

# Loving the alien

## Shoufay Derz's

*practice is concerned with the limits and possibilities of language and the ambiguities faced when attempting to visually articulate the edges of the unknown.*

Shoufay Derz is an Australian born artist, researcher and educator of German and Taiwanese heritages. She works across a range of media including Photography, video and installation. She is currently working Berlin, Germany. She was a fellow through the Australia Council Artist at Künstlerhaus Bethanien.

As co-director of The Institute of Endotic Research (TIER) in Berlin, As co-director of TIER, she has developed programs that combine her practice with collaborative approaches and social contexts. It is within this framework that the Wusinsans collective was born, based on collaborative research and creative experimentation.

Just as the writer uses words to express the ineffable, her practice engages the intersections between known and unknown worlds.

Deeply engaged with poetic potentiality her projects attempt to connect the silences in language with holes in social, structural and geological landscapes to contemplate the voids of history and also the uncertainties of future landscapes.

The resultant, elegiac artworks are simultaneously a lament on the transience of life and a celebration of its mystery. Recently her performative experiments have played with tactics of intuition and humour to convey stories of exclusion and collectivity, while delving into the transformative possibilities, impossibilities and risks of site-specific storytelling. In darker times, expressions of joy can be a radical activity. Derz holds a MFA by research at UNSW and a PhD at the University of Sydney.



From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print, 110 x 136.24 cm





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print, 110 x 136.24 cm





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print





From *Loving the alien*, pigment print, 110 x 136.24 cm



I would like to show my respect and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Gayamaygal people, of elders past and present, on which these meetings took place.

This is a longer story, beginning before now. On being neither this nor that. On our irresolution. On our relations in the midst of our deeper unknowns.

Through the bush we were guided by Karen Smith from the Aboriginal Heritage Office. High in the eucalypts, a black bird followed. This was the warrior bird, Karen shared. I asked, what are the creation stories of this place?

There are none. They were killed. We've lost so much.

Amid the trees, water, rocks and creatures warmed by the glowing autumn sun, I felt an internal fire extinguished, a light giving breath withdrawn into darkness towards a time before imagination had a chance to spark. The void clenched onto me, digging a deep hole inside and retreating into a black stone I'd forgotten I carried. We are born into a shared wound, a murky pool of loss.

## 'A picnic of Eels'

Persons from separate places were invited to gather and share in a lavish feast by the water.

Afterwards towards the fading sun, their faces magically transformed into green and their bodies disappeared into the cool muddy water. Green heads could be seen above the surface basking in the warm light while their bodies quivered beneath among the roots. That day an assembly of strangers collectively entered the pond and became eels. This is a true story.

We disappeared and appeared in all shades of green. The colour of aliens, the embodiment of what is both not there and there. The imagination. We are foreigners to each other. We came from all places and no places. We are kin and not kin. We are eels and we are not. We speak towards and away from what we cannot say. We are separate and yet we carry the same dark stones.

A hidden silence reached out across the great muteness to meet the silence in the other, as if breathing life into the immovable sense of a closer unknown.

Days later eels began to emerge from the pond and were seen at various patches amongst the coral ferns. Forty or more were encountered.

We walk the land of the buried past, present and future. We are born into the unknown as the unknown is born into us.

Shoufay Derz, 2019





*In the beginning*, pigment print, 110 x 136.24 cm





*In the beginning*, pigment print, 110 x 136.24 cm





*In the beginning*, pigment print, 110 x 136.24 cm



*In Memory of water*

**Shoufay Derz**





Installation view GAG PROJECTS, *To Descend (Kreidefelsen auf Rügen)*, From *In Memory of water*, 2018, Rügen  
Chalk applied by hand on Pigment prints on cotton paper, 90.5 × 71cm





*To Descend (Kreidefelsen auf Rügen)*, From *In Memory of water*, 2018, Rügen Chalk applied by hand on Pigment prints on cotton paper, 90.5 × 71cm





*To Descend (Kreidefelsen auf Rügen)*, From *In Memory of water*, 2018, Rügen Chalk applied  
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*To Descend (Kreidefelsen auf Rügen)*, from *In Memory of water*, 2018, Rügen Chalk applied  
by hand on Pigment prints on cotton paper, 90.5 × 71cm

