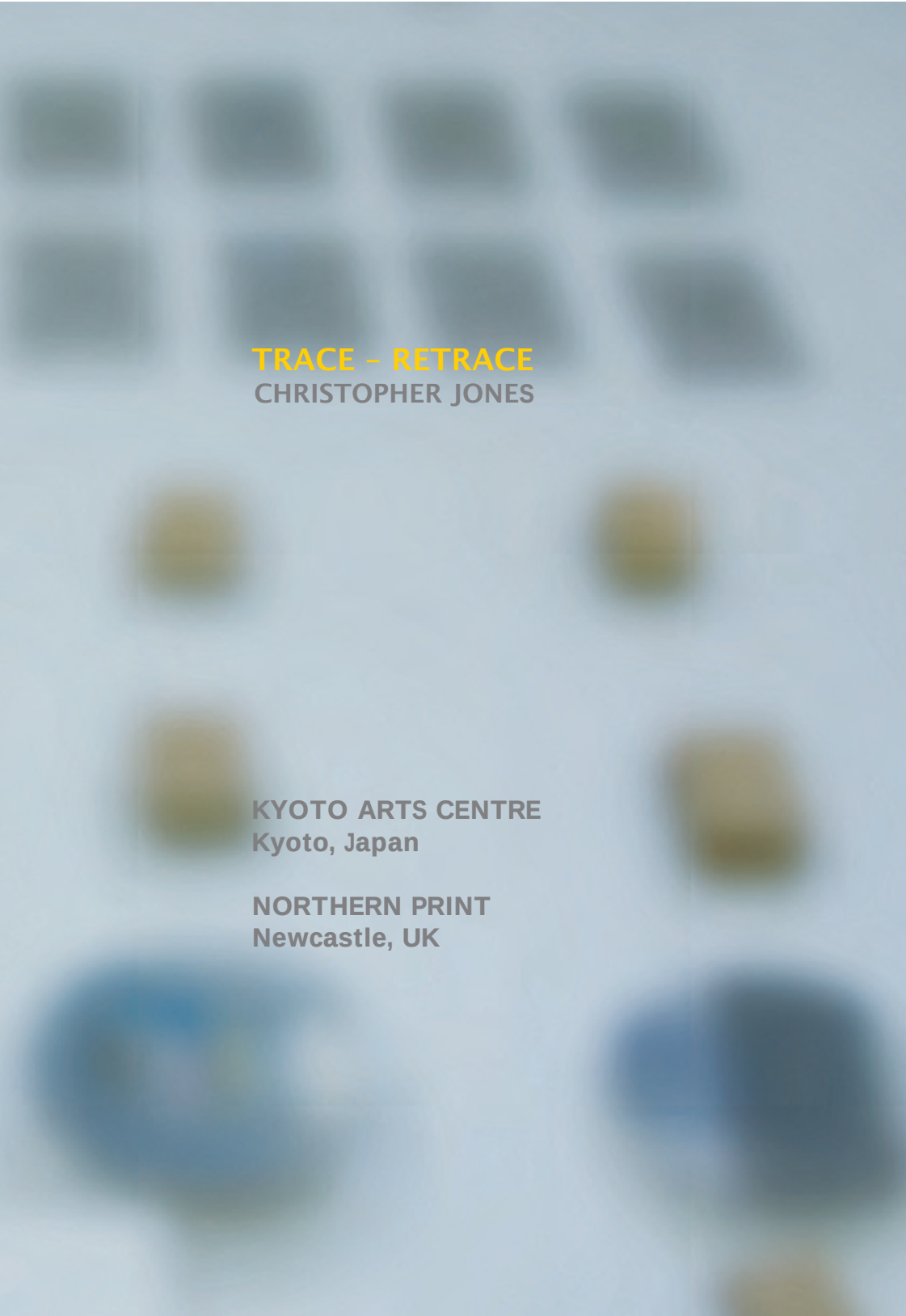


TRACE – RETRACE

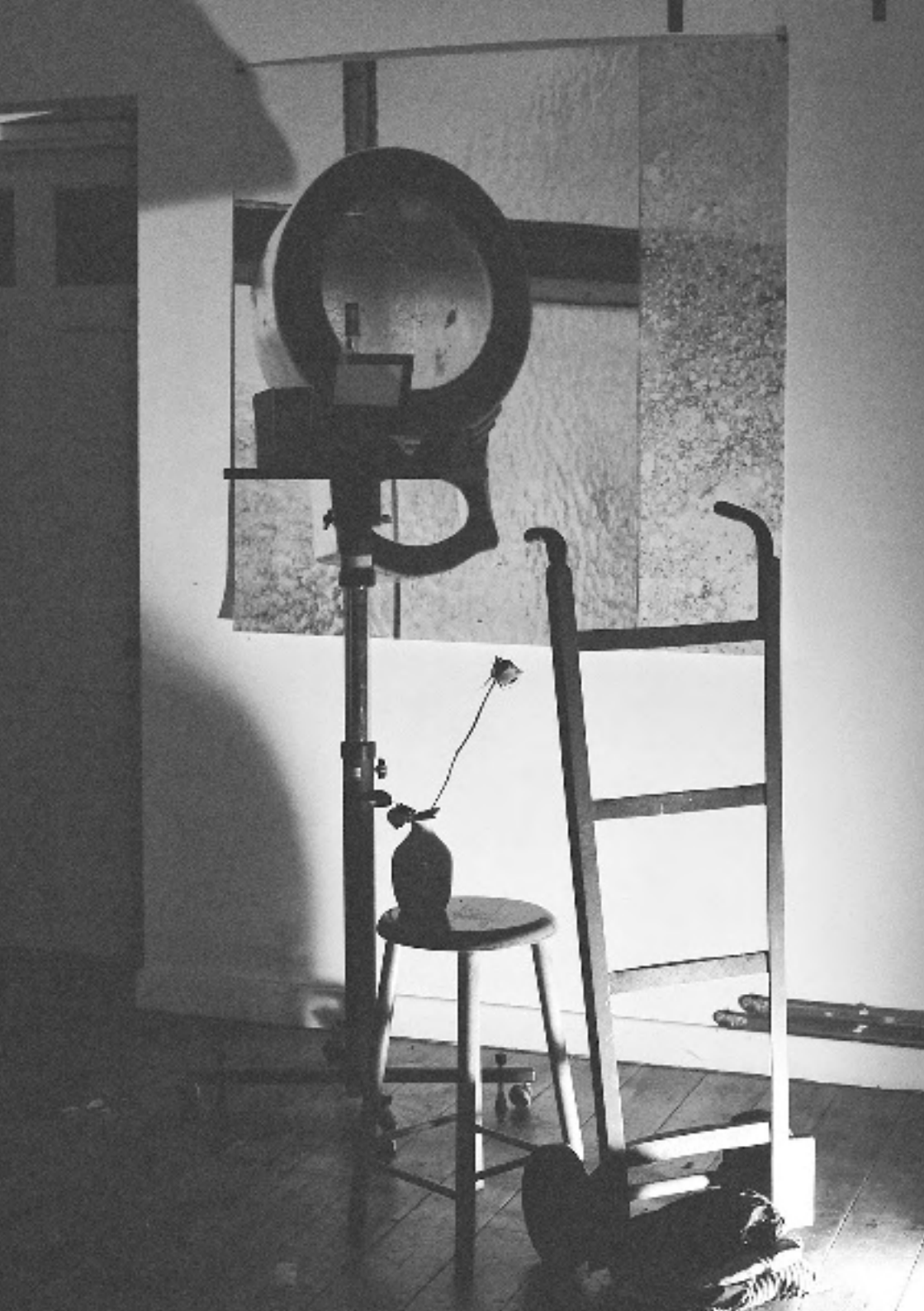
CHRISTOPHER JONES

KYOTO ARTS CENTRE
Kyoto, Japan

NORTHERN PRINT
Newcastle, UK

"…even when the images supplied by memory are true to life one can place little confidence in them"

W.G. Sebald, VERTIGO




INDEX

INTRODUCTION REMAKING THE PAST

GAVIN ROBSON

"Something has to be forgotten which we then get access to by revision. Remembering at any given moment, is a process of redescription; the echo can be different each time. The past is in the remaking. Remembering is a prospective project"
Adam Phillips, Freud and the Uses of Forgetting.

The desire to understand change in an artist's work as progressive too often leads to a false view of how he might imagine his own history. Rationalising change as framed in what are, significantly, called periods gives rise to the notion of a series of abandonings – of putting aside something exhausted and played out. The reality, in the mental life of many artists, is that the boundaries between phases of work are highly permeable. As in old houses where a suite of rooms is joined by aligned doors the contents of the past, temporarily invisible are always available if remembered in the right order.

This availability provides opportunities for the artist to behave in a way which contradicts the normal forward direction of historical narratives by reperforming a work, or a set of works, from his past. Accounts of this phenomenon frequently sound a note of embarrassment, as if the artist has proved inadequate to the task of making progress. For the artist however, such an act or reimagining can be enormously productive. Time spent forgetting is time spent in the service of creative remembering.

It was fifteen years before Delacroix had sufficiently forgotten his early masterpiece Algerian Women in Their Apartment to be able to produce the magical variant now in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier. This radical reworking depended crucially on the achievement of distance. It is well known that Delacroix regarded his experience of North Africa as a way of getting back to the classical world, a world which could only be revitalised by being remembered differently. It was however two years before his memories of Morocco and Algiers had faded into alignment with the purpose. To arrive at the Montpellier painting it was necessary for him to variously forget his deep cultural inheritance, his contact through naturalism with exotic imagery and his first developed synthesis of both.

