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Wet, flowering, dry

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Wet, flowering, dry
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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In Gratitude

An enormous thank you to all (family, friends, colleagues) who supported, encouraged, questioned, and emboldened this work over the last two years.

Table of Contents

List of figures

13. Caroline Minchew, *Untitled (Mud)*, 2022. Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag with bone black pigment, slate pigment, and charcoal, 38”x24”.
14. Caroline Minchew, *Untitled (Sun)*, 2022. Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag with bone black pigment, slate pigment, and charcoal, 22”x18”.
15. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled*, 1962. Gelatin silver print, 14x11 inches (mount) 35.6x27.9 cm.

Abstract

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Wet, flowering, dry is a series of photographic works that explore how vernal pools are a macrocosm for holding memory and a site of omnipresent solitude and decay. This installation distills an embodied and ephemeral experience of how we are grounded in a network of invisible connections with our surroundings. This network becomes evident through biological, historical, and field research conducted at the vernal pools for over a year. Through slow observation and consideration of how multiple stories of place can weave together into a larger parable, *Wet, flowering, dry* reveals how the life cycle of a vernal pool is an echo and lesson in understanding power and beauty in the unseen and the passage of time.

Introduction

There exists a stretch of pools bundled together in a regrown forest where unfathomable, deliberate events take place each year. These pools exist elsewhere if you know where to look. Matter is produced by the wearing down of surfaces, friction exposes reflection, and a silence exists only before the noise. Here only the slow-moving observers and those who dive below will be rewarded. In a short movement of season, the passage transforms from a dank pit of mud to a brimming and flowering plenum of turbulent cries, only to dry up leaving a barren hollow, holding tracks in the muck.

I was first introduced to this site in October 2021, when the pools were dry and blanketed by fallen leaves. My interest in vernal pools began as an inkling that I could respond to a landscape's inherent visual darkness and press my own instincts and embodiments to a site I revisited and observed quietly over a long span of time. What resulted is a mirroring of my own artistic practice to the biologic systems already at play, layered with historical accounts that explained my reactions and resonance to spending time in that space. The isolation of the pools also offered a place of retreat and solitude, where I could go to work photographing and immersing my reality into that of a shallow pool. I worked to see if there was a limit to the number of photographs that I could make there without getting bored, or when I would feel the task was completed. This has yet to happen, as the constant changes in season drastically shift the appearance of the pools. The more scientific research I did further revealed a world of teeming life beneath the surface that I will never fully see or understand.

The slowness in researching and photographing *Wet, flowering, dry* gave me space and time to uncover the why and where of my intrigue in the site, and to create a working process

that sincerely connected the experience of being there to the artworks themselves. The final step was marrying the materiality of the print to the orchestra of systems at play at the vernal pools, resulting in a post-treatment of inkjet prints where I rub, layer, and brush pigment and charcoal onto its surface. Adding my hand in such a visible manner to the works created a final step of closeness and introspection, as I worked hours over each print slowly and methodically rubbing powders to the surface of the photographs.

Vernal Pools

Vernal pools, also known as ephemeral pools, are depressional basins compacted onto forest floors. They have no inlets or outlets, and no visible connections to other mouths of water. Because of this, they are temporal sanctuaries that allow certain species, such as frogs, fairy shrimps, and salamanders to breed without the worry of a predatory fish. Many amphibious creatures such as the wood frog depend on vernal pools for breeding sites, many of which are bioindicator species. The presence of such creatures is a marker for ecological soundness, that "serves as a measure of the environmental conditions that exist in a given locale."[1]

The life cycle of a vernal pool has three phases and is as follows: wet, flowering, and dry. The wet phase occurs during the winter months, when rainwater and snowmelt fills the pools marking the beginning of many species' life cycles. Next is spring, reproduction season, as eggs hatch, new life is made, and the pools slowly begin to dry out. Dry season completes the cycle. From summer to fall the water will completely evaporate, plants and aquatic life will die, but

[1] *OED s.v.* "bioindicator."

seeds, eggs, and cysts remain waiting to begin the cycle again the coming wet season. Three stages: birth, life, death, undulating waiting for one to tap in, one to sleep, and one to wait.

Visit a vernal pool in the summer and you may unknowingly walk right on its waterless and muddy surface (figure 1). Return in spring and the pools will be filled with still water, reflecting the forest canopy above (figure 2). In Elizabeth Coburn's book, *Vernal Pools Natural History and Conservation*, she beautifully articulates the case for story telling through observation:

> There is something almost magical about visiting a flooded woodland hollow in early spring and seeing hundreds of salmon-colored fairy shrimps swimming lazily above submerged leaves, watching caddisflies in their miniature log-cabin houses lumbering along the bottom, and catching sight of a spotted salamander as it journeys to the surface for a gulp of air during this brief sojourn in the pool. Hearing the short-lived concert provided by quacking wood frogs is a pleasure eagerly anticipated during long-late winder days when it seems as though spring will never come. Each year, the burgeoning of life in tiny pools across the landscape carries a message of renewal and hope. It is an annual miracle, a uniquely miniature aquatic world, dependent upon them.[2]

In the spring, egg sacks float just beneath the surface of the water, their gelatinous globs gently housing tadpoles through growth (figure 3). Just as the water levels change throughout the year, so do the smells and sounds of breeding. At night, the calls of frog species echo and bounce

[2] Elizabeth A. Coburn, *Vernal Pools Natural History and Conservation* (Blacksburg and Granville: The McDonald & Woodward Publishing Company, 2004) p. 1.

around the forest and surface of the pools. Ticks and screeches add to the percussion of the night, revealing a drastic change in sound from daytime stillness to nighttime commotion.

