

# Sequester

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Embassy of Australia  
1601 Massachusetts Ave NW  
Washington DC 20036  
United States of America

[www.usa.embassy.gov.au](http://www.usa.embassy.gov.au)  
[cultural.relationsus@dfat.gov.au](mailto:cultural.relationsus@dfat.gov.au)

**His Excellency The Honourable Kim Beazley AC**

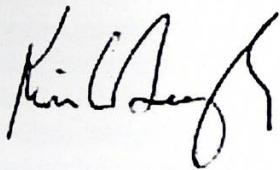
**Australian Ambassador to the United States**

The Embassy of Australia Washington DC is proud to present the exhibition and catalogue *Sequester* as part of its gallery program for 2014.

This exhibition brings together the works of six Australian artists living and working out of New York City and London: Simone Douglas, Patrick Foster & Jen Berean, Matthew Griffin, Christopher Hanrahan and Rob McLeish, and the writing of Nicholas Crogan. It is a project born of a productive collaboration between the Embassy and the artists with many newly commissioned artworks and the representation of others in new ways.

The gallery program is an important element of the Embassy's cultural programming which aims to deepen understanding about Australian arts and culture. *Sequester* represents the agile persistence of these Australians as they attend to and assert themselves within the global knowledge economy as artists, scholars and educators. At the same time, their efforts, presented here collectively, go towards unravelling the strictures that can constrain our daily interactions with architecture, media and landscape and generate a space for relief and contemplation.

The Embassy congratulates the artists and acknowledges the generous support of our 2014 Cultural Program partners BHP Billiton, ConocoPhillips, Lockheed Martin and Rio Tinto.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kim Beazley', is positioned below the text. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Kim' being more legible than the last name 'Beazley'.

## Sequester

### Christopher Hanrahan

In introducing the exhibition Sequester, I would like to digress and introduce Richard Garner. Garner lectures in the Department of Mathematics of Sydney's Macquarie University; his bio reads something like this:

*Richard Garner received his Ph. D. from the University of Cambridge in 2006, subsequently holding postdoctoral positions in Uppsala and Cambridge before joining the Macquarie fold in 2010. His research interests are in abstract mathematics, broadly construed, in particular in category theory and its applications to logic, topology, geometry and computer science.*

Now it would be fair to say this is getting into the esoteric realm of mathematics. Yet when pressed as to how he negotiated questions pertaining to the point of his research he replied succinctly, "In my work, as we are able to understand complex ideas, so too is society incrementally able to understand ever more complex ideas". It is interesting to note that Richard chose to cede ownership of his research in deference to the collaborative "we" and moreover, through this collective position he is also able to state his position with greater authority. For this is how we understand the sciences, indeed to be termed scientific, the enquiry must be measurable to empirical evidence as defined by principals of reasoning. This reason defined by collective testing and agreement. Observation, measurement and experiment.

In introducing Richard and thereby juxtaposing the sciences and arts, I now feel more comfortable saying that the sciences (in this case mathematics) and contemporary art are fine bedfellows. In their pursuit of new ways to understand the world they grow ever more complex and define new territories – or alternatively as they define new territories they grow ever more complex. In making this comparison linguistically tricky I am seeking to emphasise the dichotomous invocation of science and the arts at once – to do this linguistically is important in that science is derived from Latin *scire*, "to know" and art from *ars*, "to have agility" linking to the English rogue's "sleight of hand". At this linguistic and generative point a separation and consequent mistrust is engendered, yet the nuts and bolts of these fields remain intrinsically connected. This connection most explicitly manifests itself in the pedagogy and research of these fields, whereby a set of rules are established from which the practitioner, pedagogue

or student then extrapolates towards new and perhaps unforeseen results.

Put simply, despite inherent connections the sciences and arts are dealt with separately. This ongoing separation may be the result of our subconscious relationship with the nomenclature claimed by each of these fields. It's a problem of context and communication – indeed one can argue that when these abstract pursuits are capably and enthusiastically communicated society as a whole benefits. In an even simpler term – iPhones - perhaps the perfect collusion of creative and scientific endeavour. Importantly one in which the success economically, technologically and creatively is unimaginable without such a union.

It is with this in mind the exhibition Sequester presents six Australian contemporary artists currently working out of New York and London; Simone Douglas, Patrick Foster & Jen Berean, Matthew Griffin, Christopher Hanrahan, and Rob McLeish. Akin to a science experiment these artists have been selected based upon an empirical set of rules. The artists are all living and working outside of Australia and they have all in varying degrees worked as educators. These rules provide a simple function, it is appropriate that an exhibition in an Embassy of Australia should present the work of the Australian diaspora and in the oft-confusing world of contemporary art, who better to present than those artists entrusted with the communication of these ideas?

Beyond these basic facts, the exhibition aligns the reductive tendencies of each artist's practice, which manifest aesthetically or conceptually in their various approaches to art-making. Each artist too has adopted a system of constraint to structure their experiments. The external material fed into these systems is drawn from the world around them. This expressed as an engagement with the landscape in the work of Simone Douglas and a wry approach to media in Matthew Griffin's video works. Patrick Foster and Jen Berean establish a strict set of rules for an engagement with wider society through a critical approach to architecture and design. Rob McLeish and Christopher Hanrahan question perceptual and material understanding through transformations and process.

Through the collation of these artists and the juxtaposition of their methods, Sequester demonstrates the ability of artists to examine and elucidate the vast complexities of lived experience with a remarkable economy of means. Having said this, the artist's "economy and lucidity" may also obfuscate interpretation. I note this as a wilful and valid position for some artists can alienate some viewers. In this instance one might

simply insist, slow down, don't feel threatened and ask not what it means, but look at what it is, what it may be.

Finally, in the dichotic spirit of this exhibition and introduction, ex-lawyer, art historian and writer Nicholas Croggon has produced an essay in which he examines the relationship between capital A Art and capital L Law. True to form this piece is not intended to be explanatory of, but rather a companion to the exhibited works in *Sequester*.

## Art is art – the law is the law

Nicholas Croggon

1

Although I am now an art historian, I worked for several years as a lawyer, and so my days were largely occupied by the authority of documents. Documents (paper ones, but also .pdfs, .docs, .htmls) were what I reviewed, interpreted and produced: sitting in precisely stacked piles on my desk, they designated what I was yet to do; carefully filed into silver folders on the shelves behind me, they attested to what I had already done. These documents were not (or not usually) the sort of old and tea-stained sheaves that overflow from the arms of bustling lawyers and bureaucrats in the stories of Franz Kafka or Charles Dickens: these were crisp white sheets, warm and fresh from the printer, reveling in their contingency, in their ability to be endlessly reprinted and reproduced.