Christopher Jones' recent work touches on many similar themes. They are rooted in his contacts with Japan but depend, equally, on a measure of forgetting. To remember productively he has employed the idea of erasure, of the disappearance of the inessential in order to find a new ordering of the image.

Christopher Jones' recent work touches on many similar themes. They are rooted in his contacts with Japan but depend, equally, on a measure of forgetting. To remember productively he has employed the idea of erasure, of the disappearance of the inessential in order to find a new ordering of the image.

The titles of the work which Jones produced between 1990 and 1992 after his return from living and working in Japan for two years contained echoes of the idea of displacement. Titles such as Exile and Memoir referred explicitly to a sense of being out of place but more suggestively he grouped them all as being From The Small Hours. This sense of being in the wrong time or of being out of time returns with the present body of work produced after revisiting Japan after an absence of eighteen years.

As if to underscore the difficulties of remembering, Jones discovered when attempting to refind the apartment block where he had lived on the rural outskirts of Kyoto that it had been demolished. Its erasure was so complete that he found himself casting around the perimeter of the site for traces of anything he might remember. This experience seemed to him on reflection to be linked to the necessity of losing something in order to find it again through a process of creative elaboration. He began to restage elements from his earlier works and photographs of these reconstructions appear in conjunction with motifs from the work of the 1980s photographed and overpainted. It seems also as if in trying to make sense of memory it was necessary to rebuild the site from which images might come to light.

Come to light too in that the new work has an openness and airiness, a fragility which might be associated with new growth. It may not be too fanciful to see a connection to Jones' images, based on digital photographs, of rice growing on the cleared demolition site which he encountered where his apartment had been.

