



**Utilizing Arts-Based Research Methods for
Inquiring into Complex Subjects**
Applying Methodology in “Mechanics of Consciousness”

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to establish a foundational understanding and academic framework for utilizing art-making as a method of knowledge-making within an academic context. Specifically, a/r/tography, an arts-based research methodology, was identified as a viable tool for inquiring into complex subjects. Furthermore, arts-based research was recognized as an innovative research paradigm with profound implications for society, knowledge, art, and academia.

Various of sources, primarily relevant peer-reviewed articles, books, and interviews, contributed to the data collection. In addition to these contemporary references, older sources dating back to the 1990s were incorporated for the historical context of arts-based research. This set of sources was employed to define, offer illustrative examples of, and present a practical framework for conducting arts-based research.

As the practical and final part of this thesis, *Mechanics of Consciousness*, an original arts-based research project by the author, was presented. The collection of artworks featured in *Mechanics of Consciousness* was exhibited at Galleria Himmelblau during the 2022 Tampere University of Applied Sciences Fine Arts Degree Show *Embers*.

As this is an aesthetic inquiry, the “result” of this thesis is the process of this thesis.

Key words: arts-based research, a/r/tography, art, fine-art

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

ABR	Arts-Based Research. The term encompasses a variety of variations.
Paradigm	A world view underlying the theories and methodology of a particular scientific subject.
A/r/tography	Artist/Researcher/Teacher. A specific variation of ABR. A form of practice-based research that recognizes the interconnectedness of art-making, learning, and knowing within the realms of art and pedagogical practices, emphasizing their dynamic and transformative nature.
Catalyst	A thing that precipitates an event.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the words of Pablo Picasso, “I never made a painting as a work of art, it’s all research.” This statement encapsulates the essence of this thesis, which aims to explore how people use art-making to unlock knowledge. As we delve into the dynamic relationship of art and inquiry, we embark on a journey of discovery to a research paradigm that recognizes the significance and validity of artistic knowing, even within an academic context.

1.1 Background

When I started work on a collection of artworks for our university’s fine art degree show, I had yet to grasp the concept of arts-based research as a research paradigm. I simply wanted to use the act of art-making to help me process a particularly complex topic, which, prior to first reading, was still perplexing. The decision to use art in this manner was likely influenced by the many foundational recipes of arts-based research that I had encountered during my studies. Of course, art is commonly used for introspection and to explore and express anything the artist chooses. Indeed, it came as a very natural thing to do, similar to scribbling on the margins of a notebook during a lecture, but with an emphasis on the art. I also anticipated that delving into an enigmatic and perplexing topic by making images would undoubtedly yield intriguing and captivating results.

Problematically, I hadn’t exactly set out to do *research*, and the nature of my topic was complex and challenging to describe (hence why I tackled it by making art). So, it wasn’t easy to articulate what I had made or what the purpose of it was. Were the resulting images merely a collection of glorified scribbles, or was there merit in the significance I attributed to the process regarding its role in my investigation of this perplexing topic? Namely, having a solid and clearly defined methodological framework would have been beneficial, and this is how we arrive at Art-Based Research.

1.2 Research Question

The following research question guides this thesis:

What characteristics define a practical and academically recognized framework for using art-making as a method of acquiring knowledge about complex topics?

I will address this question by familiarizing myself with the study of arts-based research methodologies, examining relevant literature, analysing previous arts-based research dissertations, exploring sources dating back to the inception of contemporary arts-based research, and engaging in art-making.

The objective is to develop a paradigmatic framework that seamlessly integrates art and research, providing the novice artist-researcher with the necessary information to knowingly implement ABR methodologies in their work, reach wider audiences with their discoveries, and equip them with more tools to make a difference in the world.

1.3 Rationale and Significance

Many fundamental concepts of arts-based research are prevalent within the Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) Degree Programme in Media and Arts, Fine Art study path, where I study. These concepts include ideas such as art's capacity to reveal insights that might otherwise remain hidden and the ability of art to express ideas that may be challenging to convey through other means. Moreover, we are frequently taught that art serves as a valuable tool for investigating and exploring subjects of personal interest for artists. In essence, we are, in fact, being taught arts-based research, among other things.

That being said, I do not recall ever hearing the distinct term Arts-Based Research (ABR). In fact, during this research project, I conducted a search for previous theses from my university related to the term arts-based research and found zero. While this suggests a potential issue with my search methods, it is more plausible that there were indeed no theses addressing this subject. At

first, I thought it might have something to do with the relative newness of arts-based methods within Finnish academia, as highlighted by Leavy (2018), or it could point to a lack of dissemination outside of Aalto University and the University of Lapland, which according to Leavy (2018) are recognised to have developed their own ABR traditions and orientations. Nevertheless, from my experience at Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK), ABR traditions and orientations definitely exist. Shaun McNiff (2011, 388) highlights the increasing amount of courses students must take before engaging in research as an issue caused by the unnecessary categorising of different emerging arts-based research methods, and points out the value of just doing research simply according to the expertise and resources of a given faculty.

The benefit of using internationally recognised terms is that methods can be examined in a broader context and discussion. Methodologies learned and used without definition are still useful but harder to critically assess in the broad academic context. Furthermore, as I will go into more detail later, the position of arts-based research as its own paradigm has significant implications because, otherwise, research will just orient itself to either quantitative or qualitative types.

This perspective does not seek to confine our understanding of art or limit the artistic process by categorizing it solely as a research tool. On the contrary, the objective is to provide accessibility to yet another dimension of how art can be seen, applied, and discussed in an academic research context. In practice, this could mean that arts-based research methodologies are taught and defined as such so that students and faculty members are able to critically assess methodologies in relation to international discourse on the subject using internationally recognised terminology. Moreover, participating in the discussion and use of ABR as its own paradigm advances knowledge and society.

As argued by Barone and Eisner (2012), the choice of research tools significantly influences the nature of our research. Beliefs concerning what qualifies as valid research have far-reaching implications for both human behaviour and society. This raises a concern: many commonly accepted standardized research methodologies, which prioritize clarity and rigid

methodological approaches, often view creativity as a deviation from precise research standards. However, it is important to note that while the notion of non-scientific research may seem contradictory to some, a substantial body of valuable research does not adhere to traditional scientific methods (Barone and Eisner 2012, 1–2). Hence, it is crucial to explore the potential of arts-based methods in offering insights into the methodology for artists, researchers, educators, and anyone else who values knowledge.

1.4 Structure and Method

This is a two-part thesis. The first part is a literature review with a variety of contemporary sources, including articles, books, and interviews, such as *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* by one of the leading experts in ABR, Patricia Leavy, *Arts-Based Research* by Prof. Tom Barone, and the original pioneer of ABR Prof. Elliot Eisner, and a comprehensive review of 30 arts-based dissertations from the University of British Columbia. To gain a foundational understanding of arts-based research, we will look at the conception of modern arts-based research in California, gaining insight into what the pioneers of the research paradigm were arguing for at the time, the challenges arts-based researchers face, some of the different methodologies covered by the umbrella term “arts-based research” (particularly a/r/tography), and practical examples of arts-based research.