As a lawyer, I often wondered what amongst all these documents was my particular skill—I could not, like an artist, make sculptures or paintings, or like an engineer, build a bridge. I rationalized, however, that I could build something: if someone asked me what the law was in a particular situation, my answer would be by way of a complex edifice of documents, which sustained a network of rules, exceptions, policies, regulations and principles. This edifice of documents would be given shape in another document, a letter of advice—a short, sharp articulation of the law (I was told my clients would never read more than one page).

In the office, I learnt what law school had not taught me—that law exists first in documents: in letters of advice, in governmental forms, in information management systems, in cover sheets and Court files. ‘Formats and protocols matter. Matter matters.’

2

The law, then, is documents. But it is not only documents.

For every document-as-law emerges out of a system of law, a regime of lawfulness from which each law draws its authority, and because of which we are compelled

(either by our own sense of duty, or by somebody else's) to not only read these documents but comply with them. Behind each judicial decision, parking fine or property transaction is the abstract power of the Law.

That the material instances of the law are underpinned by the Law (that is, by itself) is something that we are actually made familiar with from a fairly young age. How often did we, as children, question the rules or commands of our parents only to be told, 'because I say so!' Such a statement is merely another way of saying the legal truism that we will encounter many times later in life: 'the law is the law'.

In a 1982 essay, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida described this structure of the law through a short story by Franz Kafka called 'Before the Law'. In Kafka's story, a countryman seeks admittance to the 'Law', but he finds that 'Before the Law stands a doorkeeper'. The doorkeeper explains to the countryman that he 'cannot grant admittance at the moment', but that 'it is possible' he will be admitted later—attempts to get past him are futile, for past him are more doors and doorkeepers, each more powerful than the last. The countryman takes a seat and waits before the doorway to the Law, constantly making fresh attempts to gain access, but constantly having access deferred. Eventually, the countryman dies, and the door is shut. For the countryman, as for the reader, access to the 'Law'—and indeed to what Kafka even means by the 'Law' in the story—remains forever out of reach.

For Derrida, Kafka's essay shows the way in which we are always doubly 'before the law'. We are, like the countryman, its subjects, prostrated before the law, required to comply with the rules and prescriptions of its guardians. And yet, although we must comply with the law, the core essence or truth of the law, the Law that lies behind the door and which gives the doorkeeper his authority, remains forever just out of reach—we are always before, but never quite in the law.

In countries like Australia and the United States, the legal systems are awash with things that express this duality. Court-rooms, with their obscure ceremonies and austere arrangement of space; legal contracts, with their archaic language and numbered paragraphs; heraldic stamps, barrister's wigs, policewomen's uniforms—all these speak of the power of The Law, but without ever quite disclosing what this power is. The documents and objects of the law are always at work expressing, but also hiding, the authority of The Law.

So the law is always one and two things: it is 'the law' and it is 'The Law'.

3

So how does this all relate to art?

My argument is that, as systems that mediate our ways of being in the world, law and art actually work in a similar way. Just as the law is always preceded by The Law, sitting behind every work of art is the idea of Art—an abstract notion that fires the disparate elements of the work into a comprehensible whole, forcing us to encounter the work in a particular way, and yet whose precise nature or authority is always withheld. The work of art is always guaranteed by an idea of Art.

In the 1960s, a group of artists in fact set out to explore precisely this aspect of art. The Conceptual Art movement undertook the task of investigating the basic conditions that underpinned the artwork. In doing so, they sought to remove from the artwork all its usual material properties, systematically stripping it of the aspects that made it a work of perceptual and spatial experience (like a sculpture or painting) until it became a bare linguistic definition.

In the mid-1960s, the American artist Joseph Kosuth starting exhibiting paintings containing nothing but the dictionary definitions of words like 'meaning', 'definition' and, of course, 'art'. As he stated:

Works of art are analytic propositions. [...] A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art. Thus, that it is art is true a priori (which is what Judd means when he states that 'if someone calls it art, it's art').

Kosuth's work argued that the artwork was at its core an obscure and irreducible statement of authority, a founding tautology: just as 'the law is the law', Kosuth's work found that 'art is art'.

And yet, as philosopher Peter Osborne has argued, the Conceptual Artists discovered that they could not reduce art to only the idea of art. It was Conceptual Art's failure

(or perhaps its achievement) to show that even exposed in its barest, most tautological form, the abstract idea of Art remained bound to an articulation in time and space—a painting, a photograph, a piece of paper. Conceptual Art showed that art, like law, is always both art and Art, both an idea and a document.

It is thus no coincidence that at this time Conceptual Artworks also began to resemble legal documents: the American Robert Morris exhibited a legal certificate, while his countrymen Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt wrote down rules for how their works could or should be made. Australian artists like Ian Burn, Simon Klose and Robert Rooney compiled lists, rules and files of documents. Other artists expressed this in more performative ways, which continue today: artists in the institutional critique movement locked visitors out of the gallery for the duration of the exhibition (Eduardo Favario and Daniel Buren), contemporary installation and performance artists use horse-mounted policemen to direct people around the Tate Modern (Tania Bruguera).

Since at least the 1960s, then, art has explicitly recognized that it has an affinity with law—an affinity that hinges on the notion that just as every law is underpinned by the Law, so does every work of art presuppose Art.

Art is art and the law is the law.

4

But although they may share a similar structure, law and art are not the same.

The law always moves backwards. When, as a lawyer, I went looking for the source of law's authority, I was always pulled back in time: from the bureaucratic form on my desk that day, to the policy from the year before that produced it, to the law from five years ago that the policy implemented, to the Australian Constitution, to the legitimacy of England's colonial settlement, and so on. Of course, this was always a fruitless journey: the law's documents always defer their authority to another moment, further back in time. Behind every door is another doorkeeper, each more powerful than the last.

Law, then, is always history, the movement towards the founding moment of law—what legal theorist Peter Goodrich describes as ‘the foundational and always prior appropriation that justifies law, its absent origin, its arcane and mysterious source in God or nature or moral creed’.

The Law, figured as an absent origin, takes on the name *nomos*.

5

Art, however, moves in the other direction. Art does not have a *nomos*.

Of course, art certainly has a history—indeed, as an art historian, I am the first to insist on the importance of journeying back into the history of art, to recoup what has been forgotten, to look for new ideas as to what art might be. And artists today are also art historians, constantly looking back to the past for models to build on or break with.

