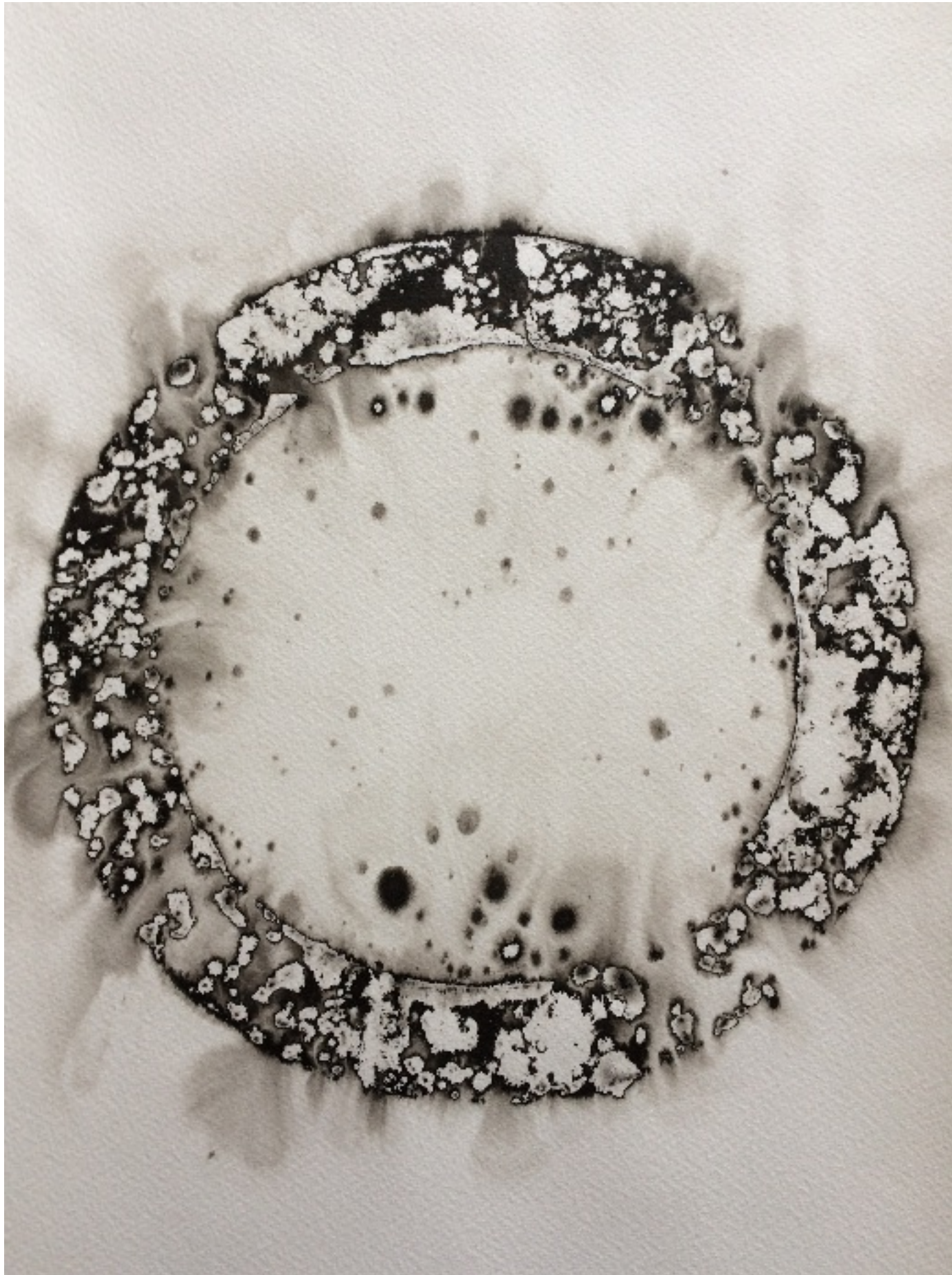
Working to this very specific brief extended practices to produce new outcomes. Specifically an existing methodology was expanded to include printing with plasma cut steel, an alternative to using the forged surface, as the need for a variation in the print qualities became apparent. This experimentation with the printing process allowed for different outcomes to be achieved informing the 'series' style of display. An ongoing problem with the presentation of work was solved by devising a framing system. Particularly, the narrow rectangular shaping of the double glass frames, comprising two scales of printed outcome, was used to evoke microscope slides, to tie in with the overall theme.