The idea that art emerges from clearing away the accretions of cultural baggage is one which is frequently encountered in art since the late eighteenth century. Artists have taken erasure and renewal to be essential counterparts in a quest for authenticity. Very often the desire for distance from seemingly exhausted traditions has expressed itself through reaching out to the exotic construed as the primitive. Jones' view of the uses of Japanese culture is in no way however formed on the model of exoticism. He hints rather at the essential emptiness which often accompanies our encounters with foreignness, the feeling that we need to supply our own contents to flesh out the reality of the encounter. It is from sensing the paradox that the centre of these meetings is often void, that he can find a place for images from his own past.

How those images should be manifested, and what structures will release their new, or perhaps recovered, meanings is crucial for Jones. The use of over painting is one way in which potential can be released and, as importantly, old material reabsorbed. The sensuousness which characterises the layerings of paint in some of Jones' works, and which contrasts with the austerity of the photographic base, suggests a way of recontacting primary experiences of touch and taste which lie dormant in memory.

In those pieces where etchings and monoprints are digitally enlarged the process of enlargement gives a similar impression of fatness and fullness to marks which at their true scale might seem dry and skeletal. In both cases there is a springing up from the originating image in what could be seen as a metaphor of refreshment.

An additional point of reference on his return to Japan was the text of Frances Yates, The Art of Memory. Yates describes in detail the structures used in the ancient world by which memory can be retained and projected. These structures are for the most part based on the notion of harbouring and storing key images in an imagined architecture. Intriguingly Jones describes the possibility of producing a body of work where these structures are overtly employed and in his recent work there are hints of how this might happen.

The placement of key images within a field and their relationship to each other is clearly of particular importance to Jones. While the manner of their being associated depends on what might be described as a collage method there is a precision and an aptness in the way in which they are brought together which is far from the pure psychic automatism advocated by the surrealists. The ordering of images with such exactness supports a reading close to the memory training techniques described by Yates. The proposal of an architecture to locate memory, and more particularly an architecture of the theatre, hints at the possibility that images might not simply be found where they had been deposited but that they might be rendered eloquent in ways which go beyond the straightforward function of recovery.

How we imagine the theatre can be rather how we imagine the studio. It is in the studio that the artist instigates those conversations that animate the process of working towards resolution. He does so, even half-expecting answers, believing that images can be made articulate by drawing them into relationships where they are compelled to exchange meanings - image addressing image across an empty stage.

'…a translation issues from the original - not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original…'
Walter Benjamin, The Task of the Translator.

April 2007

Retracing the Thread, 2006
Oil on photograph,
mounted on steel plate
7·5 cm diameter

Sanjusangendo, 2006
Oil on photograph,
mounted on steel plate
7·5 cm diameter

The Recall Room, 2006
Oil on photograph,
mounted on steel plate
7·5 cm diameter

Under the Skin Again I, 2006
Oil on photograph,
mounted on steel plate
7·5 cm diameter

From the 33,033 Shapes, 2006
Oil on photograph,
mounted on steel plate
4·5 x 8 cm

Frozen by Distance, 2006
Collage, mounted on steel plate
mounted on steel plate
4·5 x 8 cm

Recast, 2006
Collage, mounted on steel plate
4·5 x 8 cm

Screen, 2006
Oil on photograph,
mounted on steel plate
4·5 x 8 cm

Store, 2006
Oil on photograph
15 x 10 cm

RECOLLECTION 1

GALLERY FORUM WITH MADOKA MORIGUCHI
(writer & curator),
DAGMAR PACHTNER (artist), CHRISTOPHER JONES & A GALLERY AUDIENCE:
memory, image & photography

Madoka Moriguchi: In this room we see many pieces – paintings, collages, prints and photographs – but one could say that these works constitute a single work, an installation. Each wall is arranged differently but they have a relation to each other that brings the space together into a single entity – so that we experience individual pieces in relation to one another and to the space. For example, the small works on this wall are arranged to form a large "empty" rectangle in the centre, on the facing wall a large digital print the same size as the empty rectangle is positioned in the centre – there is a direct connection between the two walls, one is quite like a reflection of the other.

Perhaps we could start by asking Chris to say a little about this – about the structure?

Christopher Jones: On the one hand it is a formal solution to organising around eighty pieces within this large, artificially lit white cube space. I had no plan but knew on bringing the work in here that each wall would need a distinct identity in order to establish a clear structure to the room. When you enter the installation you are met by an informal arrangement ahead of you of over forty small pieces which seem to be in flux. By contrast, the side wall has twelve small works arranged in a row – sparse and static and behind you a large metre-high print is placed next to pieces that measure barely a few centimetres. The impact of this is that the viewer has a different encounter as they move from wall to wall – having to move up close or further away, to peer up and crouch down.

On the other hand there is also a consideration which relates to the theme of memory which is part and parcel of the work – I see the arrangement of the individual pieces as somehow analogous to certain models of memory formation: a construction in which images recur in slightly different forms, scale shifts, structures move in and out of focus and individual works connect across the space. A visitor yesterday described the arrangement as a constellation and I think that's a good way of thinking about the work but also about all the "stuff" we carry around in our heads – it comes together and then it will fall apart – or at least seem to, as the elastic thread that holds it together gets stretched and strained.

MM: What about the shapes and sizes of the individual pieces – circles and this rectangular shape with a curved top?