And yet, the history of artistic documents (artworks) does not, as it does with law, point us towards an ever-receding prior moment of justification. Instead, the matter of art’s history offers us a field of (often incommensurate) suggestions as to what art could be.

Today, with each new work, the artist gathers together a jumble of these suggestions into a constellation, and seers them into a particular material form—a sculpture, a video, a painting, an installation, a performance. Such forms often appear strange and unfamiliar to us, but this is because contemporary art does not, or does not always, use the history of art as a model of what it should look like. Instead, it takes up art history’s forward looking gaze, and posits, in a particular material structure, a reorientation of the force that guarantees its reception—Art.

The strange materiality of contemporary artworks ask us to take stock of our present moment in time and space, and to look backwards to look forwards—to consider not what Art was, but what Art will be.

## 6

With all this in mind, let's turn to the exhibition at hand.

Each of the contemporary artists in *Sequester* works with a system of constraint. In the process of making their artworks, they impose upon themselves rules or laws about how the material aspects of their work are to come into existence.

What does this process, brought to light for us through this exhibition, tell us? As I hope is beginning to become clear, it points towards the argument I have been making about the relationship between art and law.

By including laws within themselves, the works in *Sequester* act as types of mirrors, showing that just as artworks exist in systems of law (their presence in the Australian embassy makes this very clear) so does law persist in the system of art. Or, put another way, the artworks in *Sequester* suggest that not only does law surround art, but it is also embedded and reflected in the very structure of art itself, in art/law's existence as a material thing that always presupposes a more general, abstract version of itself.

## 7

One more thing before I conclude.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has described the way in which law is similar in structure to not art, but language. For Agamben, just as law is underpinned by a presupposition of the force of law, so language always presupposes the sayability of the world—language presupposes that language as such fundamentally exists, and that each utterance is just an example that attests to this fundamental truth.

The language of the law, my letters of advice, and this essay all operate in this way.

However, art, because it moves in the other direction, plays an interesting role in this law-art-language triad. This is because with each utterance, art offers us the opportunity to reconfigure its irreducible source of authority. Like law and language, art presupposes an Art, but unlike law and language it is oriented to the future, and thus it gives the viewer the freedom to imagine what this Art may be.

The forms of contemporary are not always easy to understand.

However, what I want to suggest by considering art, law and language together is that it is precisely this obscurity that makes art so interesting, and makes it different from the other structures that shape our lives. As lawmakers, office-workers and writers we are constantly dealing with particulars (this document, this rule) in ways that point to, but obscure, the mysterious but powerful forces from which these material instances draw their authority. It is only with art, which can with ease take up in its materiality any number of different forms, materials, ideas, rules and languages, that the ultimate authority underpinning such materiality remains open for elaboration.