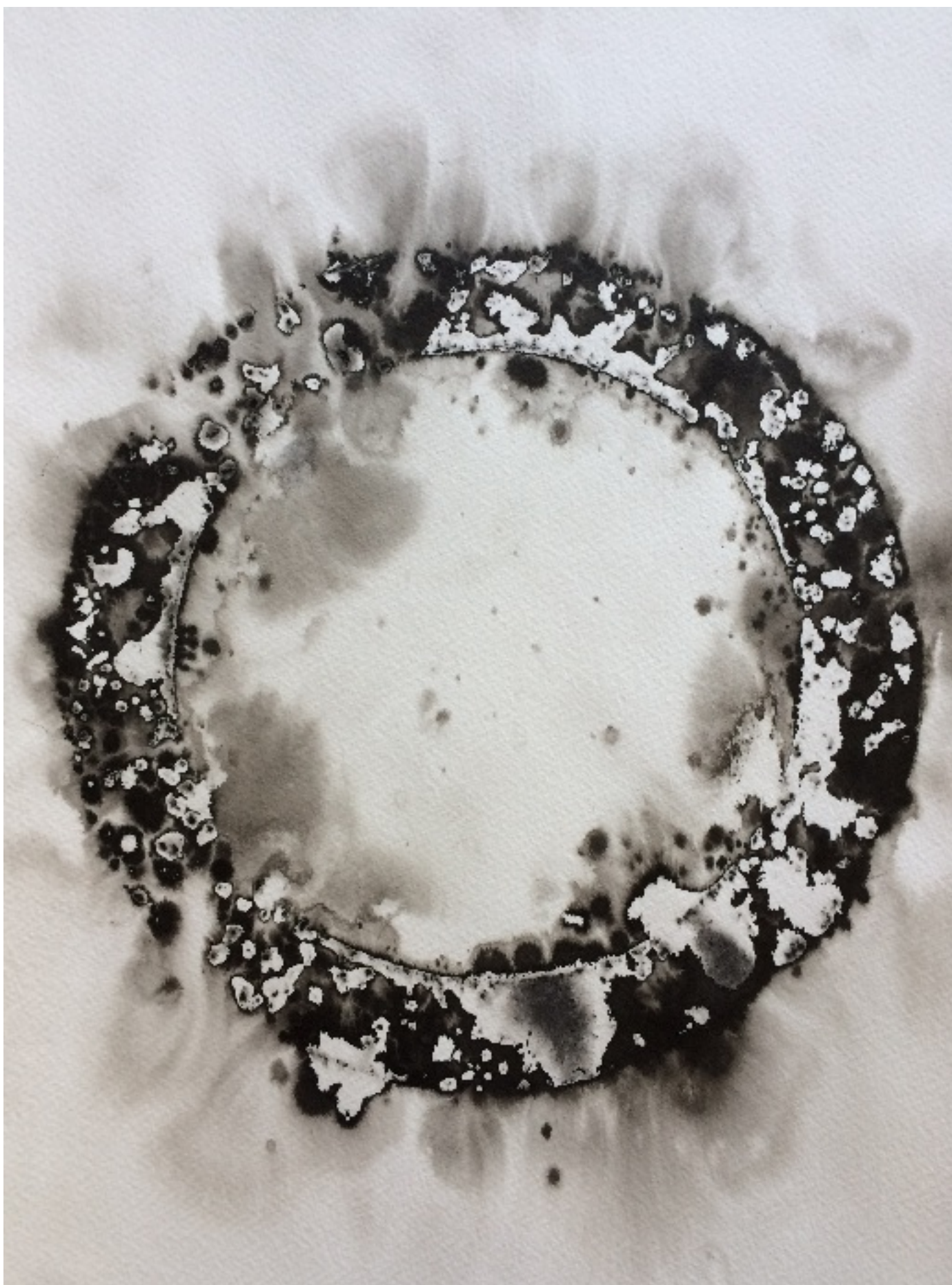
Many of the qualities identified earlier are seen to be present in the work: texture, monochrome, multiple, abstract, naïve, minimal and tactile. Touch is evident in the printed outcome, where steel, ink and paper have come together to reveal the unseen result of the bodily actions of the artist, through the physical processes of forging and plasma-cutting, on material. Boundaries of experience were expanded; repetition occasioning variations in corporeal movements, materials and timings informing phenomenological learning. New and extended skills acquired through this collaboration include: being open to opportunities, researching, sampling, problem solving, decision making, sourcing materials, arranging packaging and transport, building relationships, liaising, communication, record keeping, time management, networking, exhibiting, costing and invoicing.