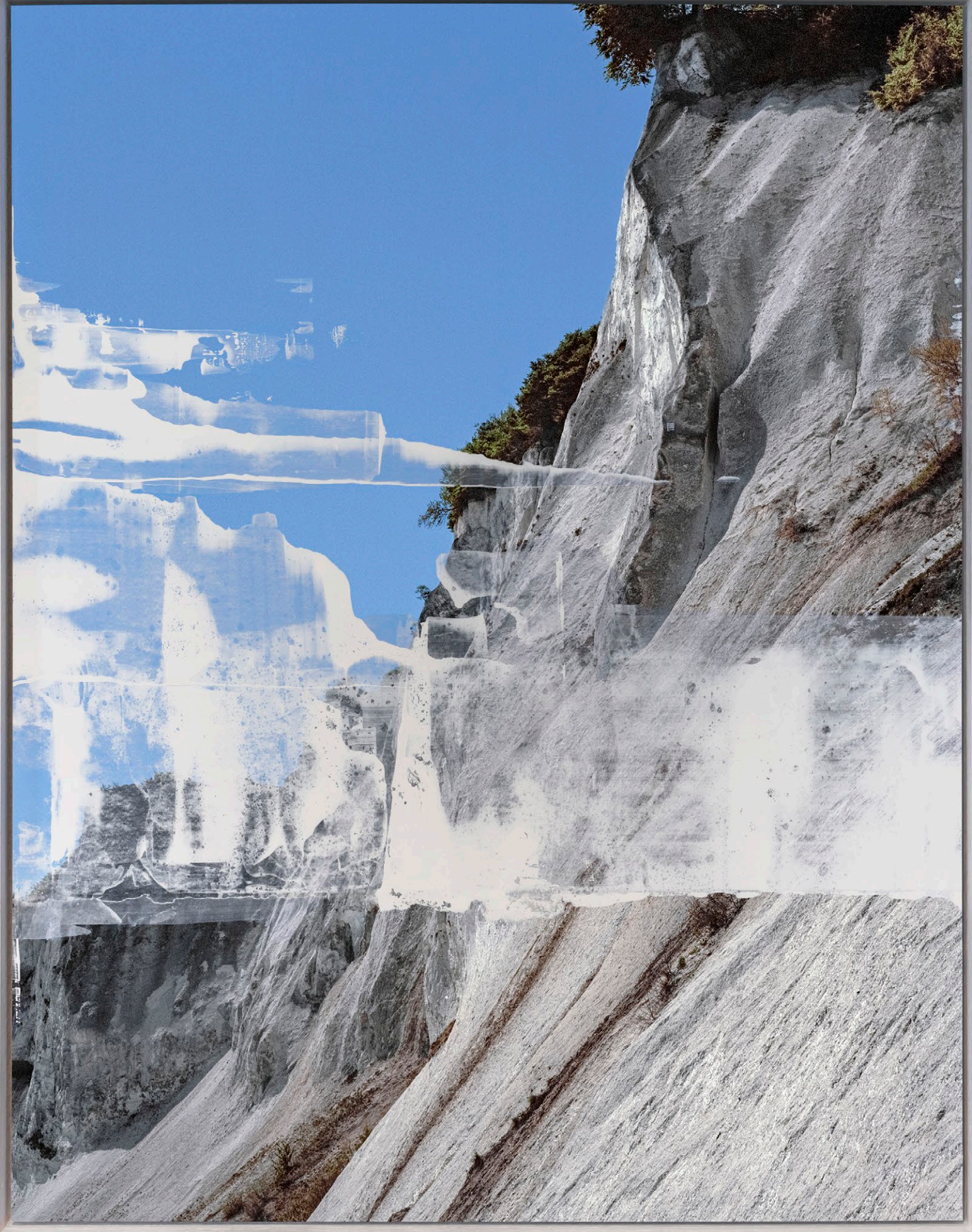




*To Descend (Kreidefelsen auf Mons Kint)*, from *In Memory of water*, 2018, Rügen Chalk

applied by hand on Pigment prints on cotton paper, 90.5 × 71cm





*To Descend (Kreidefelsen auf Mons Kint)*, From *In Memory of water*, 2018, Rügen

Chalk applied by hand on Pigment prints on cotton paper, 90.5 × 71cm





*To Descend (Kreidefelsen auf Mons Kint)*, From *In Memory of water*, 2018, Rügen

Chalk applied by hand on Pigment prints on cotton paper, 90.5 × 71cm





*The face of the Deep*, Installation view GAG PROJECTS, 2019





*The face of the Deep*, Installation view GAG PROJECTS, 2019



...all that you need to find poetry  
is to look for it with a lantern<sup>1</sup>

## **In Memory of Water**

In his poem, *The Desert is a Memory of Water* (2011), the poet Jack Myers recollects how his two-year old son, “dug holes in the yard and fit his face into each one of them to see, as he explained, if he could find where the darkness came from.”<sup>2</sup> For Shoufay Derz, this evocative poem reflects her similarly well-nourished compulsion to uncover the unknown, which has been the focus of her artist’s career. Motivated by a need for discovery and disclosure, Derz employs poetry and her personal history as guides to inhospitable, monumental landscapes, eroded by millenia and preserved by memory; places where the unknown resides in the fissures and lacerations of colossal formations. Looking to what is within and beyond these poetic terrains, Derz marvels at what she can’t see. “I want to extract knowledge from the void and reveal the unknown for others to see. It’s about creating a sense of wonder about what is and what was,” she says. “If we define ‘what is’ as a void, then it’s interesting to see how much light the landscape can shed onto and into it. How far it can take us into the past and our own internal landscapes.” It’s like looking down a manhole and dropping a coin into the darkness to find out how deep it falls.

Much happens in the unknown: secrets, confusion, and contradictions. Surveying the landscape, Derz is particularly interested in the paradox of the void as reflection, the illusory separation between the visible and invisible. A state in which the void transforms through space and time to allow a moment in which we observe everything as it is, not as we see it. Although at first glance light and shadow co-exist in a single view, the illusion is created when the voided space opens up like an eye, to bare its soul. An extension of the paradox exists because although the reflection is real, it is also the illusion itself, an irony that creates an ephemeral state of separation much

like memory – as shimmery as a desert mirage.

For a photographic series from 2015 at Hill End, a hole was dug in the ground and filled with water to reflect everything around it, so the void could give back what it would otherwise take.