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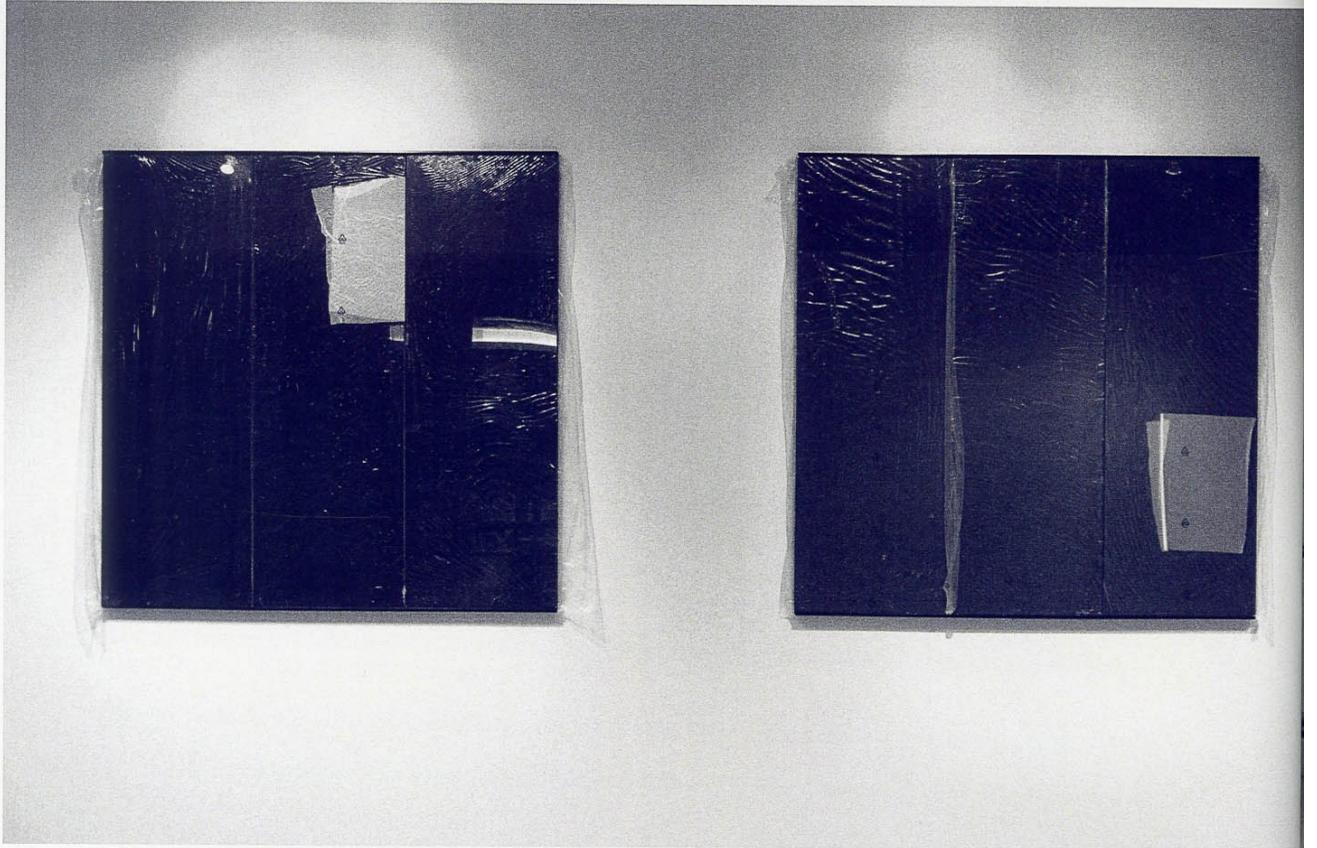
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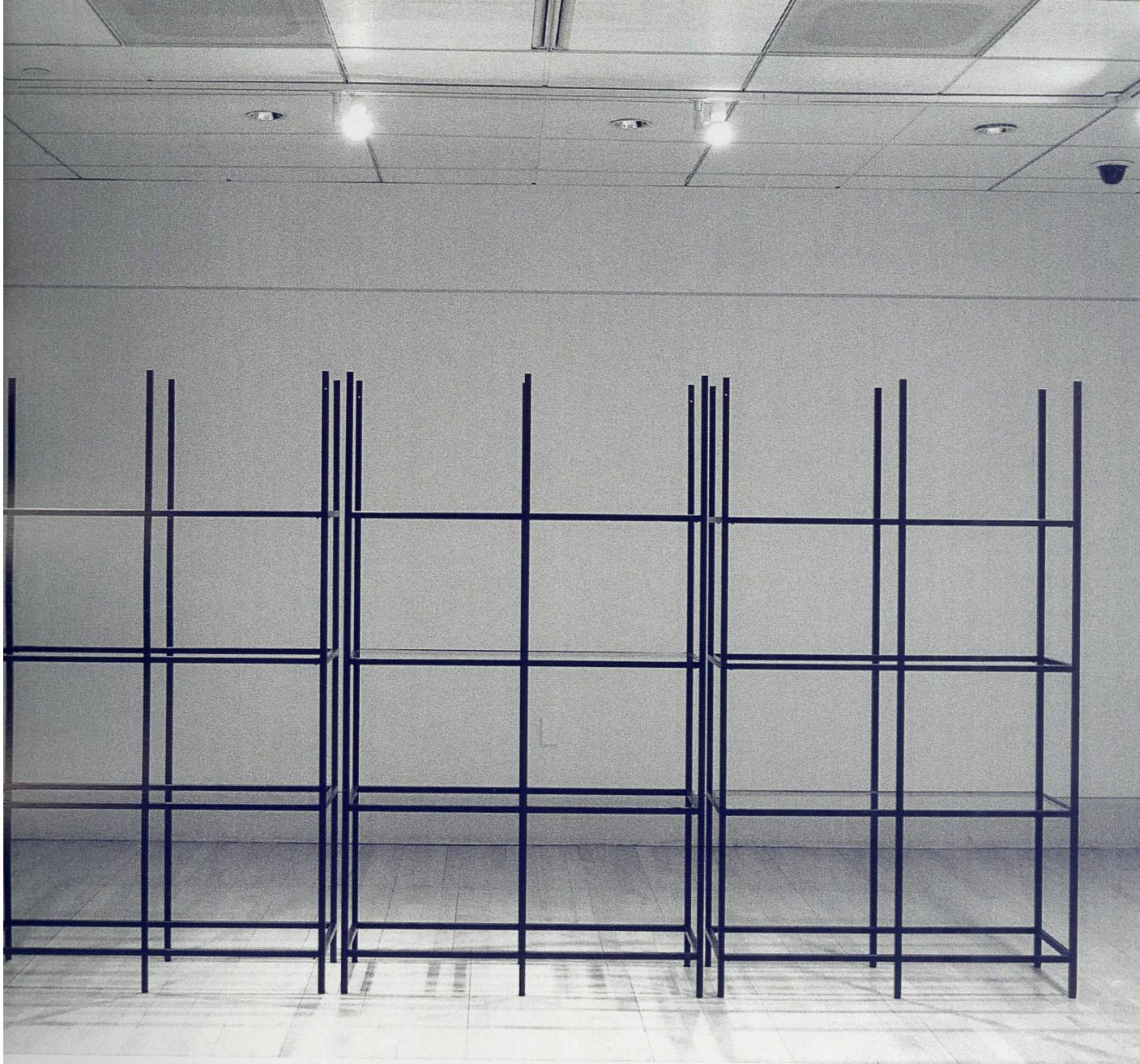
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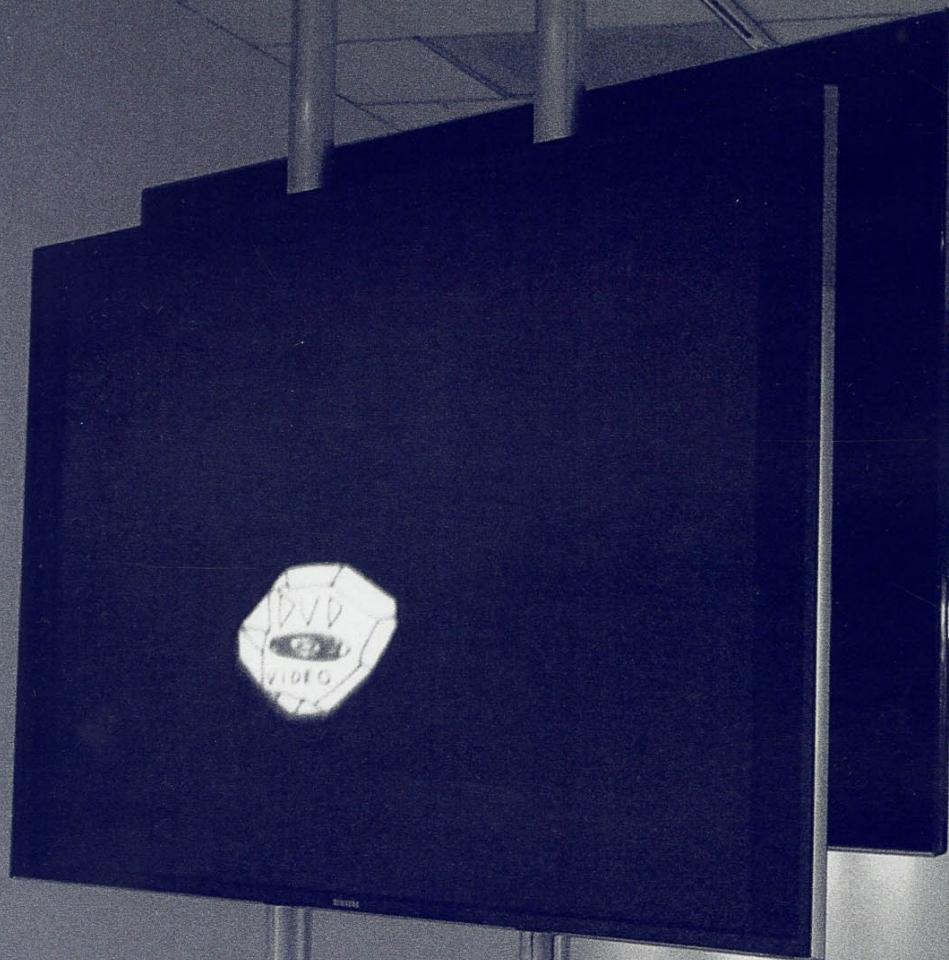
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Patrick Foster & Jen Berean  
Conciliation & Compromise

shelving units, shelves in original packaging  
2014  
courtesy the artists



Matthew Griffin  
Of No Momento

Beta video transferred to Digital Video  
3 minutes 58 seconds  
2007  
courtesy the artist