The body of work was purchased by Professor Mike Curtis, the Executive Dean of Guy's Hospital, where it is now on display on the 18th floor. (Page 35).









Qualial Primacy

The hierarchical sifting of experience and sense information, 'qualial primacy', characterized by being fully focused on or absorbed in one's work, prompted further enquiry. Theorists from philosophy and neuroscience, whilst failing to reach any agreement on the 'hard problem'; summarized here by Susan Blakemore, *"How do you account for consciousness? How can a physical brain, made purely of material substances and nothing else, give rise to conscious experiences of ineffable qualia?"*, (Blakemore, 2005, p.4), generally admit to an embodied mind and body. In an overview of current thinking Dr Hannah Critchlow, Neuroscientist, states, *"individual experience underpins the essence of consciousness ... from interaction with the outside world"*, (Critchlow, 2018, p.4,12), statements fundamental to the phenomenological ontology.

The idea that the brain is receiving and prioritising information gains support from Neuroscientist Helen Thomson, who confirms that, *"We filter out familiar and irrelevant information"*. (Thomson, 2018, p.121). Similarly, David Adam's findings, in 'The Genius Within', that the use of a smart drug made him more aware of the task in hand and less aware of people around him, (Adam, 2018), offer possibilities that perhaps there are ways in which this behaviour can be encouraged, without additives.

With evidence supporting qualial primacy as a theory conditions were created to try to influence the occurrence of the unexpected outcome; to access through improvisation the modality of bodily concentration which yields embodied responses which could not have been accessed ordinarily. As Shaun McNiff expresses it, *"we have to let go of certainty in order to find truth"*. (McNiff, 2013, p.125).

Encouraged by studying the very physical methodologies of Richard Long, Richard Serra, David Nash and Tom Joyce bodily engagement and process informed investigation. Repetition resulted in movement becoming much freer, the work less formal; repetition, suggests Edmund de Waal, *"allows for play, for the play of ideas as well. It allows a lot of space in that it's a kind of structure. Giving yourself a structure allows for interstices and gaps between the one thing and the next; it allows you to chart your feeling and your thinking"*. (de Waal, 2016, p.32).

Ink and paper are manipulated without plan, the tool for printing abandoned; paper soaked, ink poured with direction or freely, drips, splashes, runs, some later additions repelled by prior markings and forced to creep around, time, the excess removed or not.

Experimentation through mark making, Richard Serra illuminates, *“is a way of thinking out of time, only present in the experience, here and now ... A mark is made in a dimension between the conscious and the unconscious”*. (Vervoordt, 2013).

Another element added, wax, unexpectedly ripples the paper with movement at the touch of the hot liquid, solidifying to a white opacity which draws yet blocks light. In an action which involves the whole body's manipulation of water, paper, ink and time the unplanned response sought begins to emerge, and as Shaun Gallagher captures, *“my knowledge of what I can do with my hands is in my body”*. (Gallagher, 2005, p.74).

Naive, abstract, monochrome markings evolve to evoke ideas of presence and absence drawn from the negative space of removed ink, the echo of what was once there. The wax elicits memory, the expression of something not quite seen or no longer present.

Reaching that moment when the unforeseen outcome occurs extends practice and reveals experience held within the artist. As Peter Dormer explains *“when craft is practised as a disciplined piece of knowledge, it is inevitably an activity of self-exploration.”* (Dormer, p.223).

The value of this method is summed up by Richard Serra, *“The vulnerability of not knowing what you are doing is always more rewarding than knowing it”*. (Vervoordt, 2013).









Phenomenology makes obvious the artist's practice

"It is at the present time that I realize that the first twenty-five years of my life were a prolonged childhood, destined to be followed by a painful break leading eventually to independence. If I take myself back to those years as I actually lived them and as I carry them within me, my happiness at that time cannot be explained in terms of the sheltered atmosphere of the parental home; the world itself was more beautiful, things were more fascinating." Maurice Merleau-Ponty. (Turkle, 2004. p.4).