In the second part, we examine the practical application of what we have learned in part one—namely, the presentation of an original arts-based research project, 'Mechanics of Consciousness' by the author. The collection of artworks featured in 'Mechanics of Consciousness' was exhibited at Galleria Himmelblau during the 2022 Tampere University of Applied Sciences Fine Art Degree Show Embers, accompanied by a text, forming it all as a work of a/r/tography—a method under the umbrella term of arts-based research.

2 ARTS BASED RESEARCH

As I have argued above, it is essential to have an awareness of prevalent methodologies when entering into an academic environment. This chapter serves as an initiation to Arts-Based Research (ABR). Hence, it establishes the preliminary framework for engaging in, assessing, and deliberating on ABR, all the while paying homage to qualitative methodology by employing a traditional literature review.

2.1 Definition

To arrive at a solid definition of ABR, let's dive into the analysis of a few definitions offered by various experts. I will include the ideas of prominent figures and experts in the field of ABR, such as Professor Elliot Eisner, an art educator who is considered one of the original pioneers of arts-based research (Sinner et al. 2006), Patricia Leavy, Ph.D., an internationally recognised figure in research design and arts-based research, award-winning novelist, arts advocate (Guilford Press n.d.; Patricia Leavy n.d.) and author of books such as *Method Meets Art* and Professor Lynn Butler-Kisber whose expertise include (but are not limited to) qualitative research methodologies and arts-based inquiry research (McGill University. n.d.).

There are commonalities and divergences in perspectives regarding ABR. In this, there are also a number of subcategories and descriptive terms, resulting from the disuse of an umbrella term such as ABR and a tendency to label subtle differences (Leavy 2018, 4). Most notably, while some acknowledge arts-based research as a set of tools employed within qualitative research, others regard it as more effective when employed as an independent research paradigm in its own right (Leavy 2018, 4; 2015, 6).

Butler-Kisber (2017) defines arts-based research as the use of an art form in research as a tool for reflection, interpretation, analyzing, and accessibility. Furthermore, by retaining the signature of the author and allowing for ambiguity – thus resonating more with its audience, arts-based research tends to be more

interesting than conventional research material. Moreover, ABR brings artists and educators together, thus creating richer communication. Butler-Kisber highlights Arts Informed as a prominent Canadian strain of ABR. Arts Informed contends that the researcher should approach the art form rather than the reverse. (Butler-Kisber, 2017). While this works as an illustration of ABR being considered first and foremost a tool and not necessarily a separate paradigm, we observe the highlighting of bringing together artists and researchers (interdisciplinarity) and the ambiguous nature, heightened levels of engagement and increased interest that ABR contains within it. Furthermore, we can start to understand how easily numerous ABR strains or subcategories can be created, namely, when each university and faculty has its own particular way of doing things.

Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (2012) set the premise for their description by highlighting the significance of communication tools. Choosing a specific form of representation both imposes limitations and offers possibilities and when these tools limit what is expressible, a price is paid. In sight of this, they describe ABR as an effort to reach beyond the limitations of discursive communication, thus allowing for the expression of meanings that could otherwise not be expressible. This approach leads to the development of something that closely resembles a work of art. (Barone & Eisner 2012, 1).

In contrast with the previous description, Barone and Eisner's description is more in-depth and emphasizes ABR's significance to knowledge in its own right. Furthermore, there is little distinction made between a product of ABR and art; indeed, they are seen as closely resembling each other. Leavy (2018, 12; 2015, 30) differentiates "pure" art and ABR by arguing that, while artfulness and craft are important, in ABR, the content being delivered is not art for arts' sake and should provide utility. Barone & Eisner (2012, 1–2) elaborate that while the idea that research reports can be crafted in a way resembling how a painter paints is not commonplace, all forms of representation serve as important vehicles for sharing our thoughts with others and beliefs concerning what qualifies as valid research have far-reaching implications for both human behaviour and society.

As we near closure on the definition of ABR, let's examine two very concise descriptions. Patricia Leavy, backed by several publications and years of research into the matter, concisely defines ABR as a transdisciplinary approach that blends the tenets of the creative arts within research settings to construct knowledge (Leavy 2009; 2015; 2018, 4; Handbook of Arts-Based Research, McNiff (Leavy 2018, 4)). This definition seems to be widely accepted, compatible, and descriptive. Similarly, McNiff (2014, 259) defines ABR as a process where the researcher uses art-making as a primary mode of inquiry. (McNiff has primarily defined ABR in his earlier 2012 publications, which I have unfortunately not been able to make use of because of an accessibility issue.)

ABR practices are defined as methodological tools employed by researchers across disciplines, encompassing all phases of research, including problem generation, data and content generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation (Leavy 2018, 4; 2015; 2009). These tools utilize the principles of the creative arts to address research questions holistically (Leavy 2018, 4). This inquiry process involves researchers engaging in art-making as a primary way of knowing (Handbook of Arts Based Research, McNiff (Leavy 2018, 4)). In this context, art is not viewed solely as an academic discipline or as something limited to professional artists. Instead, it is seen as a transdisciplinary means of understanding and expressing that is accessible to people from all backgrounds. (Handbook of Arts-Based Research, McNiff (Leavy 2018, 24)).

2.2 Paradigm

Now that a basis for the definition of ABR is established, a deeper look at the arguments for a paradigm is possible. It is not my intention to go too far down into the rabbit hole of paradigms and their distinctions, so I have limited this section to provide a glimpse into the reasons why ABR should be considered as its own paradigm to the extent that is relevant to this thesis.

Paradigms determine how we establish fundamental ground rules for communication and research (McNiff, Handbook of Arts-Based Research (Leavy 2018, 26). Different research paradigms (for example, quantitative and

qualitative) use philosophical substructures that guide research practice. This includes questions such as what can be known, by whom, and how. ABR pushes the boundaries of the inductive model (generally followed by the qualitative paradigm) further, as openness to the unknown and the spontaneous are required by artistic inquiry. (Leavy 2015, 19–20). In other words, the paradigm of ABR is a step beyond the qualitative paradigm.

As argued by McNiff, the artistic and scientific processes are two separate things; one cannot be fully reduced by the other. While they are separated by the nature of their conceptual frameworks, in ABR the two come together to make a new system of knowledge where art takes the lead. (McNiff, *Handbook of Arts-Based Research* (Leavy 2018, 23–26)).