Matthew Griffin  
Waiting

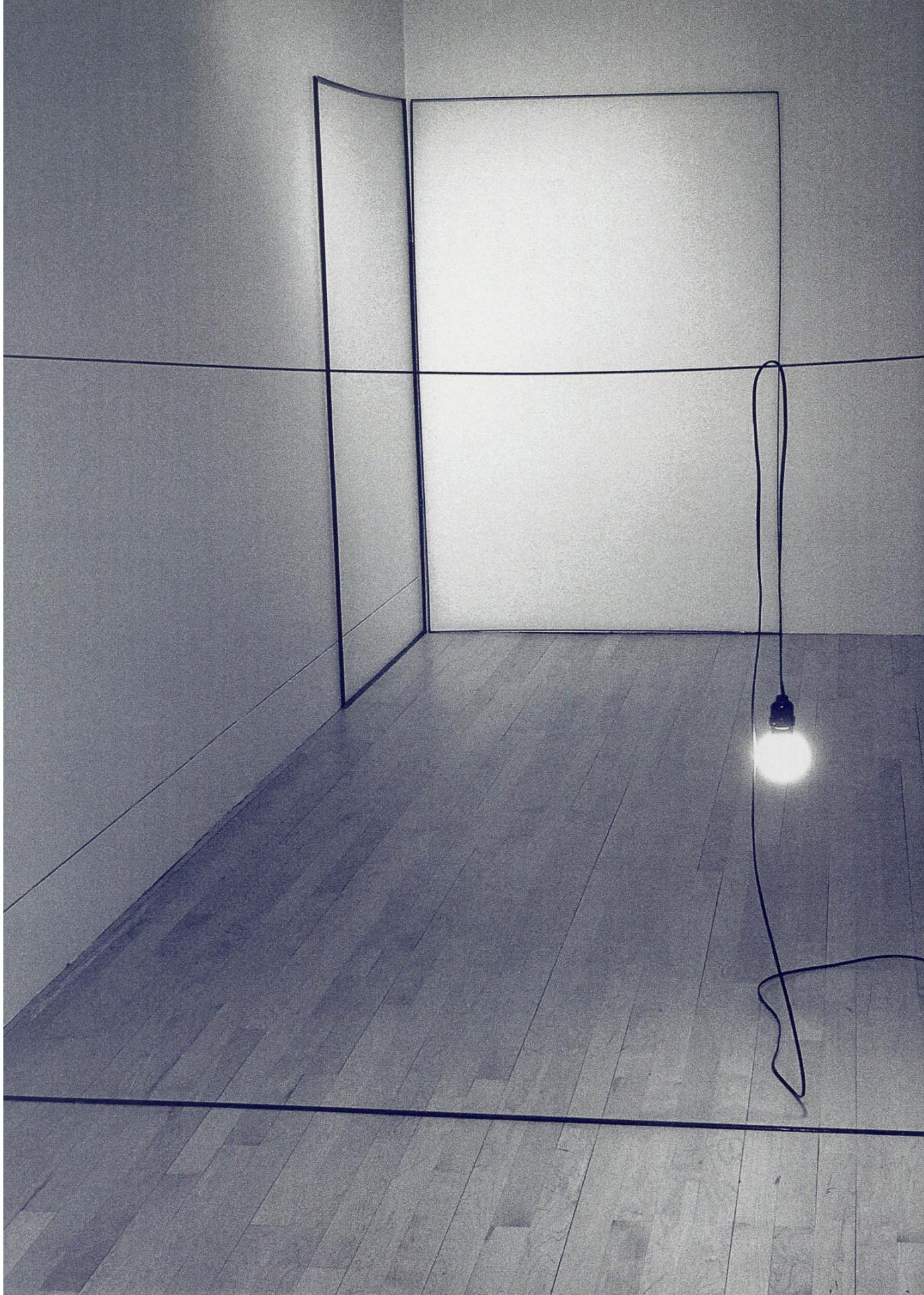
Digital Video  
1 minute 29 seconds  
2014  
courtesy the artist