Returning 'home'; fingertips tracing carvings, knuckles tapping panels, the polished slipperiness of the dark oak staircase, doors with redundant key-holes betraying anonymous repurposing, white moulded plaster, shadows, beams, hidden spaces, creeping past the cellar door, rainbow hues, led lights, taking in the chill air of the dairy, the ice touch of the salting stone and the knobby flagstones underfoot and the monochrome of the timber-framed building; images are gathered of the textures created by craftsman, occupants and time.

Informing practice for the final pieces: the organic shapes on the flagstones (like tree rings) and misshapen holes from keys, nails and pegs, confirm 'circle'; beams throwing shadows on to white ceilings and walls create lines referencing indent and wax to evoke memory, presence and absence, implying 'porcelain'; textures on beams, doors and flagstones suggest 'print'.

Engaging with Heidegger's ontology, which proffers that one learns through bodily interaction with surroundings and objects, the source of the qualities valued by the artist is disclosed. The significance of the home, as context, is explored by Philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, who prescribes, *"the house is our corner of the world ... it is our first universe ... all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remains indelible within us"*. (Bachelard, 1964, p.26,31). Of the physical properties of the house, Yoshida Kenko opines, *"The man is to be envied who lives in a house, not of the modern, garish kind ... all its furnishings simple but antique"*. (Williams, 2015, p.225); a concept in harmony with Wabi Sabi, described here by Axel Verdoordt, as, *"finding beauty in the imperfect, in its simplest and most natural state: the beauty found in objects that are humble and unassuming"*. (Verdoordt, 2010, p.9,10). It becomes clear that the visual

language which informs the work is drawn from the lived environment of childhood. Maria Buszek, imparts *“The object links us to thoughts, memories, sensations, histories, and relationships”*. (Buszek, 2011, p.84)

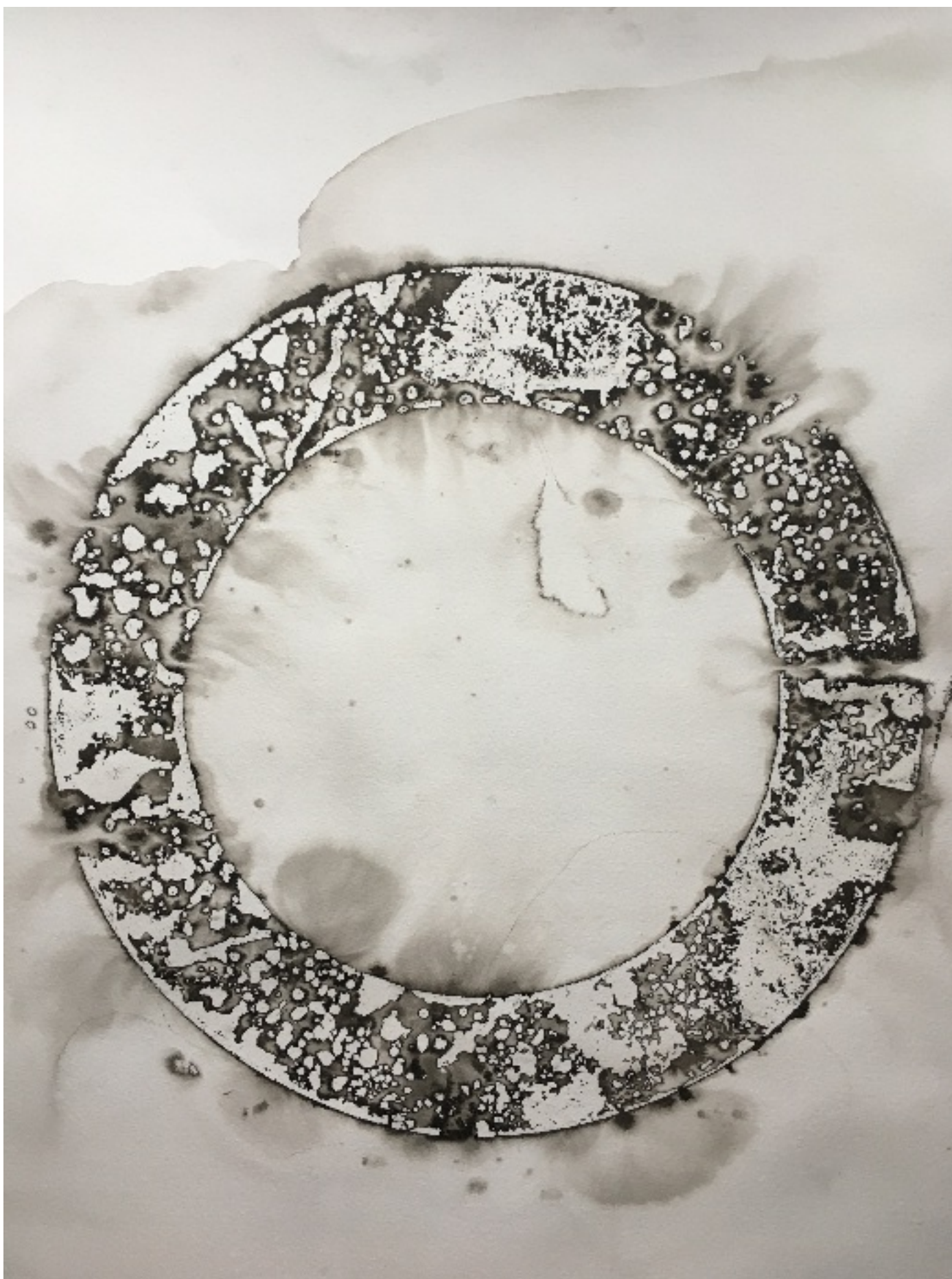
Returning to the forge induces the familiarity of returning home to the past. The farmhouse is revealed as influence on the artist, its farm and the nearby abandoned limestone quarry ingrain scale and industry.