When arts-based research is not regarded as a paradigm, the research will tend to bifurcate into quantitative and qualitative research, each with their own orientations (McNiff 2011, 388). However, art demonstrates a reliable pattern of being ahead of convention and extends beyond disciplines of science, and thus it is contrary to the nature of ABR to be contained in standardised procedures and formats. (Being ahead can be seen, for example, in authors and artists engaging in psychological themes, even before the invention of psychology). (*Handbook of Arts-Based Research*, McNiff (Leavy 2018, 24, 28)).

McNiff (*Handbook of Arts-Based Research* Leavy 2018, 24) argues that while artistic expressions and processes are often the focus point in ABR, this is not the defining element. Instead, ABR is defined by the artistic process of inquiry itself. Moreover, it is this process that can be used to explore the totality of human experience. Restrictive academic disciplines and paradigms confuse and limit communication and thought. ABR helps to relax the separation of disciplines by involving art as a way of responding to questions that may involve different varied disciplines (such as art itself, philosophy, history, social science, etc). A separation in disciplines causes the marginalisation of art during all phases of education, which in turn reinforces the idea that art is something other than a fundamental way of understanding. (McNiff (*Handbook of Arts-Based Research* Leavy 2018, 24))

2.3 Catalytic Background – Finland and Abroad

This section highlights the role of openness as a catalyst for ABR. In utilization and proliferation, it is helpful to examine the conditions, environments, and atmospheres that facilitate the emergence of ABR. And in the spirit of Marcus Collins and Peter Stearns (2020) drawing strong parallels between historical work and a sense of (group) identity, I would argue that such knowledge gives the art-based researcher a stronger sense of identity.

While earlier iterations of similar methods can be found, Sinner et al. (2006) describe a shift in academic research to the 1970s, a period during which members of academia started using the practices of artists and art critics to conduct research. This major shift in academic practice constituted a new methodological genre—coined Arts-Based Research by Elliot Eisner in Stanford, California—during the 1990s. (Sinner et al. 2006, 1269; Leavy 2018, 6; 2015,11).

McNiff (1998) describes the emergence of “a new direction” at the University of British Columbia in the early 1980s, which started with master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation students wanting to focus on the process of making art. Furthermore, the relaxation of control over the thesis/dissertation process led to students researching their creative expressions. McNiff (1998, Chapter 1).

The development of arts-based research in Finland bears similarities to what has taken place in the United States and Canada, but it is established within its local context and is not a result of developments in other countries (Handbook of Arts-Based Research, Suominen; Kallio-Tavin (Leavy 2018, 102)).

Anniina Suominen and Mira Kallio-Tavin (Handbook of Arts-Based Research (Leavy 2018, 103)) describe the emergence of ABR; in the 1990s, the idea of combining one’s artistic identity with one’s teacher and/or researcher identity was still relatively uncharted territory and the notions of artistic knowing had not been substantively explored. Even so, there was an exploratory and open atmosphere at the University of Arts and Design Helsinki (now known as Aalto

University), which paved the path for merging and inquiring about ways of knowing. Eventually, this resulted in the university's first doctoral thesis in art education in 1997. (Suominen; Kallio-Tavin in Handbook of Arts-Based Research (Leavy 2018, 103)).

As is evident from these examples, openness is a key component in the emergence of ABR. This knowledge can be used as part of the method when doing, teaching, or learning about ABR.

2.4 Advantages

Arts-based researchers are pioneering novel approaches to knowledge creation, envisioning innovative forms for research outcomes (Leavy 2018, 11). There are numerous advantages to ABR. Below is a list of the advantages most relevant to this thesis, gathered from the Handbook of Arts-Based Research (Leavy 2018, 9–11; 2009):

- **Making micro–macro connections.** Exploring/ discovering/ describing/ theorizing about the connections between the individual and larger contexts in which our lives are lived.
- **Learning and new insights.** Tapping into what would otherwise be inaccessible. Making connections and interconnections that are otherwise inaccessible, asking and answering new research questions, exploring old questions in new ways, and representing research in alternative ways and to wider audiences.
- **Participation.** Including and bringing an audience into the process. ABR is experienced and consumed by people.
- **Multiple meanings.** Instead of pushing claims, ABR can get at multiple meanings, resulting in multiplicity in meaning-making.
- **Evocative.** Art can be captivating and aesthetically powerful. It can grab people's attention and be particularly effective at communicating emotional aspects of life.

See (Leavy 2018, 9–11; 2009) for a more complete list.

2.5 Success in usefulness

A successful piece of arts-based research entices the viewer to have a second look at dimensions of the social world that have come to be taken for granted. However, the viewer and the community of viewers may question the usefulness and utility of alternative methods of interpreting and understanding social issues and events. (Barone & Eisner 2012, 145).

McNiff (Handbook of ArtsBased Research (Leavy 2018, 33) highlights the standard of usefulness to self and others as a guide in designing studies. According to Barone & Eisner (2012), in order to be useful, a piece of arts-based research ought to succeed as a work of research and as a work of art. It should lead its viewers into an experience of researching of social phenomena. (Barone & Eisner 2012, 145).

Art functions best when it is not confined by predetermined outcomes or structure. So, the most straightforward way to determine success in ABR is by judging it by its usefulness. In addition, McNiff (1998, preface) talks about applying an instinctive test of truthfulness to determine whether the study is real.

2.6 A/r/tography – The Entanglement of Living Inquiry

A/r/tography is a type of ABR specific to the practices within educational research. A/r/t is a figure of speech for artist–researcher–teacher (Leavy 2015, 4). Anita Sinner; Carl Leggo; Rita L. Irwin; Peter Gouzouasis; Kit Grauer (2006), in their pivotal review of 30 ABR dissertations from the University of British Columbia, point out four attributes that underpin a/r/tography dissertations: a dedication to aesthetic and educational practices, a process steeped in inquiry, searching for meaning, and interpreting for understanding. Their description of a/r/tography offers deep and inspiring insights into the meaning of a/r/tography. They write:

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings. A/r/tographical work is rendered through the methodological concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations, and excess which are enacted and presented or performed when a relational aesthetic inquiry condition is envisioned as embodied understandings and exchanges between art and text, and between and among the broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher. (Sinner et al. 2006, 1224).

In essence, a/r/tography is a form of practice-based research that acknowledges the interconnection of creating, learning, and understanding as integral components within the realms of both art and educational practices. It is a dynamic and ever-evolving force that becomes intertwined with the materiality of all things, encompassing both human and nonhuman elements. To do that, it embraces the practices of artists, researchers, and educators/learners, allowing them to exist within this intricate entanglement and engage in pursuing the practice of living one's inquiry. This interconnection/entanglement of practice works to transform ideas into subsequent practices. (Irwin 2013; Handbook of Arts-Based Research, Rita Irwin, Natalie LeBlanc, Jee Yeon Ryu and George Belliveau (Leavy 2018, 37)).