Derz reads landscapes as wordless poems that express loss, doubt, uncertainty, and ambiguity; the paradoxical potency of this perceived ‘negativity’ is that it allows the possibility of ‘relationship’ with something authentic. By doubting ourselves, we engage with a failure of expression, which leads us to the unknown; its fragile, unpredictable ruptures and all the possibilities it holds – the void as receptacle and reflector. In the photographic work, *Via Negative* (2018), Derz ventured into negative space at the Red Rock Canyon State Park in California in the scant hours when the weak, winter sun was high enough to coax the darkness out of canyons and ravines. By contrast, in *To Descend* (2018), the majestic formations of the Chalk Cliffs of Rugen in Germany, famously romanticised by the eighteenth-century painter Casper David Friedrich have been voided by a veil of chalk from Rugen, collected and applied by the artist’s hand. You can’t see the cliffs but you can see their materiality. Although Rugen chalk is traditionally used to restore frescoes, here it is used as whitewash, a concealment rendered on the surface of a pigment print. By erasing the already eroded shoreline, the artist’s goal of artfulness without conceit is achieved; instead of calling out, “Here I am” the works exclaims, “Look what we’ve lost.”

Now the earth was without form and void,  
and darkness was upon the face of the deep.  
And the spirit moved upon the face of the waters.<sup>3</sup>

Poetry links Derz’s thinking to the landscapes she explores physically and conceptually, in both personal and geological topographies. The works of poets Charles Wright, Jack Myers, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, Eleanor Wilner, and Li Po, as well as Buddhist sutras, reflect her resistance to the



delimitations of language in favour of the more imaginative possibilities of the unresolved and indeterminate. The origin of the word ‘poem,’ derived from the Greek poema, also suggests something which is generative, a ‘thing made or created.’ Although Derz says she likes to think of her works as “bad but sincere poems,” she envisions the notion of bad as a void knowing that at certain times of day, an alternate meaning to the notion of ‘bad as not-good’ may have light cast upon it. At this time, she suggests that bad can also be taken as an excess of emotion beyond the verbal, an accretion of the inexpressible whose depth we can’t fathom, in which only a wince or a blush may be entertained. On the Other Hand (2013), is a sculptural installation composed of two outsized sculptures of fountain pens; a slab of black granite carved to extract the word ‘silence’ out of its darkness in the handwriting of Derz’s late father; and a pool of black Chinese ink surrounding the slab. Ink, characteristically an enabler of expression, here rests serenely in a pool in which everything that does not fit into words has blended together; the internal build-up of the inexpressible finally externalised as an inky void. Renewal from familial loss and mourning takes place by materialising the word ‘silence’ on the black granite slab, a cursive embodiment of absence. It is a one-word elegy that exists beyond speech, not just because it implicitly says so, but perhaps because there may be nothing left to say. And just as language and ‘that which cannot be spoken’ are symbolised by formless pools of ink, stagnated words, or sculptures of disembodied tongues, the white veils of chalk also materialise utterances and silence, poetry and uncertainty. Is the chalk a full-stop or a sequitur? As in every poetic exchange, it is open to interpretation. Derz’s work is an ode to doubt, to infinite possibilities, and to the prospect of maybe never really finding out where the darkness comes from.

What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.<sup>4</sup>

George Shaw  
13 March 2018

## NOTES

1. Charles Wright, “The Secret of Poetry,” in **A Short History of the Shadow**, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002).
2. Jack Myers, “Desert is the tMemory of Water,” in **The Memory of Water**, (Michigan: New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2011).
3. Eleanor Wilner, “Reading the Bible Backwards,” in **Reversing the Spell**, (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1997).
4. T. S. Eliot, “Burn Norton,” in **Four Quartets**, (New York: Harcourt, 1943).





*On the other hand*, Manly Art Gallery & Museum, 2018  
Indigo solution, blown borosilicate glass, gold plated brass, black granite, black chinese ink.

















無 *Mu*, Wombeyan marble and cartridge paper (60 cm cube), bronze tongue





*Under Erasure*, pigment print on cotton rag paper, 128 x 160cm unframed / 130 x 162cm framed





*Via Negative I - III*, pure pigment print on cotton rag paper, 160 x 128 cm





*Via Negative I*, pure pigment print on cotton rag paper, 160 x 128 cm





*Via Negative II*, pure pigment print on cotton rag paper, 160 x 128 cm





*Via Negative III*, pure pigment print on cotton rag paper, 160 x 128 cm





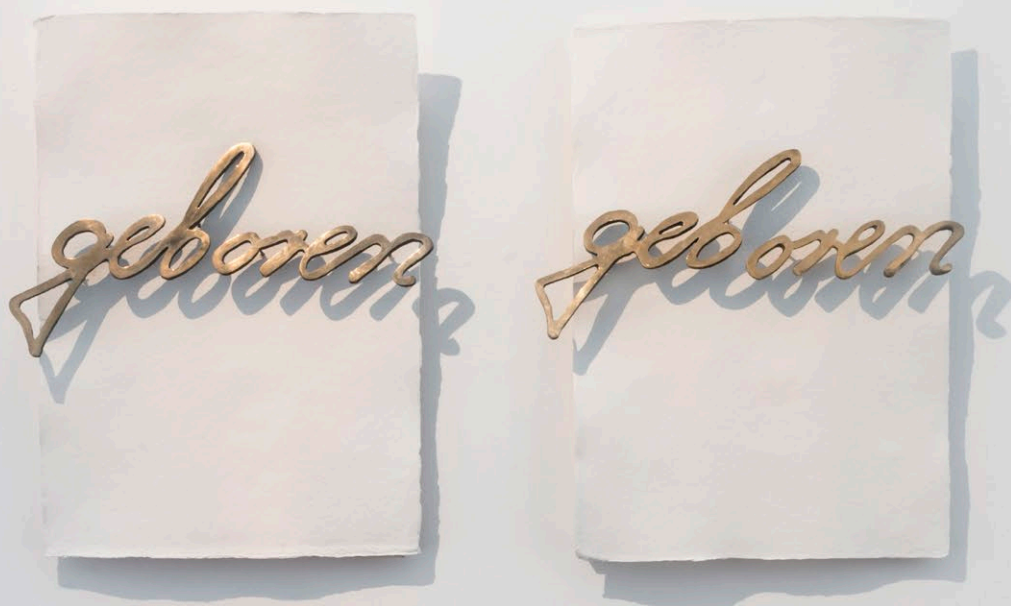
*Reversing the Spell II*, handmade paper, acrylic mirror, diptych, 120 x 90 cm each





*Detail, Reversing the Spell II, handmade paper, acrylic mirror, diptych, 120 x 90 cm each*





*Born I and Born II*, cast bronze, 54 x 28 x 2 cm each, handmade paper.