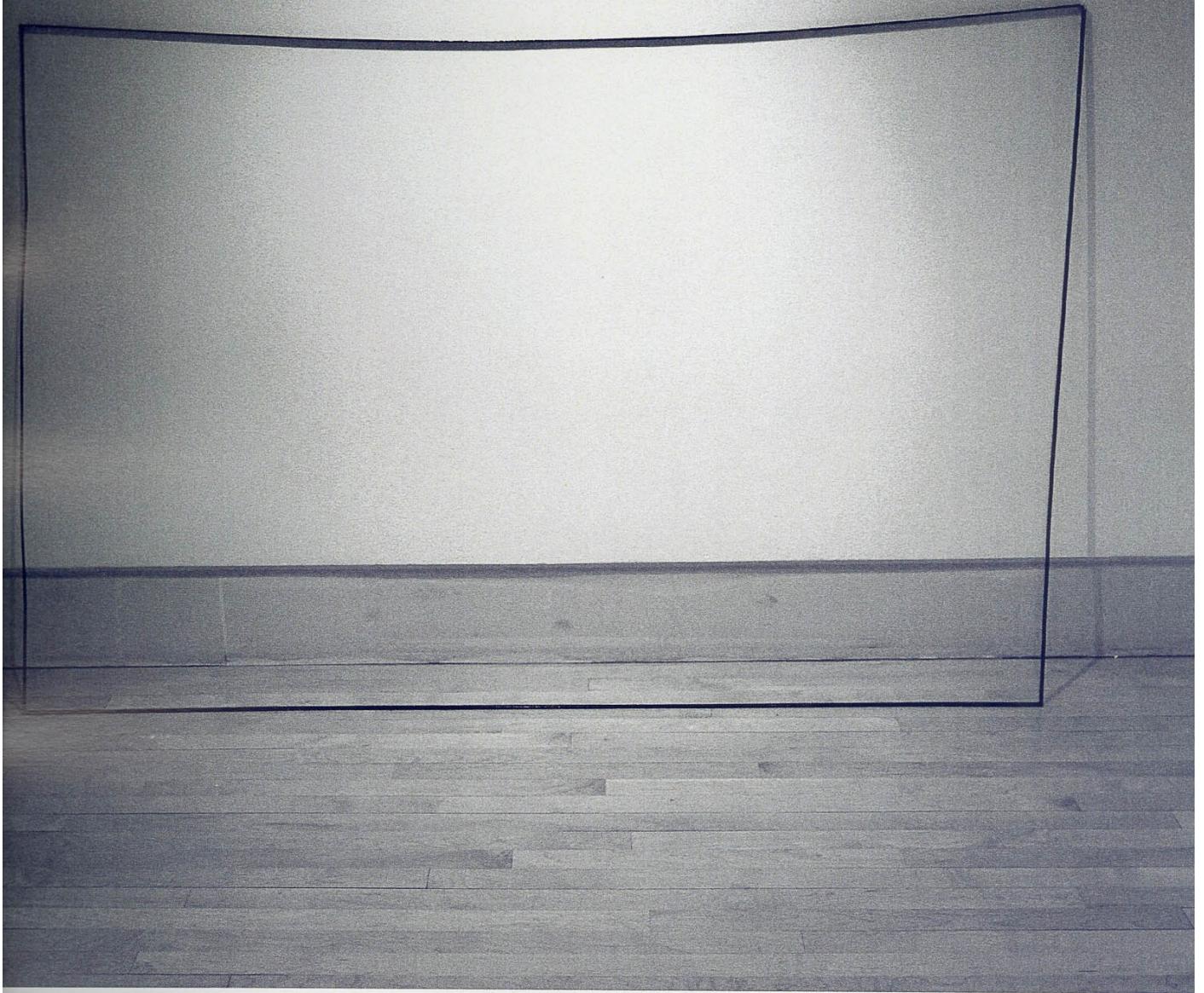




**Simone Douglas**  
Blind

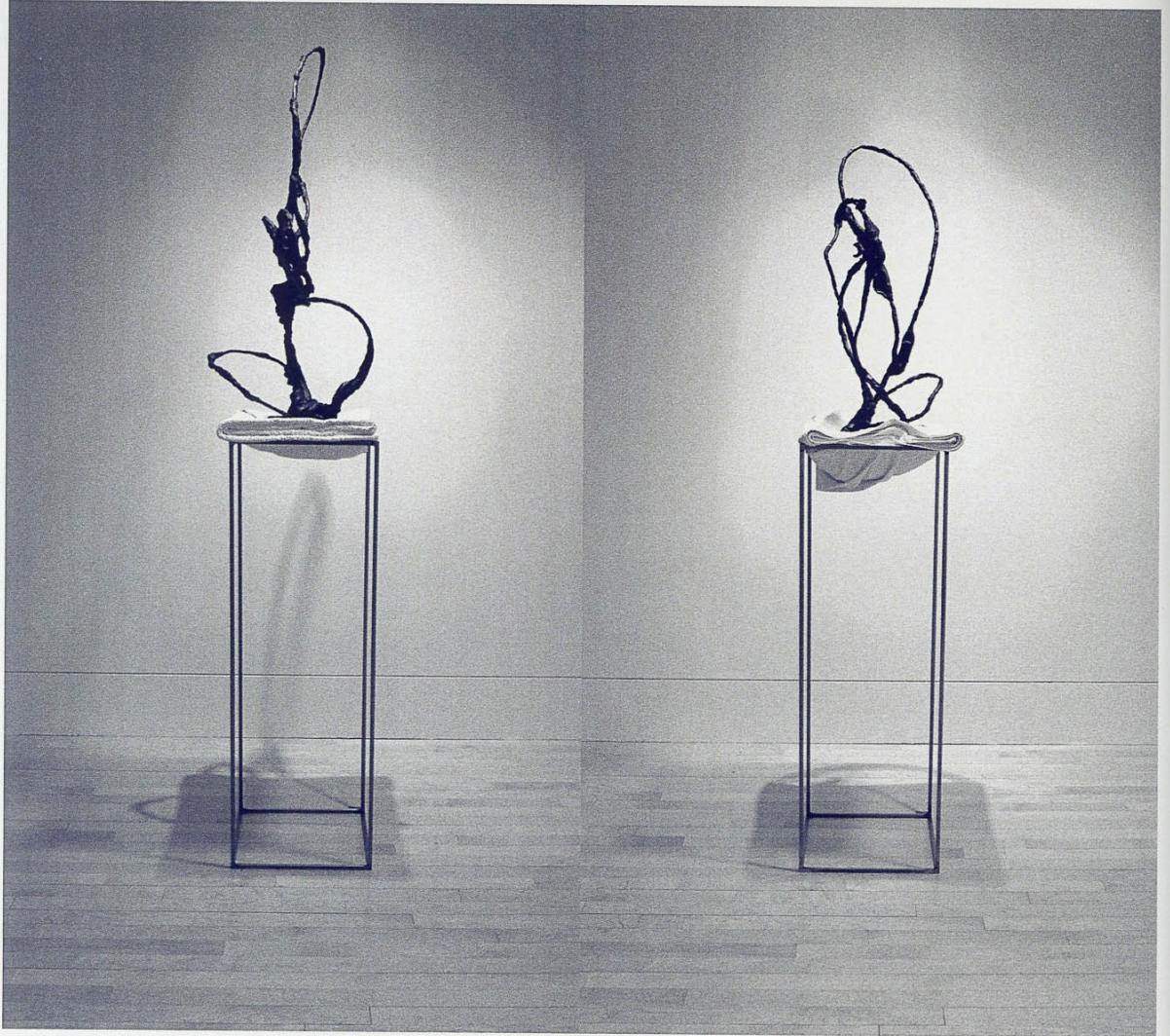
C-Type Prints  
2006  
courtesy the artist