A/r/tography is a project and a multiplicity of projects at the same time intersecting with possibilities. Instead of theory it theorizes, instead of stable practice it practices. This transformation creates spaces of exchange, reflexivity, and relationality in a continuous state of movement. The process of becoming a/r/tography is paramount to a/r/tography. Irwin (2013, 199–200). One must stand inside practice to apply it –a/r/tography is a living practice (Handbook of Arts-Based Research, Rita Irwin, Natalie LeBlanc, Jee Yeon Ryu, and George Belliveau (Leavy 2018, 37)).

2.6.1 Becoming – Subject-in-process – In the In-between

As Irwin, LeBlanc, Ryu, and Belliveau in the Handbook of Arts-Based Research (Leavy 2018, 37) say: “artists embrace the living of practice and becoming part of the variations within potential’s variations.” Irwin (2013, 200; 202) explains becoming in a/r/tography seen through three entangling lines of becoming-intensity, becoming-movement, and becoming-event. She writes:

Each line of becoming is not defined by the points it is connected to, but rather by the space in-between, the middle, and the movement that reverberates within. Each line of becoming is situated within the intensity of an event in constant movement—movement toward possibilities, toward an unfolding of that which is yet to be known, toward the potential of potential. (Irwin 2013, 202).

“*Becoming-intensity* is about the capacity to affect and be affected through the dynamic movement of events with learning to learn.” Irwin (2013, 206). Recognizing learning as the folding and unfolding ideas characterized by repeatedly evoking new understandings, and to linger in this evolving space of possibility leads to seeing that one never “becomes” but rather exists in a constant state of becoming (Irwin 2013, 203).

To explain *becoming-event*, Irwin (2013, 207) gives an example of going on a walk with others. She describes it as an act of significance that worked as retraced rituals of past memories and future inventions and a visitation of memories, contemplating what used to be important while also considering possibilities and exploring the potential of a place. Listening, viewing, tasting, smelling, and touching were an important part of this experience of knowing and learning. Later on, this sparked discussions and debates among the participants of the walk. These discussions became critical aspects of inquiry about us as bodies whose sensations and movements are crucial to our understanding (Irwin 2013, 207; Ellsworth 2005, 27). Such a view of the method of practice and teaching is to ask what pedagogy does rather than how it means or what it means (Ellsworth 2005, 27). Thereby pedagogy facilitates thinking as an experiment, and conditions for the unknown. “Lines of becoming entangle in *becoming-event*.” (Irwin 2013, 207).

Becoming-movement –practice set in motion leads to further events. Movement has the potential to alter perceptions, to see again differently, to change the state of materials to become something else. In not exhausting movement, there is an encouragement to inquire again, thus *becoming-movement* in one's own work and collective work. (Irwin 2013, 209–211).

3 ENTANGLEMENT IN “MECHANICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS”

“A fundamental premise of artistic inquiry is that the end cannot be known at the beginning.” (McNiff Handbook of Arts-Based Research (Leavy 2018, 32)).

Were this a more traditional thesis, I would, at this point, offer my conclusion on the characteristics that define a practical and academically recognized framework for using art-making as a method of acquiring knowledge about complex topics. However, in the spirit of arts-based research, I will not offer a triumphant solution to this question. Instead, this thesis comes to a close with the integration, presentation, and examination of “Mechanics of Consciousness.”

Made by myself, Mechanics of Consciousness is a collection of photographic artworks as part of the process of personal reflection and ongoing learning about the artists' role in researching complex topics. As an aesthetic approach to process complicated ideas, it does not explicitly offer its viewers answers but rather an invitation to contemplation, making, and learning.

Moreover, this chapter entangles the making process, exhibition, and deliberation of this written thesis. Practically speaking, this consists of a presentation of the artworks, their making process, and an analysis of the process, including the content of this thesis as part of the process.

3.1 Background and Topic – Catalytic Inquiry

Generally speaking, psychological, philosophical and theological themes that offer a chance to delve into the deeper meanings of existence, are intriguing. So I originally set out to *explore levels of reality aligning on top of each other, resulting in the expansion of self and possibility* – a moment of profound realisation when encountering a fragment of truth. In this, I also wanted to learn about the role of the artist. This idea was the original conception of what has led to the entirety of this thesis, including the process of making which I will soon describe.

3.2 Process-in-making/ Making Process, Technique and Medium

The aforementioned initial thought processes naturally led to a process of making. Being a photographer, I tend to use that skill set as one of the primary means of making visual art – such was the case here as well. Say I wanted to explore architecture, I'd likely go out and photograph some buildings. Herein lies the challenge posed by wanting to explore a set of abstract ideas with a camera – it is not immediately obvious where and what to start snapping pictures of. Choosing photography as my starting point, I remained open to where the process would take me in this regard.

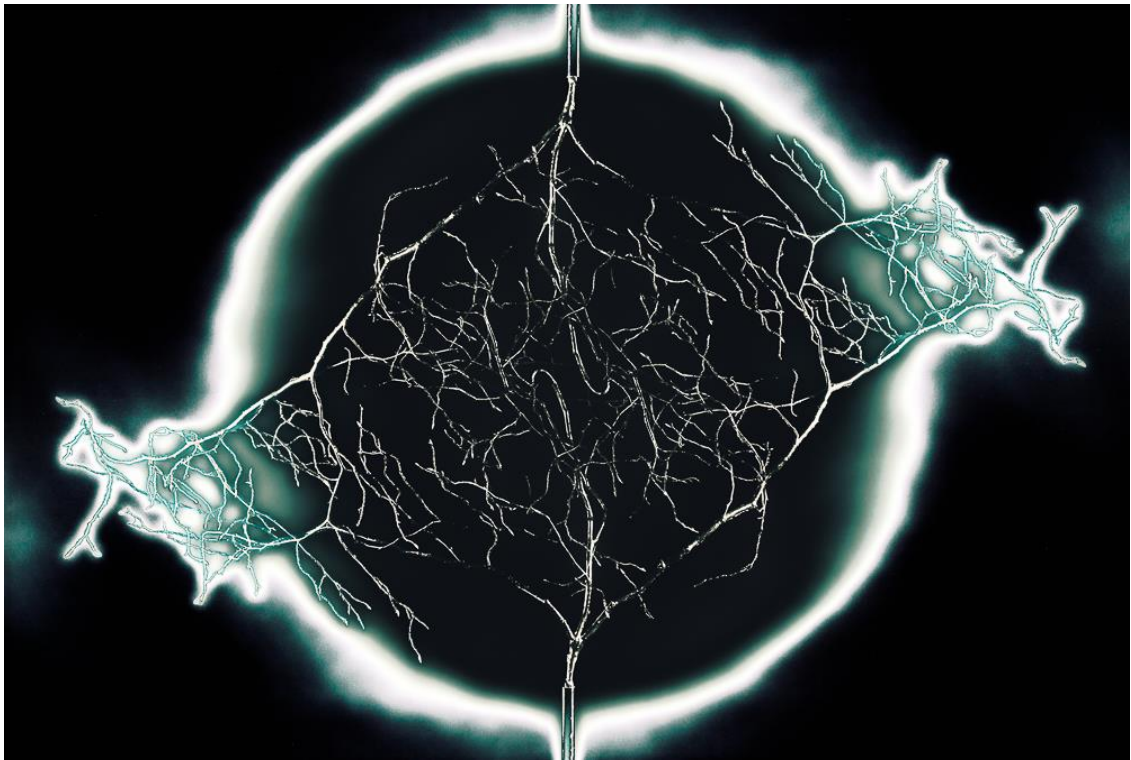
3.2.1 Still and Moving Images: *Fragments and Speech*

I started my process by going for a contemplative walk by a river, taking pictures while I went. Eventually this led to an examination of a variety of local stringy brush, which I helped myself to a generous sample of. “This is what I was looking for”.