Transformation is at the essence of the art of Shoufay Derz.

Her works allude as much to what has been - as to that which is now seen. Whether the subject is landscape, lives or language, an echo of the past pervades in the present.

Poets use words to describe what is often beyond word. Images and objects, frequently vested in the poetic, are conceptual and physical vehicles for continuing themes of the ineffable, of absence and erasure in her art.

Along with aspects of her personal Taiwanese and German heritage and histories, and facets of art history, the artist works in a range of media, to mine the poetic from sources as diverse as the Biblical text Genesis, Rumi, the 13th-century Persian Sunni Muslim mystic together with contemporary poets, for her own visual forms of 'concrete poetry' that are expressive of transition, of absence, of coming and unbecoming...

Fragile landscapes, images of eroded sites, disappearing cliffs, are for the artist wordless poems and material representations of absence; terrains of emptiness that retain traces of geological scar, forms that are no longer there, subjects of periods of drought and flooding. Hence the title: In Memory of Water...

The panoramic USA Badlands landscape series *Via Negative* is named for a philosophical mode of alluding to, or describing 'what is not'. Derz seeks terrains both physical and psychological – internal landscapes that are at the intersection of memory and triggered by traces and inescapable transcriptions of the past in the present.

The concept of 'legacy' is implicit too in the To Descend series of images photographed on

The concept of 'legacy' is implicit too in the **To Descend** series of images photographed on Rügen an island in the Baltic Sea with Germany opposite one shoreline, Denmark on the other. The photographs are overlaid with veils of chalk taken from the site. It is sold as an art material in German art stores and, as told to her by her German art restorer cousin, is also used typically to paint frescoes as it is reversible – ephemeral - it can be washed off.

“‘To Descend’” the artist notes, “can refer to the movement down to the sea edge when visiting these steep eroded cliffs, but also to link back and descend from the past. It poses questions of how our inheritance, by bloodline, culture, and language contribute to the shape of our present circumstance. How are we indebted positively or negatively, to the past in recognising what we are today? In what way can this be erased rewritten and reconfigured?”

Retrospective reference is also made to the art-historical legacy of German Romanticist, Casper David Friedrich (1774 – 1840) who famously painted the majestic Rügen cliffs in Derz's significant choice of site and in making the dimensions of her images to be the same size as his paintings. The reference is not nostalgic but is intended by the artist to be a critical look at the mythologies of history or more personally the mythologies of family which we understand through stories to form our identity: “Rather than point out towards the void of the sea in the style of Casper David Friedrich, my lens focused towards the material of the chalk cliffs with chalk paradoxically as a whitewash to further void the already worn shoreline. Yes, you can see hints of the horizon, but the main substance is the chalk –a material of writing, and a material I associate with the formation of ideas. And although ephemeral in that it can



*be wiped off chalk is a material representing language in a primary state and embodies the essence of transformation; thought to word, hand to paper, word to material."*

Birth and creation is a subtext of this exhibition and the subject of Born, a bronze casting of the word in the German language (geboren) in the artist's grandfather's handwriting taken from her father's migration papers from Germany to Australia.

Legacy through language and the materiality of writing again surfaces with the Creation story from the Book of Genesis with its first line about the ephemeral moment of transformation:

*Now the earth was without form and void: and darkness was upon the face of the deep And the spirit moved upon the face of the waters*

It finds repetition in *Reversing the Spell I* embroidered in black on black dyed silk in a ghosted facsimile of Derz's father's handwriting splayed with black feathered quills, a form of quasi portrait; and in *Reversing the Spell II* a Chinese language version written in Derz's cousin's calligraphy with the blank, negative emptiness of the calligraphic characters cut out from the robust white hand-made paper.

The artist acknowledges in these works the poem "Reading the Bible Backwards" by Eleanor Wilnor from her collection *Reversing the Spell* (1998) that envisions the reversing of the Creation story told in Genesis by describing the sea's slow inundation of the earth that would reverse the spell of sins against

nature and human history's disasters and legacies.