CJ: The curved-headed shape originates from the shape of window mounts in an Edwardian album that I was given – I liked the scale of them and the way the window seemed to make the images it framed more precious. But the more I used it the more the associations to architectural motifs seemed relevant – to doorways, windows, tombstones… This shape, and the small circles, have an "objectness" – the fact they are not rectangular stresses their physicality, they are not solely surfaces for the creation of pictorial space. Circles have a kind of emblematic aspect – if we look around the Art Centre we will see numerous small circular motifs in the form of stickers, signs, notices, fixtures and fittings.

The tiny scale of these pieces is as important as their shape. I have been reading On Longing in which Susan Stewart writes about the miniature – paintings, doll's houses, and Tom Thumb bibles – and how they imply a distancing, because we are outside of them. By contrast, the paintings I have made in the past have been very large – Stewart would connect them to the idea of the gigantic: forms which the viewer become part of. In this installation I think I am playing with both these ideas – the individual miniature which we peer into from outside can, in a group of others, form a huge structure which fills the room, and which the audience becomes part of– we are inside and outside the work at the same time.

Dagmar Pachtner: I notice that all the paintings are painted onto photographs – can you say a little about why you have done this?

CJ: In the most general sense I have used photographs because of what they signal –they are a common way of both recording and in some way retrieving the past. More specifically the photographs are all black and white, and if you look closely you will see that many of them are of painted or drawn, rather than "real", images. I want to suggest in bringing the colour and urgency of oil paint to these static black and white photographs, a coming together of past and present.

Whilst it is not important to the viewer to know that these photographic grounds are recent photos of work I made eighteen years ago when I was living in Japan – it has been important for me in the making of the paintings. It has helped me to particularise decisions I have made and hopefully lends the work a tension which will make the viewer curious as to why the work is as it is.

DP: I am interested to know how you choose the photographs, or pieces of past work?

CJ: It is sometimes formal to do with shape and sense of light, other times it is to do with the nature or personal significance of the image.

DP: Yes, I wanted to ask about the imagery – sometimes the imagery that emerges is hard to read – other times it is very clear – the flower image for example….

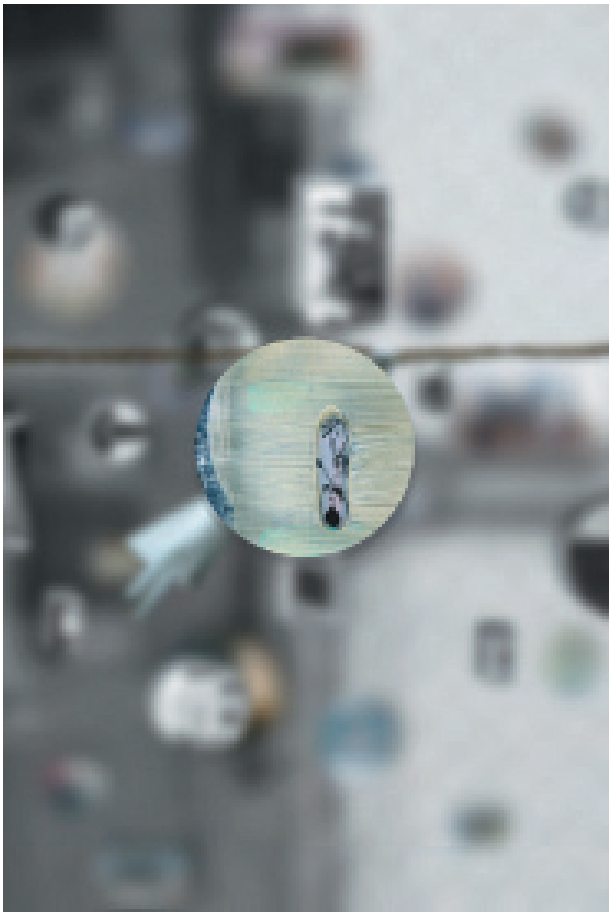
CJ: Well, the various nature of the description in the imagery is intentional – and reflects the degrees of clarity inherent in recollection. The particular family of imagery I have used is quite small and images get repeated, in slightly different forms and contexts. The rose image is one that I used in paintings all those years ago and I used it then, and do now, for two reasons: it is a straightforward domestic still-life scene made directly from the apartment I lived in and so has personal significance, secondly it has a more universal symbolism as an example of the contradictory nature of things: a beautiful scented flower with thorns that can tear the flesh. Other images here share these two characteristics: they symbolise a similar dichotomy, or are from these Kyoto surroundings. And this connection to Kyoto is important – the city and its surroundings hold a connection to a specific time and place for me and that is at the centre of this project of work.

From a Distance, 2007
Digital print & monotypes
135 x 90 cm



Regrouping, 2007
Digital print & photomontages
135 x 90 cm

Back to the Old House, 2007
Digital print, photographs,
silkscreen
65 x 90 cm



Into the Ether, 2007
Digital print
60 x 90 cm

RECOLLECTION 2

HIROYUKI SUZUKI (printmaker), HITOKO SUZUKI (literary translator)
& CHRISTOPHER JONES: memory, site, & translation

Hitoko Suzuki: You mentioned a little while ago that you see a connection between literary translation with which I am involved and printmaking with which you and Hiroyuki are concerned.

Christopher Jones: The connection arose initially from considering the relationship between painting and engraving – how in the past paintings would be interpreted/translated through engraving. Before lithography this was a way for "reproductions" of artwork to be seen by a wider audience – and studied by other artists.

Hitoko S: Well, as a translator I act as an intermediary – creating a bridge from the text in its original language to another. It is someone's work and then it is your work – and you feel as though you too are writing the work. You have to have a kind of belief, and also a doubt: have you understood the work, have you gone into it deeply enough, is your understanding the right one, is it thorough enough?

CJ: You feel responsible?

HS: Well, it's not just a responsibility to the writer or the original text but also to the reader.