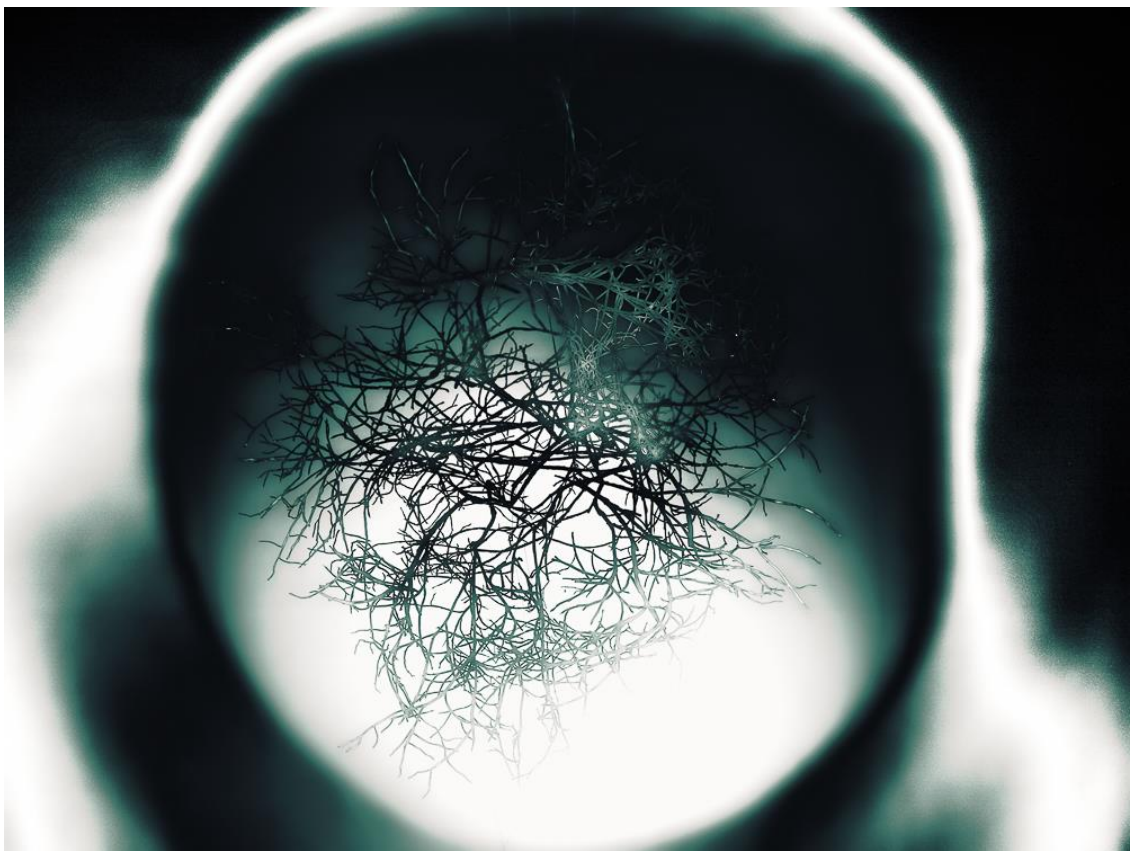
The branches were important, and so naturally I painted them in gold. After photographing the branches in the studio, I further processed the images using digital tools and workspaces taking a direction more towards digital art rather than pure photography (Picture 1; Picture 2; Picture 3; Picture 4).



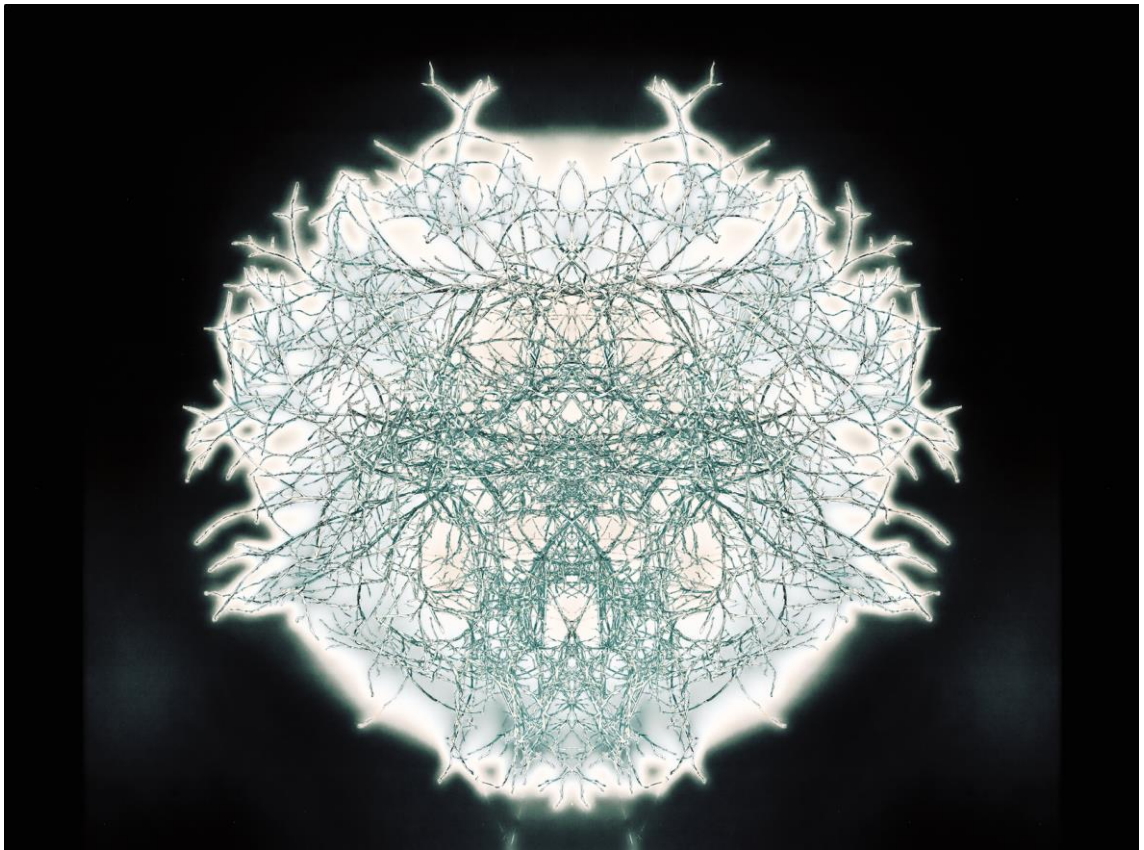
PICTURE 1. Gold painted branch before processing (2022).