無 *Mu III (not have; without)* a cast brass sculpture of a disembodied tongue presented on a chalk stick bed was cast during an artist residency in Berlin. With its connotation of a mute state, it speaks of the impotency felt from absence of knowledge of languages on both a universal and personal familial level for the artist:

*"What has been passed down to me are stories assembled into a kind of myth made of broken pieces, memories, viewpoints shared by various people and material remnants.*

*My interest in the 'unknown' is not concerned with the romantic, the mystical. I'm driven by a fierce curiosity in the way poetry speaks the unspoken and how this can positively contribute to new forms of visual arts practice.*

*My interest in this richly complex area of study is largely engendered by my mixed Chinese and German heritage, and the experience of not being raised to speak the languages of my parentage. This lack of access and understanding nurtures a sensitivity towards the unknown that is both formative, familiar and yet paradoxically also the basis for much disconnect. In a broader cultural context my work is about cultivating the creative potential of the negative, as mirror to how one's identity is shaped by unknown and unspoken potencies."*

Barbara Dowse  
Curator





*Reversing the Spell I*, hand embroidered eucalyptus and rust dyed black silk thread, turkey pen quills, 260 x 260cm



*Now the earth became without*

*the waters*





# *Collective Shroud, Ritual for the Death of the Reef*

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For the project *Ritual for the Death of the Reef*, the Great Barrier Reef was presumed dead and the assembly of ritual participants were given the chance to imagine returning to its once living biosphere to pay respects through the creation of its memorial. Through the creation of collective rituals, the work speculated on the role of poetic imagination in the fate of the biosphere and GBR. The experimental pedagogical performances at UQ – Heron Island Research Station were in collaboration with Masters of Architecture Students and Amaia Sanchez-Velasco, lecturer at the School of Architecture from the University of Technology Sydney.





*Expulsions*, Video loop





*Ritual for the Death of the Reef*, 2018, Photography by Shoufay Derz.





*Ritual for the Death of the Reef*, 2018, Photography by Shoufay Derz.

University of Sydney, Pedagogical exploration at the School of Architecture: Factory of Hyper-ecologies (2018): Nathan Chan, Yvette Salmon, Stefanie Li, Kevin Chuang, Edwin Chin Fai Chon, Daniel Viglione, Nurul Farra Nadia, Binti Zaed, Perry Cheang, Alice Pui Sze Ng, Roger Miranda, Tina Bao Ngoc Le, Nitika Duggal, Thi Thanh Mai Phan, Kate Harding, Rhys Collins under the supervision of Amaia Sánchez-Velasco (Grandeza Studio) and Shoufay Derz.



# *The Wish*

Mysteries are not to be solved. The eye goes  
blind when it only wants to see why...

This talk is like stamping new coins.  
They pile up,  
while the real work is done outside  
by someone digging in the ground.

Excerpt from "Someone digging in the ground"

Rumi, trans. Coleman Barks.





*Someone digging in the ground, red,*

Pigment print on cotton paper, custom frame stained eucalyptus and rust  
99 x 92cm unframed / 110.4 x 103.4cm framed





*Someone digging in the ground, black,*

Pigment print on cotton paper, custom frame stained eucalyptus and rust





*Someone digging in the ground (video diptych)*

Two channel video loop

Duration variable

Edition of 5



*The Wish*, Shoufay Derz's elegant, philosophically and psychologically complex installation of sculpture, video and photography has developed from the artist's residency earlier this year in remote Hill End, site of a now abandoned gold mine.

Absence, abandonment, emptiness and loss - and ways to make such abstract concepts visible, have long been a focus of the artist's practice. She conjures with the expression of seeming intangibles, with stages of transition and transformation as she interweaves her own personal narrative and experience to make manifest universal aspirations, fears and quests for meaning.

The landscape as metaphor pervades her works. Vast, harsh, empty expanses of isolated far flung monotone deserts, craggy abandoned cavernous quarries, and deep, dark, dense bottomless black lakes are all allegorical sites for her expression of wildernesses of the soul.

The Wish suites of photographic images herald a shift from bleak emptiness to a more 'optimistic' and transitional landscape with 'communal' stands of sentinel Eucalypts signalling a closer intimacy with nature. Light filters through the trees. The palette, while subdued is tinged with warmth. Though trunks are seared and blackened by bushfire, sprouts of new growth augur of endurance and promise of regeneration, of life.

A video cycle, 'Someone digging in the ground', set in this landscape is characteristically cryptic with multiple connotations of burial, of searching, of hidden depths, of excited hope, of desperation, of wonder, of bottomless longing, of eternal quest. The artist states: 'The terrain of Hill End is full of holes. One cannot walk far without stumbling upon a deep burrow or tunnel. The holes are blank open sites of speculation, enticing one to peer down into the dark unknown. I like to think of these holes as luminous voids where imagination ferments and of one 'prospecting' the ground for a sense of the unknown.'

Alchemy, a speculative and seemingly magical act of

transformation as both process and idea is a significant element of Shoufay's practice. She rigorously researches and manufactures her own dyes from natural materials and methods. Plant-based Indigo is a recurring culturally and emotionally symbol-laden dark blue-black used by the artist to dye silks, tint the wooden frames of photographs, and, importantly it is the colour of ink, carrier of words. Now, for *The Wish*, not as some latter day witch, but as an holistic act of integration, the artist has gathered, boiled and brewed eucalypt leaves and gum in a copper cauldron to craft the rusty warm gold-orange dyes for silk and for thread for words embroidered onto the canopy of 'The sleeper', a notional tent structure, and also to rub into the wood of deep box frames enclosing images of tree-scapes and red soil escarpments.

The warm luminosity of copper with the allusion to 'copperplate', to enlightenment, glows from the ground of '1024 full stops' formed by two copper sheets leaning like ancient tablets against the gallery wall. The 'stelae' are pierced at intervals with so many 'full stops', holes for white feather quills; each quill a symbolic voice - but many miss their marks, lying fallen.

Words, their meaning, their artistry, their physical form, and the materials and implements of their making; paper, stylus, ink, hands, are fundamental to all of Shoufay's art. Many of these elements are implicit in the poignant video, '洗手 (xǐshǒu) Wash Hands' with its 'panning' for a sense of connection, for a touchstone between estranged individuals. The ritual hand washing is symbolic of cleansing and a means of healing - with ink a salve, a vehicle for words, for revelation of a hidden common language.