CJ: There is the example of Blake who was so dissatisfied with his engraver that he started to engrave from his paintings himself. There must be an issue about accuracy, firstly in terms of language and then of feeling. I was reading some Murakami novels recently – three different translators – and felt that the tone of one translator was superior, but I cannot tell which might be closest to the original… which Murakami am I reading?

Hitoko S: Well, the original text is rather like the etching plate – what you work from is not seen by the audience. In the end the translator is offering an interpretation, and there will be variances. Interestingly, Murakami also translates Western literature to Japanese and recently there has been a debate about his translation of Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. Some people feel he has reflected issues in contemporary Japanese society in his translation – and he has his supporters and detractors for doing this.

CJ: The other link to printmaking is the indirect, two-stage process – in translation one starts with an existing text and works with it – you spoke just now of the original text as being like the etching plate. In etching the print fashioned from the plate is distinctly different from the drawing one starts with, changes occur through the shift in "language". The resultant image shares something with, but also differs from, the "original" plate image. And I was following this through in terms of memory – the translator and printmaker fashion something in the present from existing material, just as a memory is a present form constructed from past experience. A memory will be distinct from the facts of the original experience – it is a reshaping of those facts by all that has happened in-between, or that is happening in the instant of remembering.

It goes back to our discussion of accuracy. The writer W.G. Sebald explores this a lot in Vertigo, I am thinking of one character remembering a piece of cloth as a particular blue yet acknowledging this is at odds with what he knows to be true. What about the task you have of translating Vertigo where the

writing relies so much on oblique reference and we question whether the connections we make as a reader are really there, or intended – that must be difficult ?

Hitoko S: Yes, that's right! It's so difficult to be clear with the language yet retain the right degree of suggestion, to allow that freedom to the reader that seems to be intended by the author. I was often thinking when I read the novel, "Is that right, did I imagine that link or connection, is it really there?" The doubt has to be there in the translation for the reader, but I had to be sure for myself! And this brings me back to your work. I was looking at it again upstairs in the gallery and it reminds me so much of Sebald… the way connections are made in a way that one isn't completely sure, and the way the images are clear but ambiguous – and of course Sebald is so visual too, and in fragments – like the example of the blue cloth you mentioned.

Hiroyuki Suzuki: But what comes next – what will you be doing from now until you leave Kyoto?

CJ: I am interested to look at space in relation to memory. I have been working on some ideas prompted by revisiting the place where I lived in the 1980's – the apartment has been demolished leaving a barren patch of ground. I am thinking about working with the evidence that remains of the past.

Hitoko S: It's not so easy to see the residue in Japanese sites – there is less of the Western concept of preservation.

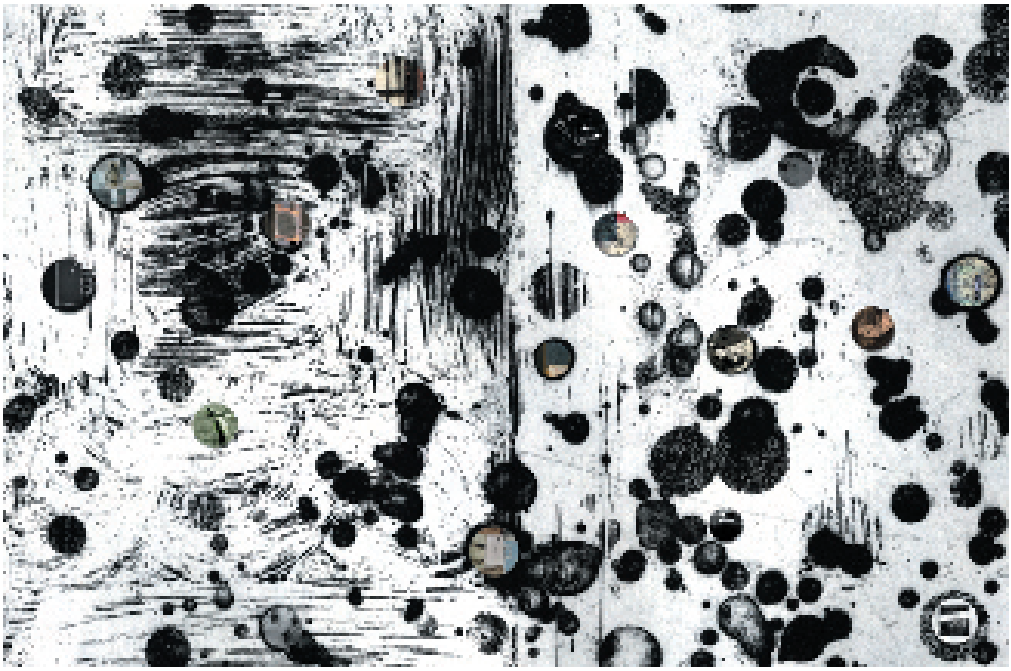
Hiroyuki Suzuki: Yes and the Japanese relation to the ground, to the soil, is different – it has a spiritual dimension to it. An empty space – the void – invites the gods in. You can see the way even ordinary building sites are roped off – almost as a ritual – the area protected and defined. The site will be cleared, a priest will come and perform a ritual blessing of purification – a way of preparing it for good spirits. This stems partly from a history of earthquakes and fires, and the post war emphasis on "new-build" but in Japan what is built on the ground is less important than the spirit of the ground itself. Renewal is an important concept for us – more so than preservation. Remember that Kyoto is unusual in wishing to preserve the past as it does. Also, traditionally the Japanese lived closer to the ground – the buildings were more lateral – you can see it in the old houses in Kyoto with narrow fronts but which tail back – "eel" houses. Compared to European houses the interior and exterior of the Japanese house are almost the same – there's a much thinner skin – we are more part of the space around us – a bit like the Japanese love of the umbrella……

Hitoko S: You should visit Ise Shrine where these ideas can be seen very clearly – it's a very revered, important place for the Japanese.