PICTURE 2. Gold painted branch after processing (2022).

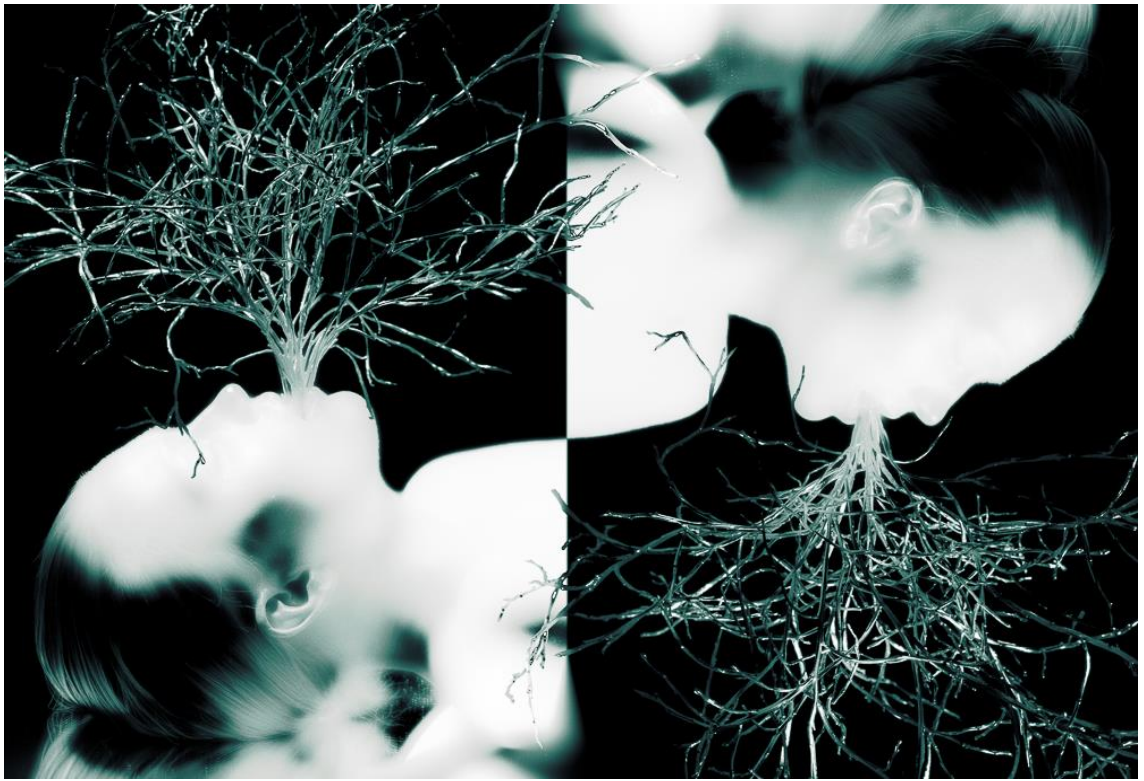


PICTURE 3. Blueberry bush A after processing (2022).



PICTURE 4. Blueberry bush B after processing (2022).

The use digital processing took considerably longer than taking the original photographs, and I found this process valuable for exploring what I was seeing (or had decided to see) besides the plain branch on its own. Interestingly, this served as a kind of study about how humans assign meanings to objects. I found, that at this point, that the branch, to me, represented “a fragment of truth”. And it could appear differently, (beautiful, terrifying, distorted, idolized etc.) depending on how you looked at it. To develop this idea further, I started progressively experimenting with the concept of discursive and internal speech/dialogue, and the body as a vessel (Picture 5; Picture 6). In these photographs I had the benefit of using a model and a skeleton used for studying human anatomy.

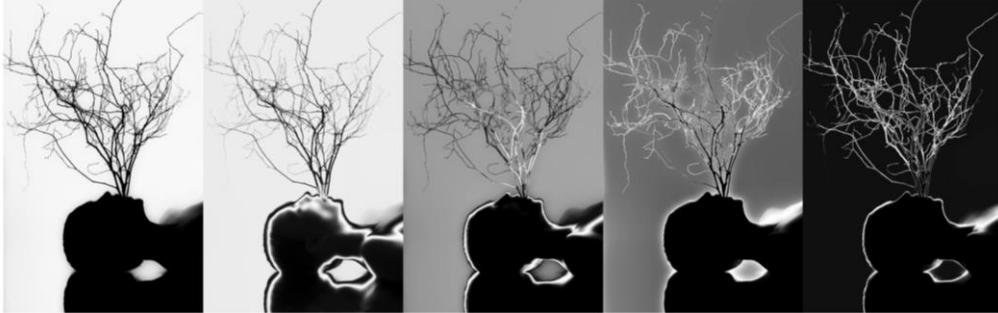


PICTURE 5. "Functional Dialogue" (2022).

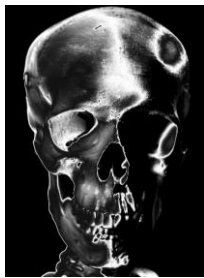


PICTURE 6. "Soul Searcher" (2022).

In addition to the printed photographs I used moving images, (see Appendix 1; Appendix 2; Picture 7; Picture 8) displayed by projected video during the exhibition (Picture 9). These works were made by recording the live manipulation of the photographs. A photo editing– and screen recording software were used for this.



PICTURE 7. A sequence of stills from “Speech Formulation” (2023).



PICTURE 8. A still from “Conclusion Imaging” (2022).



PICTURE 9. Video projection at Galleria Himmelblau exhibition (2022).

The work “3 am” (Picture 10) was made with photographs of a human anatomy skeleton and water splashes (Picture 11). This was the side product of looking specifically at Jung’s concept the collective unconscious.



PICTURE 10. “3 am” (2022).



PICTURE 11. Water splash (2021).

3.2.2 Sculpture: Structure

The most complex work was a photographic sculpture. I felt the sculpture served as symbol/representation of my initial point in inquiry. My original plan was to explore levels of reality aligning on top of each other resulting in the expansion of self and possibility – a moment of profound realisation when encountering a fragment of truth. (In this, I also wanted to find out more about the role of the artist).