The profound writings of the thirteenth-century Persian mystical poet, Rumi are both mentor and essence of Shoufay Derz's *The Wish* with its distilled elegance, pervasive conundrums, embrace of paradox, of the prosaic and of the poetic.

Barbara Dowse  
Curator





*Someone digging in the ground, the hole,*

Pigment print on cotton paper, custom frame stained eucalyptus and rust  
99 x 92cm unframed / 110.4 x 103.4cm framed





*Unnamed (landscape poem) I*

Pigment print on cotton paper,  
99 x 92 cm





*Unnamed (landscape poem) II*

Pigment print on cotton paper, 99 x 92 cm





*Unnamed (landscape poem) III*

Pigment print on cotton paper, 99 x 92 cm





*Unnamed (landscape poem) IV*

Pigment print on cotton paper, 99 x 92 cm





*Unnamed (landscape poem) V*

Pigment print on cotton paper, 99 x 92 cm





洗手  
(*xǐshǒu*)

(cycles 1 -3)  
HD video,  
43 minutes, 2016.  
Hill End Quartz,  
Chinese ink, Copper  
pot, Cast of hand  
(artist's mother's)





*King for a Day (Stripped),*  
hand stitched silk thread (dyed with pomegranate skins), king size bed sheet,  
(Text appropriated from old love letter written by Peter Derz addressed to Lena Chen







## *1024 Full Stops*

Copper, 1024 holes, quills, liver of sulfur, 2.4 x 2.4 cm Installation view: Bathurst Regional Art Gallery



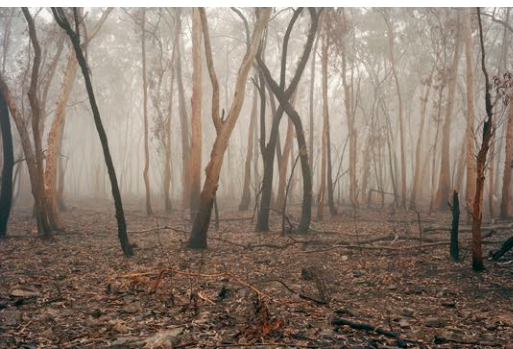






*Covering 2, 4, 6 of 9*

Pigment print, custom frame stained with eucalyptus and rust, 30 x 45cm unframed / 41.9 x 56.9 cm framed









# *Phantom Limb*

Shoufay Derz's work is bathed in the shadow of her father's presence although he passed away some years ago. Suspended from the ceiling is a pair of indigo filled giant fountain pens and below, the word 'silence' emerges, almost indistinguishable, from a pool of black ink. Her materials of marble, black stone, ink and paper evoke the ungraspable dark energy of matter before language has given it form. "The potential for connection only arises from severance," she says, "The phantom limb is both a severed limb and also the belief in the whole. Within the very destruction exists the creative forces, which give shape and transform who we are." For Shoufay Derz, language is not confined to finite definitions but is the portal through which we can glimpse mystery.

All life is contingent on the phantom limb, it exists in all of us. It is the engine room of being. Our lives can have no substance without these phantom limbs, the ephemeral nature of experience, which contains the entirety of what we are.

**Lindy Lee 2013.**





*Without*, UTS Gallery, 2013

Wombeyan solid marble and cartridge paper, gold plated copper, blue fountain pen ink.









*Cameron's Quarry*, Pigment print on cotton paper, 120 x 120cm, 2013



# Shoufay Derz

## *Ashes upon the moon*

*Ashes Upon the Moon* might also have been named after the poem 'On visiting a Taoist Master in the Tai-T'ien Mountains and not finding him' by Li Po (AD 701-62). It is a common theme in early Chinese poetry to look for something and to not find it. Instead, meaning is created through engagement with your surroundings and the relationship of things in the natural landscape.

I travelled to Caoshan, Taiwan to look for a moon landscape and instead found a green and fertile scene. This was neither the moon nor the unknown landscape I had sought. In the absence of the moon these photographs capture the action of ash thrown into the air. Ash is evocative of absence and embodies an encounter with the ineffable.

Chinese ink is traditionally made of carbon collected from the ashes of burnt pine trees. These images are a type of drawing, where the ash is to the landscape what ink is to paper.

Shoufay Derz





*Ashes upon the moon I\_* pigment print on cotton paper, 82 x 67 cm, 2014





*Ashes upon the moon II*\_ pigment print on cotton paper, 82 x 67 cm, 2014





*Ashes upon the moon III\_* pigment print on cotton paper, 82 x 67 cm, 2014





*Ashes upon the moon IV\_* pigment print on cotton paper, 82 x 67 cm, 2014



**Shoufay Derz**

*Depart without return*





*not this, not that (neti,  
neti)*

pigment print  
on cotton paper,  
custom-made cedar  
wood frame, stained  
natural indigo





*I am death, destroyer of words*

pigment print on cotton paper, custom-made cedar wood frame, stained natural indigo, 92 x 99cm

&





Video, Silent, 2 minutes 11 seconds looped



In Shoufay Derz's video *Depart without return* we encounter a face painted in a deep indigo, that is seen framed by an apparently limitless blackness. A host of moths, their wings shuddering, crawl across the face – and this is the entirety of the video, a striking image held indefinitely by the loop of playback. The only real suggestion that this is a video is the motion of the wings of the moths and the very occasional movements of the face – a slight mouth or eyelid twitch. Without this movement the face might indeed be dead, or perhaps the body is very close to death, the moths transformed from a curious detail to a symbol of the spirit.