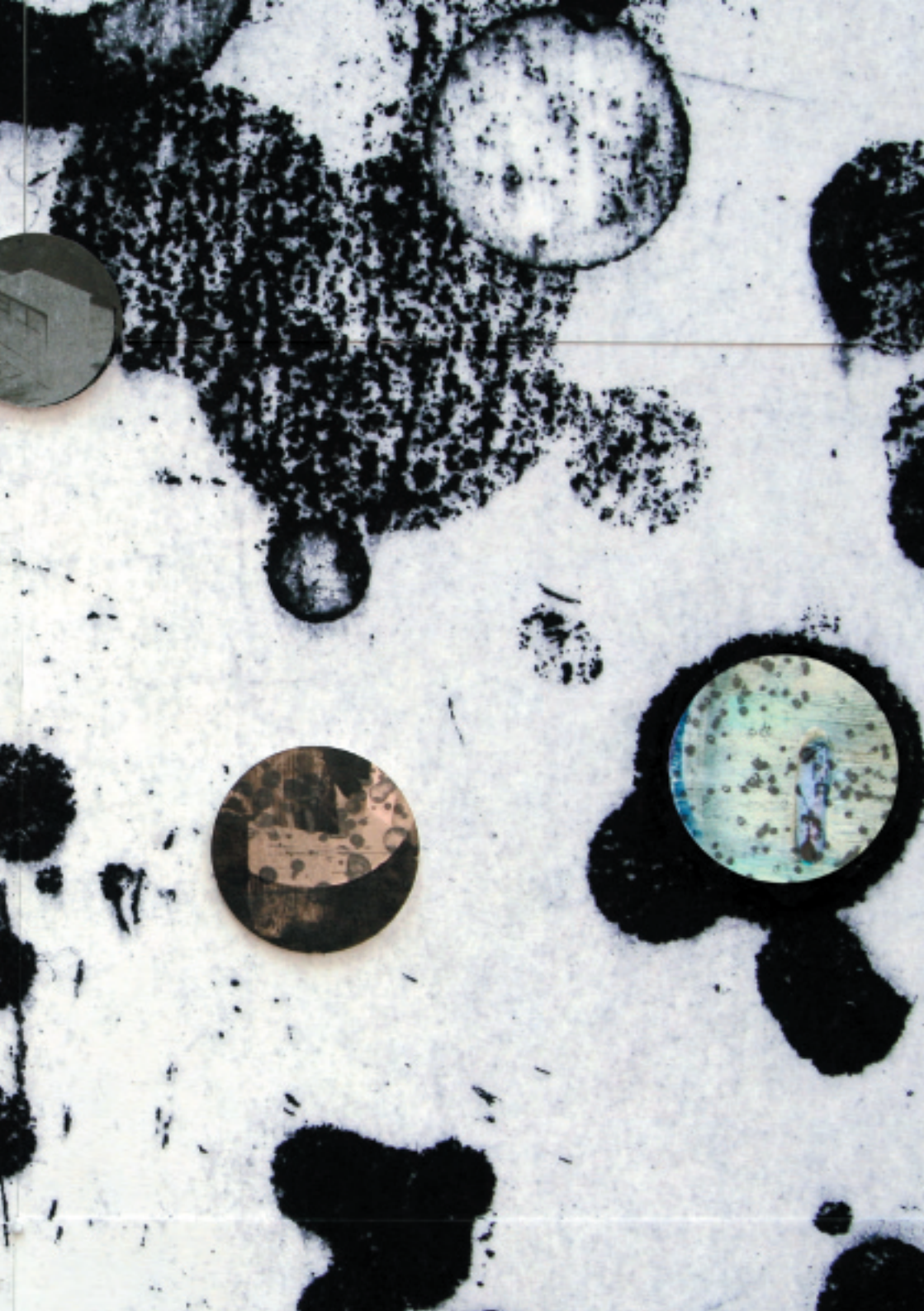
Hiroyuki S: There are two sites: an inner and outer shrine. Maybe you should visit the outer shrine, Ise Geku, it has a very strong spiritual dimension. You will find that at both the inner and outer shrines there are two sites next to each other: one is occupied by the current buildings, the other is an empty space. Every twenty years the temple is dismantled, the space cleared and a new building is erected on the adjoining site using traditional materials and techniques. So periodically the temple moves between the two sites. In this way the sites are regularly re-purified, and techniques and traditions are handed down. It illustrates the spiritual nature of the ground but also the concept of renewal.