The base of the sculpture (Figure 1) was welded steel according to a plan and 3D render. I further worked on the steel base by chemically oxidising the base plate (Picture 12), and polishing/painting the pole. Two long printed photographic images (Picture 13) were aligned back to back, impaled and left hanging on the steel base thus completing the sculpture (Picture 14).

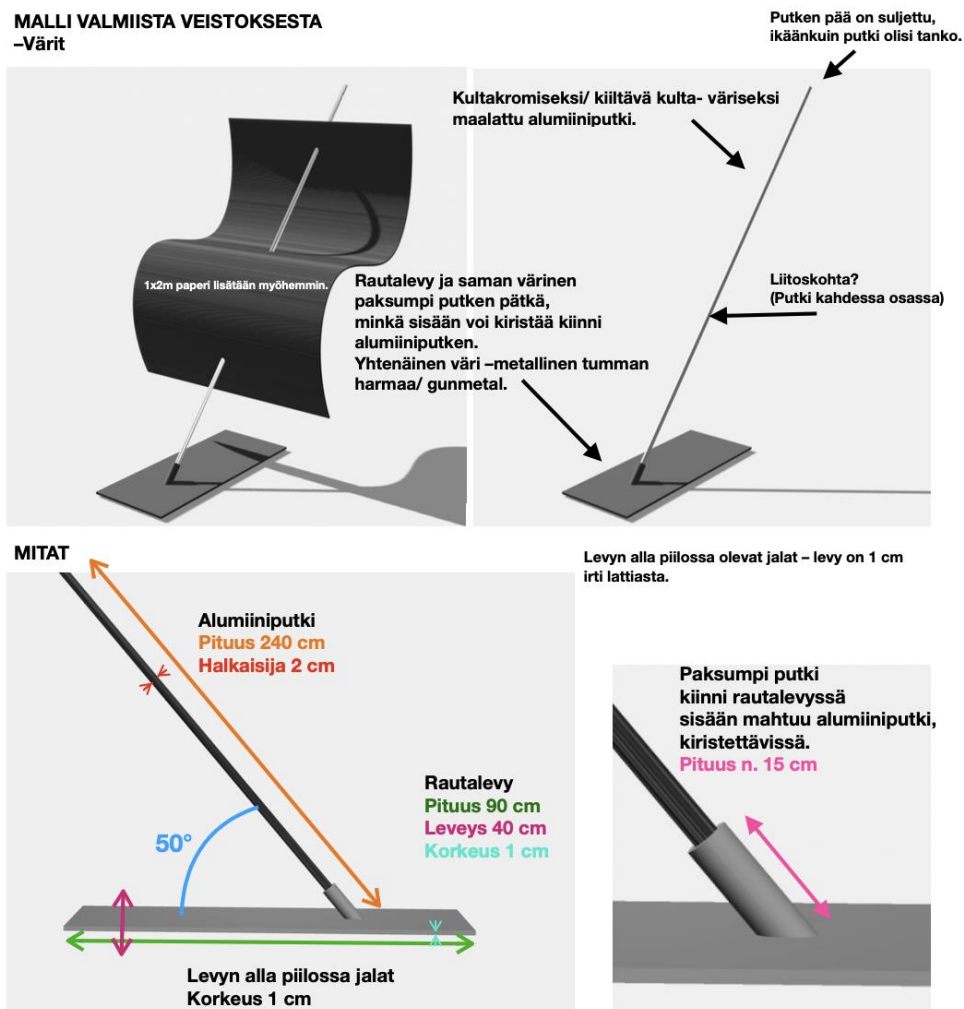


FIGURE 1. Steel structure of the sculpture.



PICTURE 12. Chemically oxidizing the base plate (2022).



PICTURE 13. Images used in sculpture (2022).



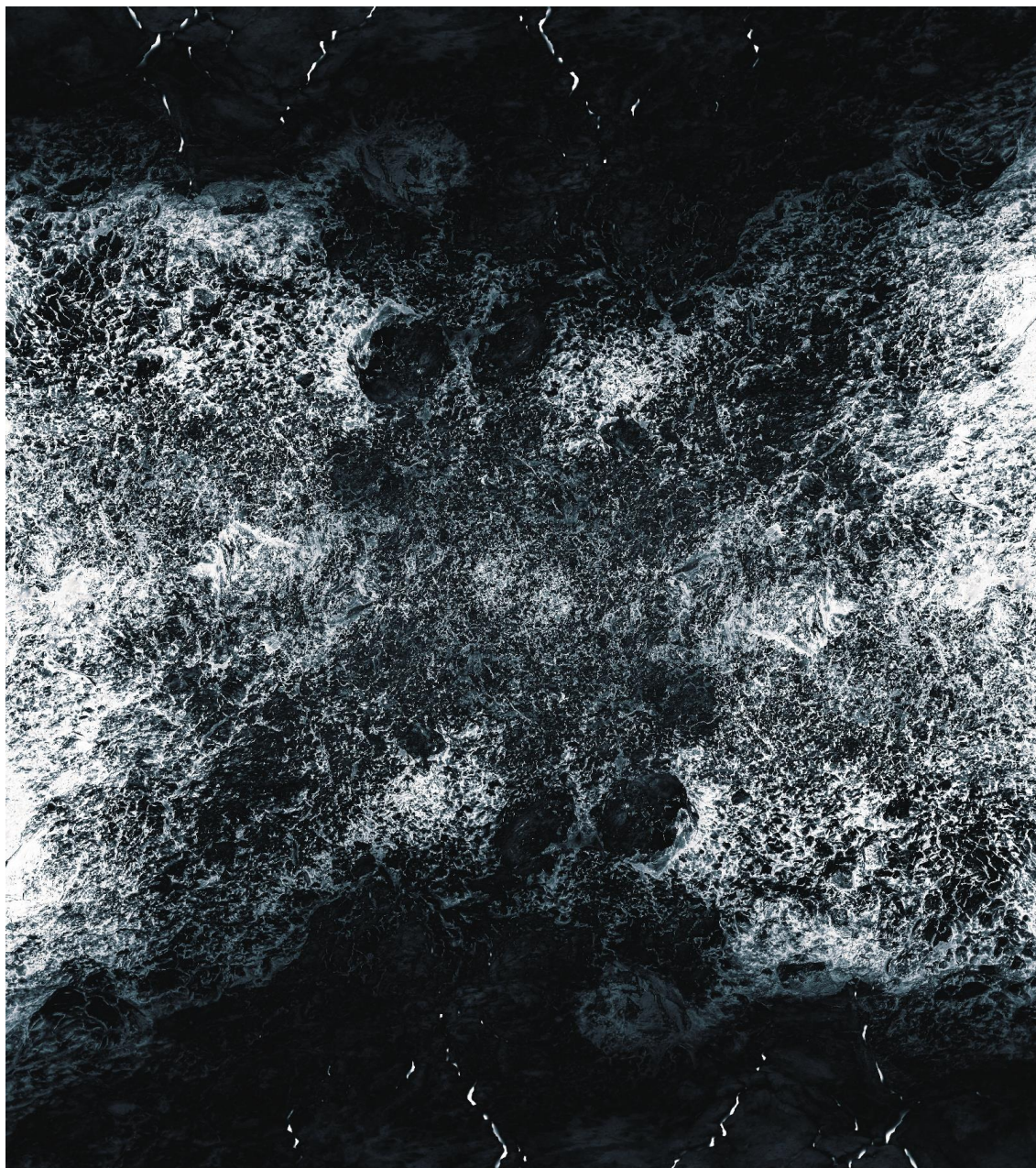
PICTURE 14. “A Distant Observation” Sculpture at Galleria Himmelblau exhibiton (2022).