*Depart without return* is layered with such meanings and associations. The work records a performance in which the artist lay in a canoe, and although it's not visible in the video itself, the action is in keeping with Derz's fascination with combining symbols rich with religious and secular meanings: the river as a separation between life and death and the ship that sails between this world and the next recur across numerous religions, while the colour blue is associated with the pantheon of Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist gods and is a symbol of the infinite. In modern Western art, the blue fields of Yves Klein's paintings and the residue of his anthropometries performances similarly suggest a transition from embodied action to immaterial ghost. The insect in the video is the silk moth (*Bombyx mori*), a moth that is blind and cannot eat or fly. In its pupa stage it creates a cocoon with a repetitive figure eight movement of its head, which in turn produces thread of up to eight kilometres in length. The coincidence of eights and the suggestion of the symbol for infinity are, for Derz, important and create an intriguing cross-cultural resonance in the image.

The apparent stillness of *Depart without return* is significant, as the video proposes a tension between the moving image and the photograph. When the video is at its most still, its striking iconicity suggests movement, a spell disrupted by actual movement: like the moving photograph in Chris Marker's *La Jettée*, the presentation of time is suddenly disrupted, moving from a conceptual presentation of time to the sudden realisation that time is indeed passing. Where the still photograph has long been considered a capsule of lost time preserved in the process of its capture, a work like *Depart without return* short-circuits nostalgia for the present moment. But given that the video is also a loop, the viewer has the uncanny option of reliving that moment over again.

In *Depart without return* Derz achieves an eternal cycle of presentation in the repetition of the image. The figure and face, shrouded in darkness, so redolent of a religious icon, pays tribute to the reflexive process of presenting just such an image, both in and out of the subject itself, lost forever to our regard when we turn away but which remains as persistent and persuasive as a memory.





*Black Lake*  
pigment print on cotton paper, 107 x 100cm





*Negative II*, pigment print on cotton paper, 185 x 150 cm





*Negative I*, pigment print on cotton paper, 185 x 150 cm

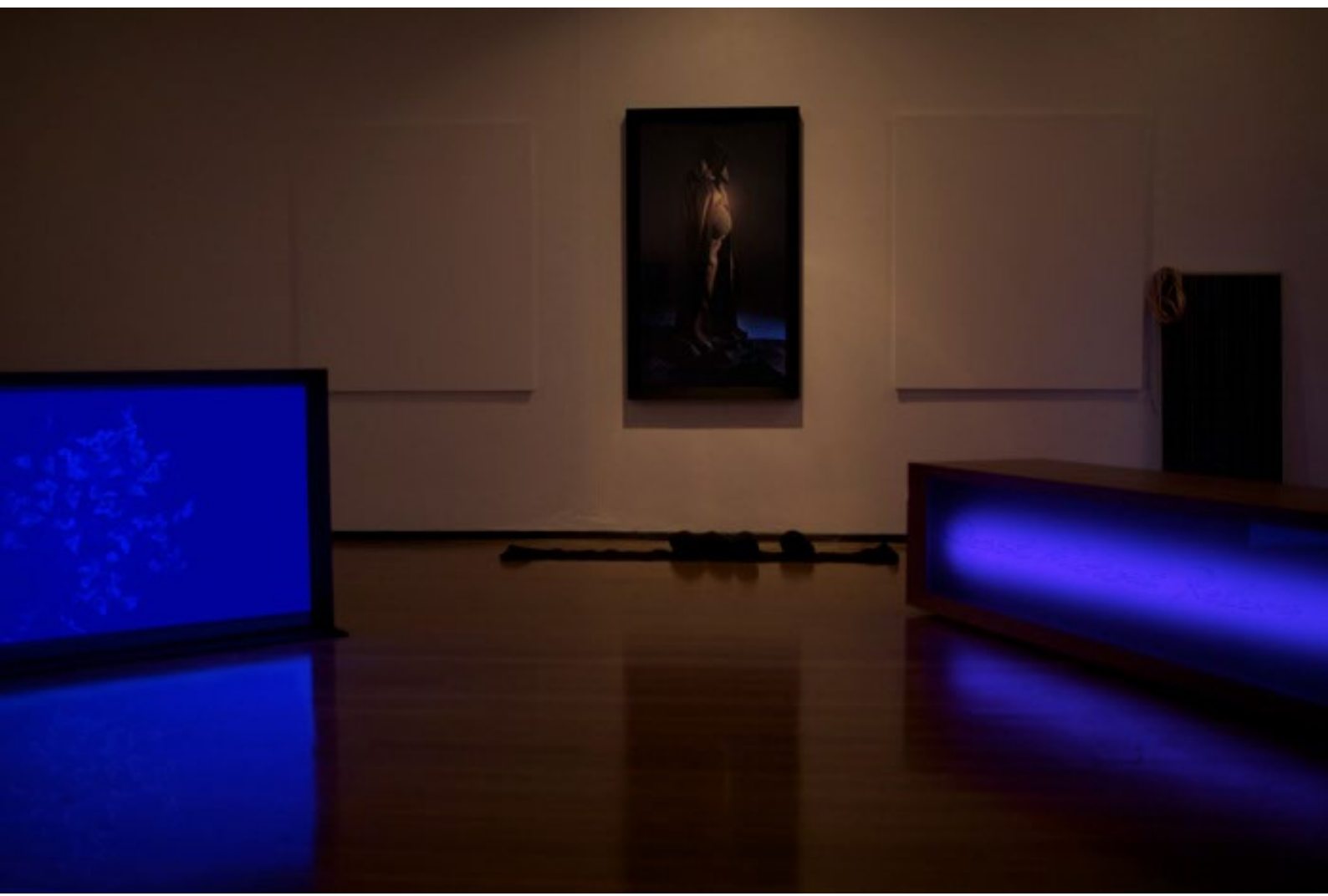




*in widening circles (after Rilke) III*

c--type print, custom--made cedar wood frame, stained natural indigo, 30 x 45cm image, 41 x 56 cm framed