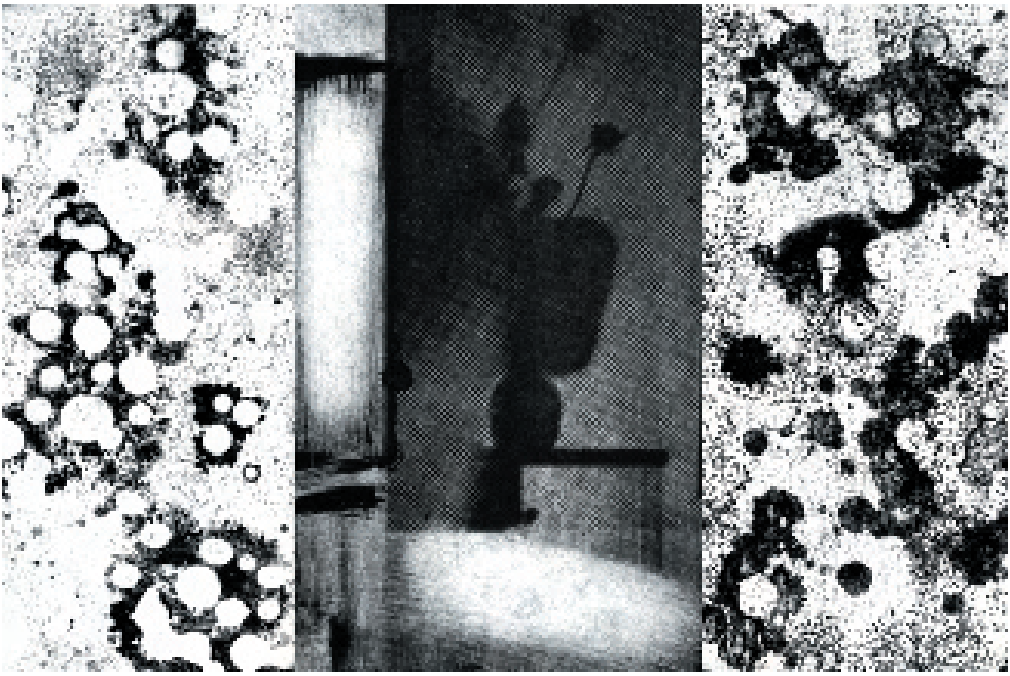
CJ: I can imagine the 'erased' site would make a very strong impression, not from what it contains physically or one can see – but rather the sense it holds of both past and future experience.

Hitoko S: Yes, in relation to what we have spoken about with regard to memory, it holds the past and future within it, a kind of "in-between" that is very powerful.