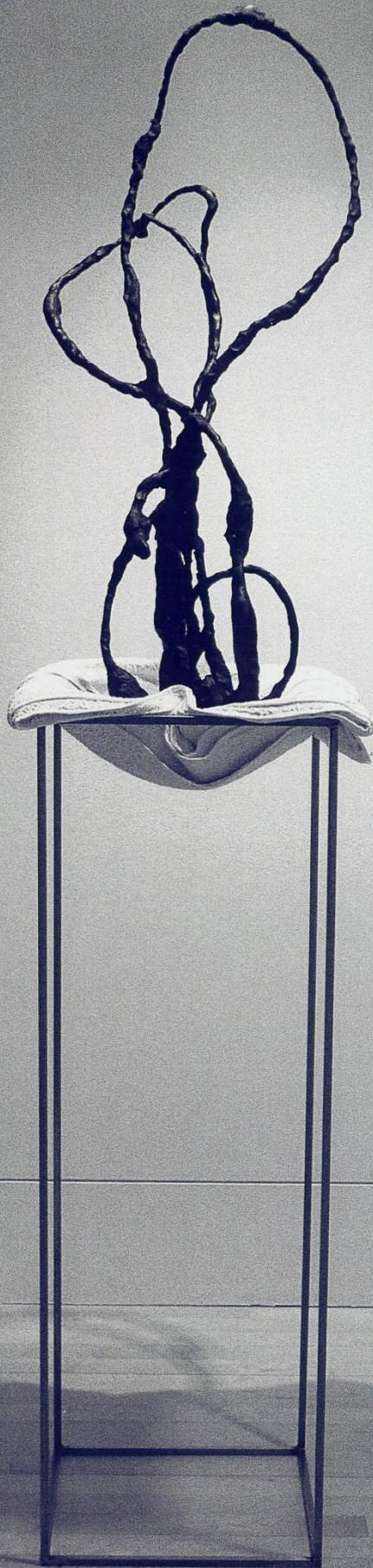
**Christopher Hanrahan**  
Other Standard Models (theatre)

steel, bronze, oak, lead light, wax and enamel  
2014  
courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery

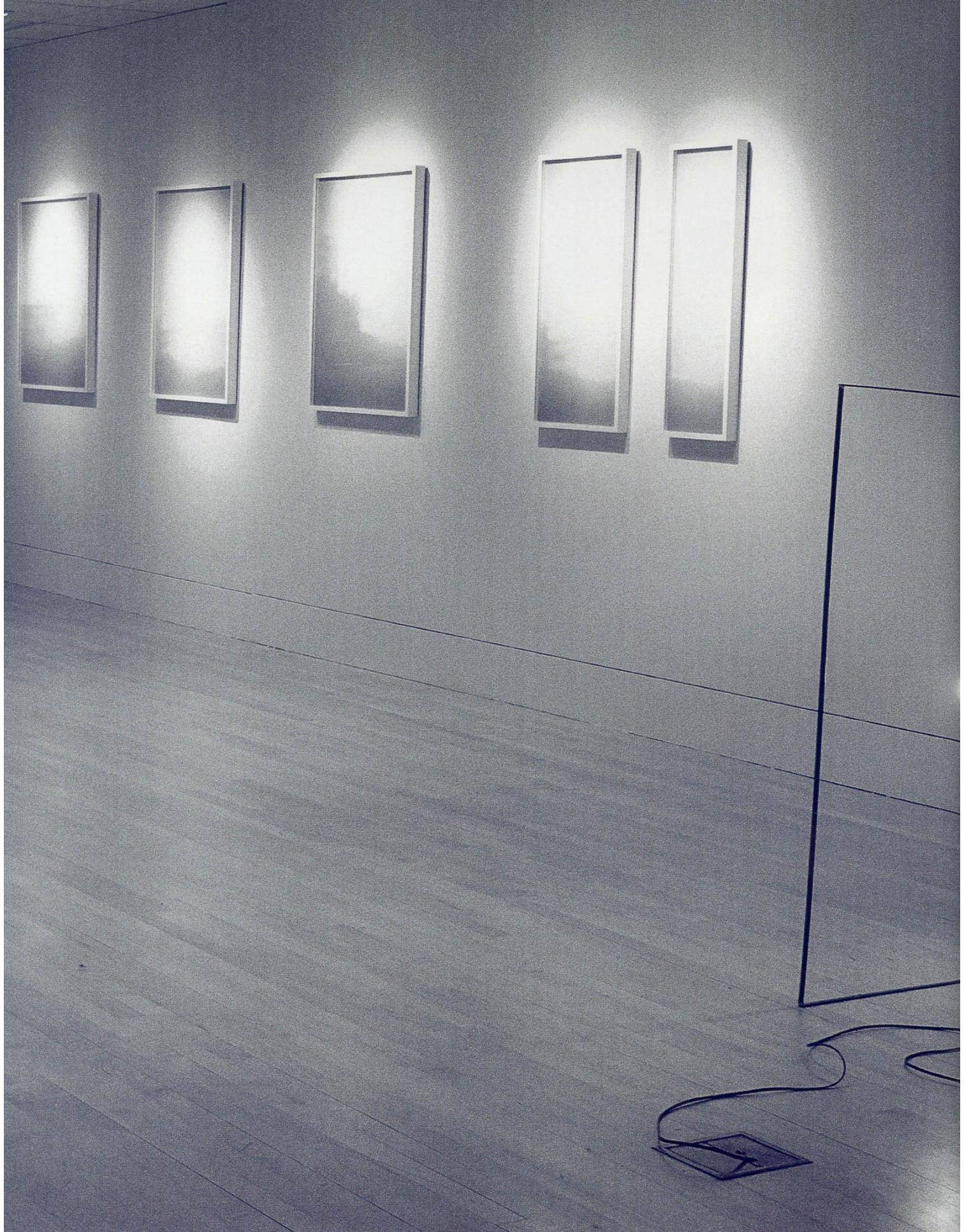


**Rob McLeish**  
untitled

steel, epoxy clay, towel, polyurathene  
2014  
courtesy the artist and Neon Parc