## ***'The Space Between Us' – matter and meaning in the work of Shoufay Derz***

***"There are many things we could have said, but words never wanted to name them."***

**(John O'Donohue, 'To Bless the Space Between Us')**

You are brought into a different world: a pile of salt in a darkened space; a skeletal timber vessel; or the hypnotic rhythm of a gently rocking boat on a vast empty ocean, containing two people speaking, apparently at cross purposes. A glowing blue glass sarcophagus with beautiful, flowing script inscribed on its side, lit by solar panels. Silk moths flutter across the mouth and eyelids of a blue painted face, a pregnant woman walks slowly in the desert, trailing behind her yards of indigo dyed cloth. The works of Shoufay Derz transport us to a place quite removed from the banalities of daily life. She scrutinises the encounters and occurrences which make up the everyday to search for the deeper meanings buried deep within them. From Sufi poet Rumi to Rainer Maria Rilke, from Samuel Beckett to Christian, Buddhist and Daoist texts, her work has at its heart her eclectic interest in writers, mystics, philosophers and artists who, like herself, are fascinated by the way that language and memory shapes us, while at the same time being always insufficient, inadequate. Evoking presence and absence, silence and speech, stillness and journeying, her works are deceptively simple. It is a simplicity born of their very long gestational passage into the world.

Derz thinks deeply, and works such as 'Depart Without Return' reveal this thoughtfulness in every aspect. This particular work began, she says, with an image that kept recurring in her imagination, of a woman in a desert – the Taklamakan Desert in northern China, part of the Silk Road. The very name 'Taklamakan' is often translated as 'Point of No Return'. She discovered, however, that in Buddhist thought the empty desert is not considered a void; rather it is pregnant with possibility. For the artist this notion of the desert became an important element in her developing visual language of love and loss. For this particular work, which came over the course of its creation to be imbued with an ever greater sense of mourning due to events in the artist's life, she has created an installation consisting of numerous connecting elements – still and moving images, panels of glass, pure indigo pigment and the

life cycles of silk moths.

As the work began to take shape, Derz investigated the symbolic aspects of indigo – how it is made, what it has meant in different cultural contexts, the significance of the colour – and then the production of silk from silkworms, and all its possible connotations. Like the silk filaments teased from the cocoon in this ancient process, Derz's work is a continuing thread which emerges slowly, over time. Her work is deeply intuitive, yet also painstakingly researched and considered, to the point of making her own indigo, raising her own silkworms, and learning how to spin silk. Nothing in her work is superficial, nothing is accidental.

There are many contemporary works in which the artist's choice of physical 'matter' contains within it their intended meanings. Dinh Q. Le's 'Erasure' and his installation of the remains of an old timber fishing boat, listing to one side on a seabed composed of thousands of discarded Vietnamese family photographs is one of these. Xu Bing's poignant 'Where the Dust Itself Collects', made from dust collected in the streets of Manhattan after the destruction of the twin towers, falls into this category also, as does his 'Tsan Series' in which he attached silk moths to papers and books bound in both Western and Chinese styles. As they laid their tiny eggs across the pages, these became a dot matrix of 'text'. The eggs hatched, baby silkworms emerged and began to enshroud their habitat in their cocoons, spinning out silk tirelessly in 'an embodiment of the persistence of culture' (Alice Yang). That may be so, but the work is also about the precariousness of life and its permeability: passages from one state of being to another. Xu Bing deals in allegory. So too does Shoufay Derz. Her strength is that she is able to take these 'big ideas' and significant philosophical/spiritual positions and imbue them with the authenticity of lived experience.

Depart without Return, like her earlier work, is elegiac and beautiful. It suggests great sadness while at the same time recognising that for those left behind the voyage continues. This is perhaps the very essence of lamentation. Derz uses landscapes – deserts, sand dunes, mangroves, volcanoes – in the way that the Romantic painters did – to convey psychological and emotional states – the ineffable, the sublime. The image of the boat figures largely in her work – from the early 'Love Capsule' and 'Transportation Love Story', to the glass sarcophagus in 'Depart without Return'. The boat represents many things: journey, safe passage, migration – literal



voyages across oceans charted and uncharted. It also possesses many metaphorical associations: the ark, Christian images of boats on the sea of Galilee, crossing the River Styx, the womb within which we journey into the world. The common thread here is about the passages between different states of being. Deaths and entrances.

In her work one can detect occasional references to the works of a number of artists who have dealt with text, with meaning embedded in materials, and with performativity, from Jenny Holzer's 'Lustmord', to Ann Hamilton's 1993 work 'Tropos' in which a figure sat at a small metal desk reading a book, burning away the printed text line by line. The text, transformed into smoke, became absorbed into the horsehair bundles which covered the entire floor. These artists explore notions of transformation. So too does Shoufay Derz. The blind silk moths fluttering on her indigo painted face in 'Depart Without Return' embody the cycles of transformation that we are all subject to.

Her intention always: to evoke a sense of unknowing in the viewer – a sense of wonder. Interested in evocation rather than representation, she asks us to consider, conceptually, how is it possible to represent the unknown?

Luise Guest