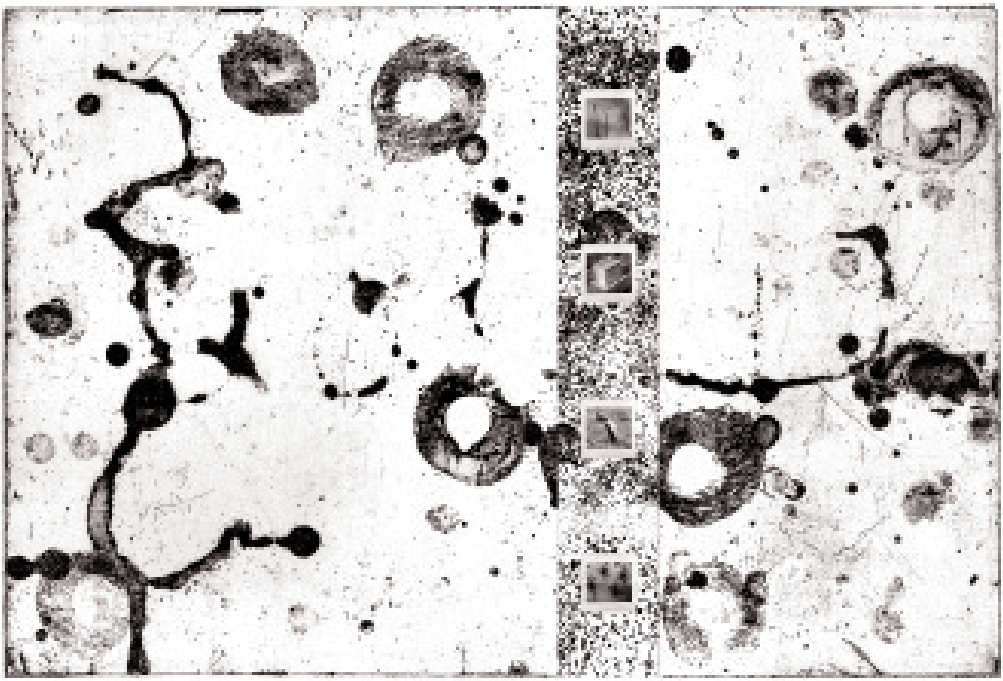


Ground II, 2007
Digital print, chin collé, etching
150 x 100 cm

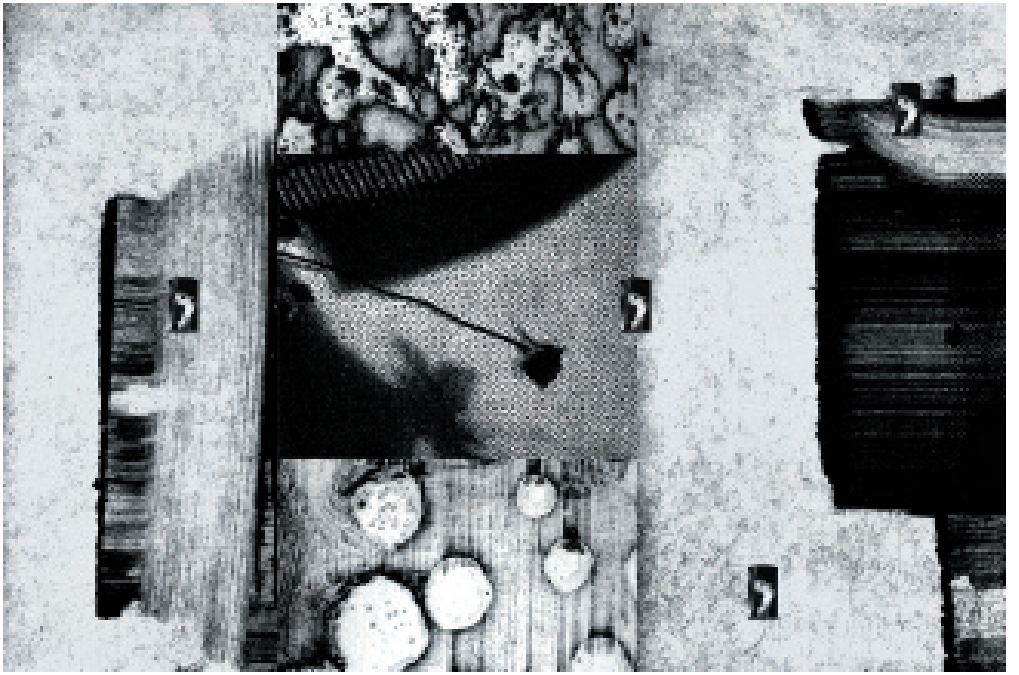




Indellible, 2007
Digital print
150 x 100 cm



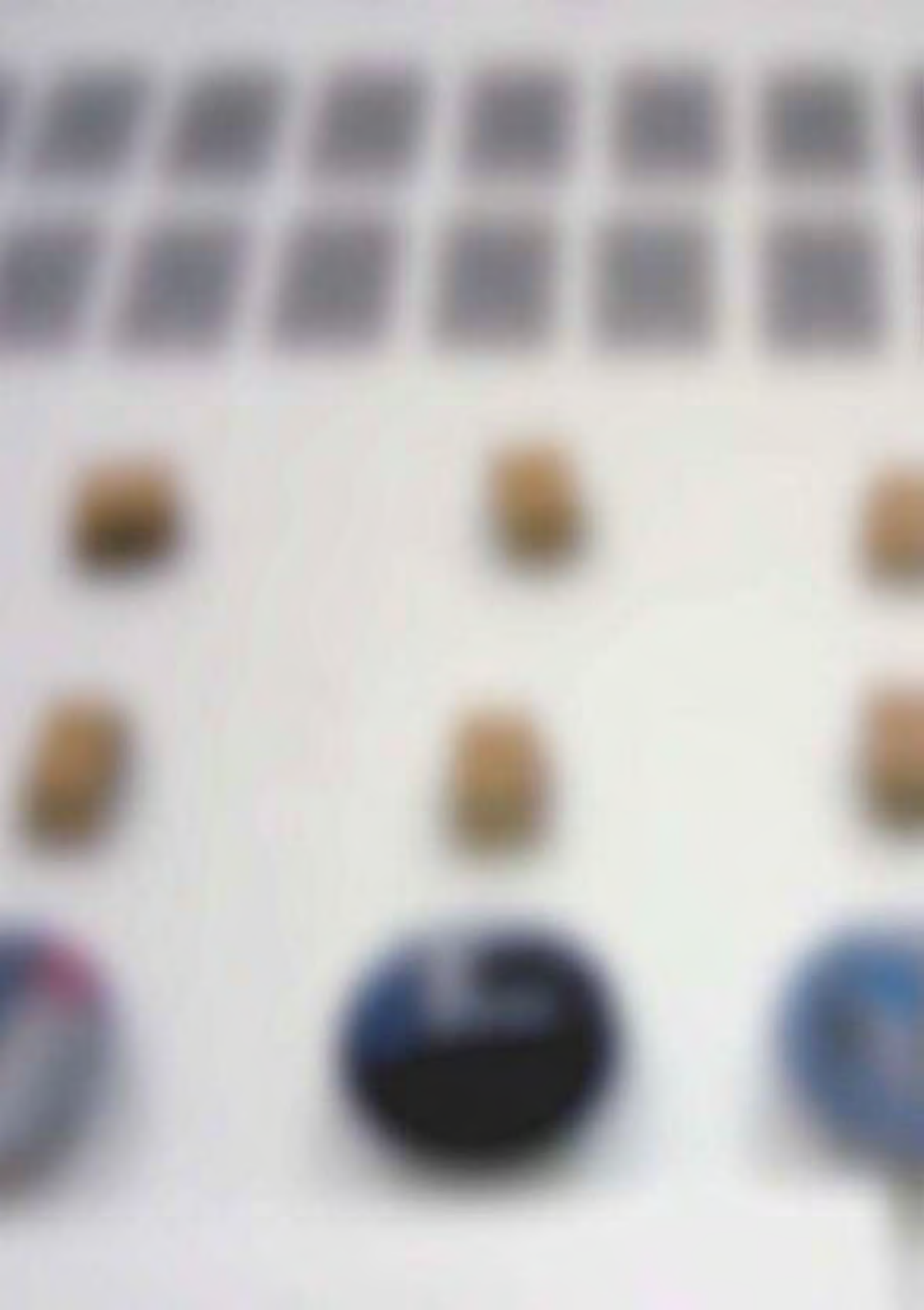
Ground I, 2007
Digital print, chin collé, etching
150 x 100 cm



Slip, 2007
Digital print assemblage
150 x 100 cm

"Yes said Lukas, there was something strange about remembering. When he lay on the sofa and thought back, it all became blurred as if he was out in a fog"

W.G. Sebald, VERTIGO



TRACE - RETRACE

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EXHIBITIONS

Gallery South, Kyoto Art Centre, Kyoto, Japan: April 30th. – May 28th. 2006
Northern Print, Newcastle, UK: May 10th. – July 1st. 2007

REMAKING THE PAST

Gavin Robson is a painter and printmaker, and Master of Printmaking at the University of Newcastle


CONVERSATIONS

Madoka Moriguchi is a writer and critic, and lives and works in Kyoto.
Dagmar Pachtner is an artist based in Landshut, Germany.
Hiroyuki Suzuki is a printmaker based in Nagoya.
Hitoko Suzuki is the Japanese translator of W. G Sebald's fiction from the German.

THANKS

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All the staff of Kyoto Art Centre
Madoka Moriguchi
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