Approaching the shed, the sound of hammers. On entering, the smell of the fires and coke smoke, the heat of the forge, the warmth of the atmosphere, camaraderie, enthusiasm, vexation, wrestling with the fire for ownership of the steel made pliable by its control. A constant battle, to and fro, of unbroken concentration, to avoid disaster and produce elation.

Using qualities and processes derived from the context and experience of those early influences a final body of work is produced to give life to that memory. Marcel Proust eloquently captures the significance of reigniting the past in the present: *“But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection”*, Marcel Proust. (Turtle, 2007, p.224).

Revisiting the work of the artists; Tom Joyce’s vast black, textured circles exuding the scale of its industrially forged origins, Richard Long’s outsize mud circles directly applied by his hands onto walls, Richard Serra’s black paintstick circles revealing the intensity of the maker’s process and David Nash’s use of large scale, naïve, charred black spheres and circles as sculptures and drawings, uncovers the prevalence of the circle both in their oeuvres and in illuminating preferences. Long encapsulates its appeal as being abstract, universal and timeless, *“They belong to everyone and equally to the past, the present and the future”*. (Long, 1991, p.76). Suggestive of the cycle of one’s life, Heidegger visually conjures the idea of a circle or roundness by expounding that a being and the world live in coexistence, linking the shape to phenomenological principle.