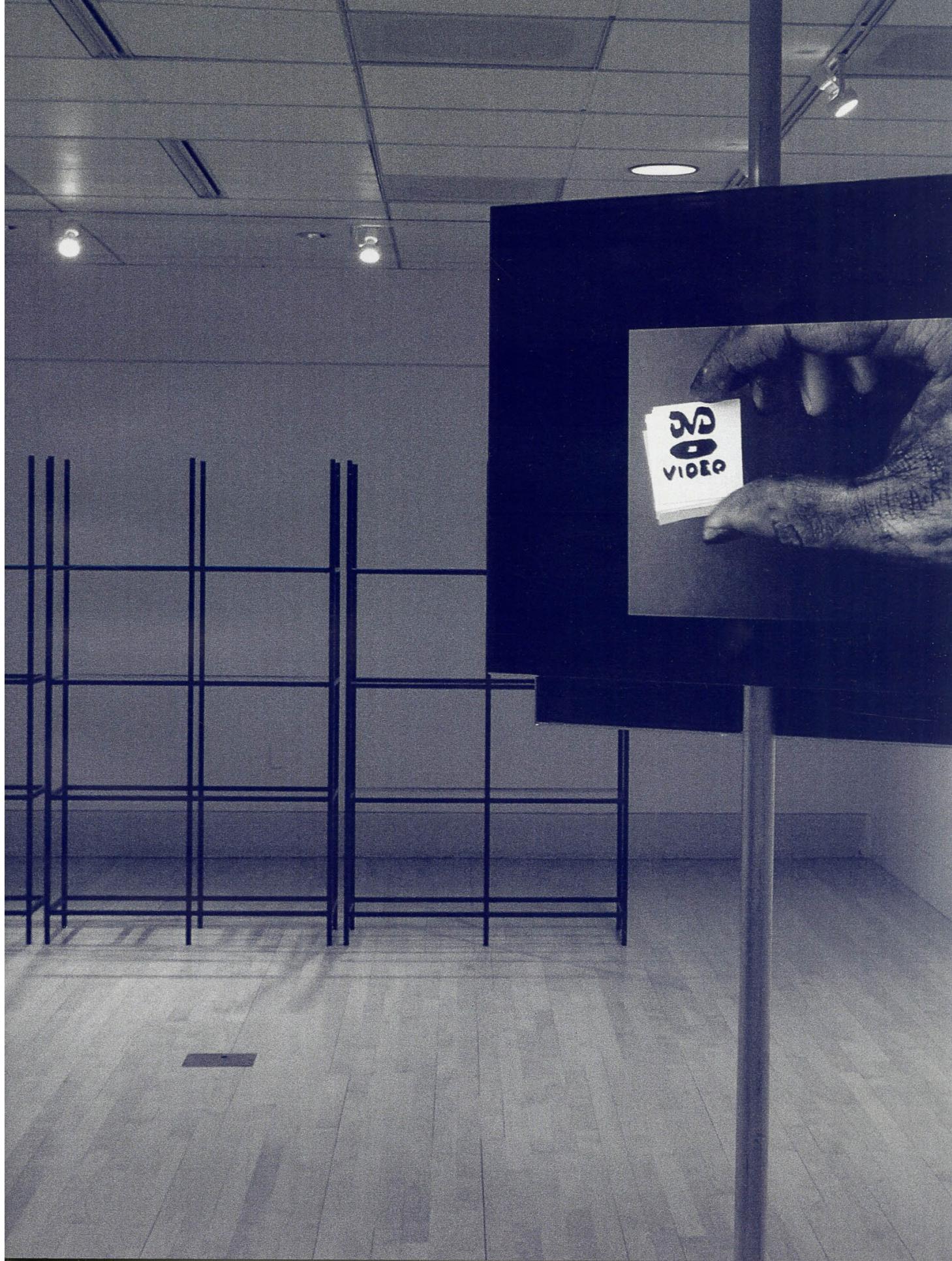












VIDEO

## **Simone Douglas**

Simone Douglas is an Australian born visual artist, curator and writer who lives and works in New York City. Trained at the College of Fine Arts, University of NSW and at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, Douglas is currently based in NYC where she currently holds the position of Director MFA Fine Arts at Parsons the New School for Design, The New School, NYC. Since the 1990's her work has been an intense engagement with the Australian interior and as such she travels to Australia 2 – 3 times a year to make her work. Her work incorporates installation, photography, video and site specific works.

Douglas's works have been exhibited at and are held in the collection of the V&A Museum, London; the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney and the National Gallery Of Victoria, Melbourne. In addition they have also been exhibited at the Photographers Gallery, London; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, among others. Douglas served on the board of First Draft, Sydney and was project director and curator on behalf of the Getty for Picture Sydney: landmarks of a new generation at the Australian Museum.

Her work has been recently published in Conveyor, Blind Spot, and in book publications including 'Look: Contemporary Australian Photography since 1980'; Macmillan press and Photography, Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection, pub Art Gallery of New South Wales.

## **Patrick Foster & Jen Berean**

Patrick Foster and Jen Berean were born in Launceston, Australia, in 1981, and Calgary, Canada, in 1981, respectively. Foster and Berean predominantly work in sculpture and installation. Foster received a BFA from the Victorian College of the Arts in 2005 and Berean received a BFA and an MA (architecture) from The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Recent solo exhibitions of their work have been held at The Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne: Murray White Room, Melbourne and Pallas Projects, Dublin. They have been included in group exhibitions such as The Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, The Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; New 09, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne and Lipp, Veyron, Berean & Foster at Rowhill Mansions, London. They have been the recipients of numerous awards including the Jane Scully Award, which saw them undertake a mentorship with Turner Prize winning artist Martin Boyce. Their work is held in public and private collections internationally and has been featured in publications including Frieze, Art & Australia and Mousse Magazine. Live and work in London and New York.

## **Matthew Griffin**

Matthew Griffin was born in Bendigo, Australia, in 1976 and works in sculpture, collage and video. Griffin received a BFA from the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in 1998. Recent exhibitions of his work have been held at The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Artspace, Sydney; The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne and Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne. His work is held in public and private collections internationally and has been featured in publications including Australian Art Collector, Frieze and Flash Art. Lives and works in New York.

## **Christopher Hanrahan**

Christopher Hanrahan was born in Mudgee, Australia, in 1978 and works predominantly in sculpture, drawing and installation. Hanrahan received a BFA Hons and MFA from the Sydney College of the Arts (Sydney University) in 2004 and 2012, receiving the University Medal in 2004. Recent exhibitions of his work have been held at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; The Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart; Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney; Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne and Shepperton Art Museum, Shepperton. He has been the recipient of numerous awards including the Marten Bequest for Sculpture and the Australia Council for the Arts New Work Grant. His work is held in public and private collections internationally and has been featured in publications including Frieze, Art & Australia and Eyeline Magazine. Lives and works in New York.

## **Rob McLeish**

Rob McLeish was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1976 and works predominantly in sculpture, drawing and installation. McLeish has exhibited extensively in Australia since 2004. McLeish was the recipient of a studio residency at Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne in 2009-10 and completed an MFA at Monash University, Melbourne, in 2011. McLeish recently exhibited at NADA Miami Art Fair and Art Los Angeles Contemporary, in 2010 and 2013 respectively. In 2012 McLeish exhibited in the 12th Biennial of Australian Contemporary Art. McLeish currently lives and works in New York and is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne.



Embassy of Australia  
Washington, D.C.