As mentioned previously, this work was complex, consisting of many work phases, and I think most of these works encompass a sense of complexity. The works perhaps do not act as a mediator to reduce underlying concepts or thought processes to an easily graspable form, but instead visualise the complexity of thought as I was experiencing it. I did want to visualise forms of concepts, so complexity makes sense.

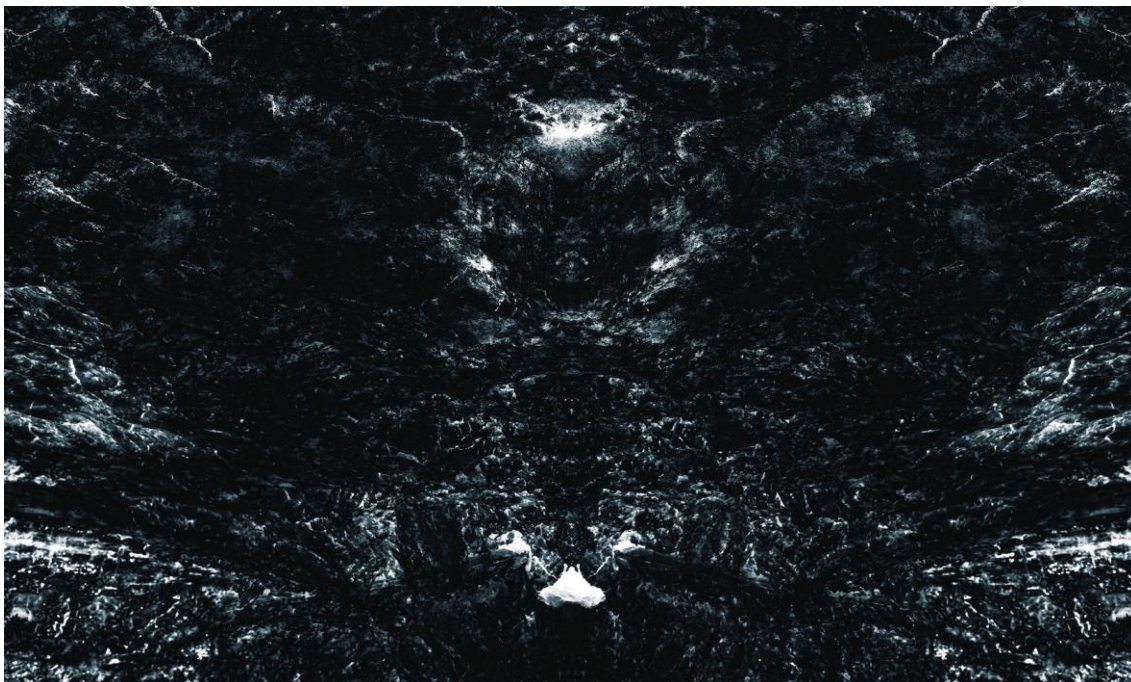
3.2.3 Stills: *Landscapes*

As my final works, I made two rather abstract “landscapes”. These images were constructed from what were originally pictures of mud at a construction site. To me the images signified the vast, chaotic and pattern prone complexity of

consciousness (Picture 15; Picture 16) – visualized by the rendering and consuming of seemingly arbitrary/ordinary things (Picture 17; Picture 18).



PICTURE 15. "Foam" (2022).



PICTURE 16. "Submersion" (2022).



PICTURE 17. Mud at construction site A (2021).



PICTURE 18. Mud at construction site B (2021).

3.2.4 Examination

When examining the art-making process itself, I find that it became a kind of exercise in symbology – I was creating symbols for myself. In this context, a symbol is a visual, non-verbal representation beyond its literal meaning. Symbols derive their significance from the context in which they are used and the meanings attributed to them. A symbol devoid of meaning is not really a symbol.

The exhibiting of my work in an art gallery yielded comments from viewers, mostly about beauty, mystery, and form. This shows that while the works on their own were visually captivating, they only provided vague clues about their background, and the context of the gallery space probably played a part in directing attention to form and beauty. The exception to this was when I engaged in conversations about the art. In these instances, a kind of collaborative interpretation gave the art meaning and purpose. Because the

symbols were part of my own personal thought processes, I was, in a sense, a part of the art in that I could provide some of the context needed for the interpretation of the symbols.

The works reflect beauty in complexity, and this seems to trigger a tendency in people to collaboratively seek meaning and adopt contexts that could provide illumination. And really, this is very reflective of my own process in using art-making to help me understand a complex topic. I wasn't aiming to provide understanding around a topic but rather visualising abstract concepts in an uncoded form. For me, the biggest takeaway from this is the experience of collaborative search for meaning when encountering complexity. While there is beauty and wonderment in that search, often, the simplest ideas have the most impact.

4 CONCLUSION

In my initial exploration, I aimed to delve into complex subjects through art creation while investigating the artist's role in research. I began without a clear plan and eventually developed the research question: "What characteristics define a practical and academically recognized framework for using art-making as a method of acquiring knowledge about complex topics?" This question led me to a literature review of arts-based research, enhancing my understanding.

The process of creating this thesis is, in essence, the answer to my research question. It's important to note that there isn't a single definitive approach to using art in exploring complex topics. This process has, nonetheless, been a journey in deepening my understanding of how art can be perceived, taught, and created.

Arts-based research as a paradigm has implications for how knowledge is perceived within academic institutions and in society. Teaching and mentoring in arts-based research contribute to shifts in academia by expanding our concept of knowledge and its forms rather than limiting it. This, in turn, unlocks the many benefits of arts-based research, which have significant implications for society and the world. Key to this is fostering an environment of openness and experimentation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. "Speech Formulation" (2022)

A moving image artwork.

<https://vimeo.com/875099408?share=copy>

Appendix 2. "Conclusion Imaging" (2022)

A moving image artwork.

<https://vimeo.com/875255714?share=copy#t=0>