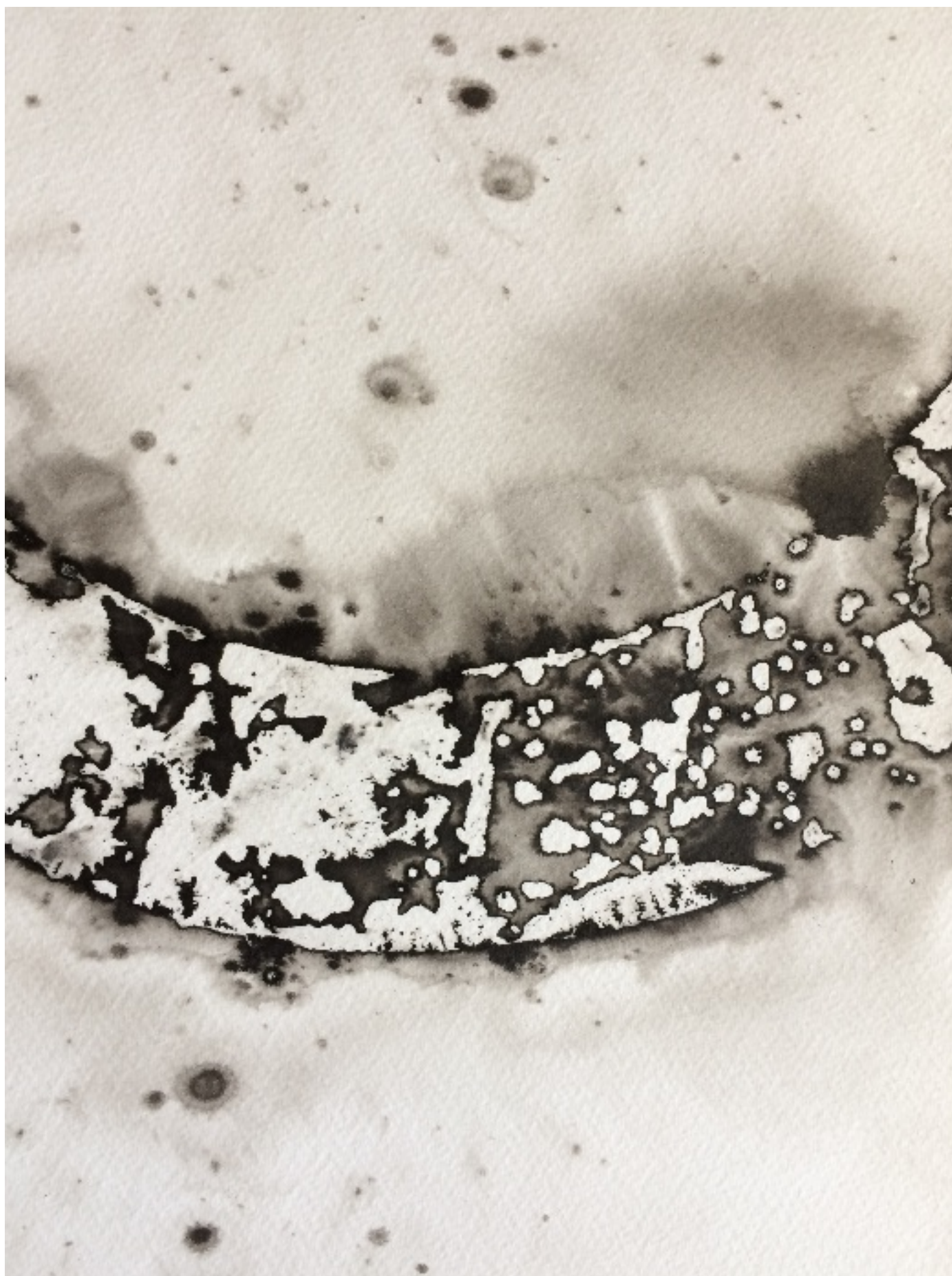




Printed circles exhibit the qualities naïve, abstract, monochrome and contain touch through the revelation of the maker through process. The texture suggests disintegration and with the spreading ink connotes the passing of time, yet they are timeless. The tactile porcelain squashes hold touch, memory, presence and absence, the crumbling and bone-like appearance also suggesting the passage of time. Memory is triggered of the fossil laden stones of field walls, the multiples of shell impressions evoked by the multiples of porcelain forms, and of handfuls of stones on the riverbank. As Bachelard suggests, *“It is our unconscious thought that crystalizes our remotest memories”, (Bachelard, 1964, p.37).*

The body of work produced for final consideration holds within it the artist as revealed through investigation of place, time and physical response to these contexts exposing the essence fundamental to and embodied within practice.





In the end you go back to the beginning

Perfectly and succinctly summarizing this journey Richard Long expresses, *"My art is the essence of my experience."* (Long, 2013, p.49).

Throughout this investigation the artist has considered philosopher Martin Heidegger's Phenomenology, supported by theoretical evidence from neuroscience, as a way of understanding the presence or embodiment of the maker within the work. His ontology that a person learns through sense-perception; *"our fundamental bodily way of being in the world"*, (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p.127), has allowed for examination of practice in its everyday sense and through the pushing of boundaries.

By evoking concentrated conditions to produce the unexpected outcome, elements fundamental to the artist have been disclosed and the essence of the artist has been revealed; the practice of the artist is the embodiment of experience and encounter with the unique lived environment of the childhood home.





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