Energy in the pools is not dependent on the sun, rather reliant on the power of detritus, or dead matter. Fungi are responsible for breaking down the fallen leaves, wood, and other debris in flooded vernal pools.[3] Microorganisms actively decay beneath the surface of the water, giving power to the organisms breeding above. This concealment of energy is repeated in the story of the vernal pool, as it is a hidden ecosystem in which many of the activity taking place there is unseen. The force of detritus as an unseen energy source is key to the works in *Wet, flowering, dry*, as it creates space for working in the aesthetics of decay.

Process and Materiality

My process as an artist is a constant search for putting words to an internal practice of understanding why I find specific places intriguing, beautiful, dark, and concerning. I'm interested in how one small site produces a multitude of stories and perspectives. Vernal pools became a point of interest to me through revisiting and embracing solitude at the site. Through conversations with a biologist the timely metaphors I was observing melded with the science I was learning. In an essence, I kept returning to the site to uncover why I kept going back in the first place.

Teresita Fernández compares her process of artmaking to mining, explaining, "The mining process is really one of extracting, so for me it's this really poetic analogy to think about artmaking as a kind of extraction. And in order to do that, and in order to ask viewers to do that,

[3] Coburn, *Vernal*, 2004, p. 58.

in order to come up with a piece that actually does these things, I have to do it for myself first. I have to go pretty deep into myself as well and figure out who I am in relation to these materials, to these things, and to these histories, and everything that I'm trying to say."[4] The idea of going deep into oneself is easier to do when isolated, and the pools offered a site of seclusion in and of themselves. This self-reflection was integral to read how to distill a physical landscape of the vernal pools into a two-dimensional object, where a projection can take place onto the photograph just as it did for me to create it.

The physical materials used in the works connect the concepts of a vernal pool to the final form of the photographs in *Wet, flowering, dry*. The photographs are inkjet prints derived from scanned large format, black and white negatives printed on thick, matte paper. Their surface is covered, smudged, and drawn on with charcoal, bone black pigment, and slate pigment. In this process I mimic the detritus in vernal pools by actively layering materials that are steeped in compressed time and decay. Bone black is a pigment produced by carbonizing bones, creating a substance of bone ash and charcoal[5]. The bone black pigment produces a heavy matte finish that I repetitively rub onto the surface of the print with my hands, effectively cloaking the inkjet print. The charcoal creates a shimmered effect, tracing the deep shadows with the negative and a subtle blending into the other pigments. Slate is powdered onto the highlights, illuminating alongside obscured darkness. As a collection, the prints balance between compositions where the pigments show a stronger hand in drawing (figures 4 and 5), and those with unabstracted representation (figures 6 and 7). I do this to act against representation itself, instead creating moments of illusion that create difficulty in deciphering between reflection and

[4] Teresita Fernández on the Violent Nature of the American Landscape, interview with Spencer Bailey and Teresita Fernández, Time Sensitive, podcast audio, April 19, 2019, https://timesensitive.fm/episode/artist-teresita-fernandez-violent-nature-american-landscape/.
[5] *OED s.v.* "bone black."

surface. The photographic element exemplifies aliveness, and eternal existence, while the drawing represents cessation through the demise of the surface.

In the final installation of *Wet, flowering, dry*, prints are housed in espresso-stained minimal, wood frames with individual spotlights. The spotlights highlight the shimmering effect of the charcoal and create space for the viewer to decipher details in each photograph as they move closer to its surface. In their presentation, I leave the borders on each photograph visible, showing mark makings and fingerprints, my obvious hand in the work. I want the work to rest between mediums and leave the viewer in the dark on the origins of their process. The sequence of the works in the gallery pairs prints that are more abstract with heavier drawing and application of the pigments on one wall (figure 8), with more representational photographs on the two surrounding walls (figure 9). This was done to amplify the endless perspectives and visual cycles of the pools and to create a grounding for the viewer to attempt to piece together physical space of the site in which the works were made.

The outdoor site-specific piece created for the installation at The Anderson utilizes an old koi pond in the courtyard outside of the gallery (figure 10). I created a mold slightly smaller than the well and cast an inkjet print in epoxy resin to create a buoyant object. Pond lights illuminate the piece from below, showing the brown, murky water that the resin rests in. The print itself is of the wood's mirrored surface of the pond and the specular reflection of sun glint. The essence of the piece mimics the stillness at the site of the vernal pools, transporting the reflection from the site in Charles City to the Anderson Gallery. The resin piece is an entirely new extension of my photographic practice, and an entry into creating works that dimensionally tie to a landscape physically. As time passes, the photographic sculpture is being blanketed with falling leaves, just as it would at the pools (figure 11).

Wildness and Landscape

Wet, flowering, dry is the result of many shifts in thinking of how I interact with the natural world as an artist, and the source of that interest. Prior to graduate school, my approach to landscape photography hinged on the idea of pristine and untouched nature, and the humanistic role to preserve that. My gaze as a photographer asserted a singular viewpoint and story that negated ideas of wonder and the unseen. I unknowingly amplified the age-old tradition in landscape photography of placing myself in the role of controller and capturer of landscape. I othered myself from my surroundings and described the camera as a tool for only self-contemplation. I came to realize that a significant aspect of photographing in these natural spaces is being a part of every faction of energy, movement, and being that exists, seen and unseen.

The process of creating work in a singular site for over a year allotted time for me to reflect upon why I'm continually attracted to subject matter in natural and secluded spaces. I am less interested in representing nature as a means for protection and environmental stewardship. Instead, I find fascination in the periphery, the nebulous, the indescribable, and the shifting moments in natural systems reminiscent of what Jack Halberstam explains when they say, "We must not imagine that the wild is ours to discover or rediscover; we should resist the temptation to believe that it once existed and now has gone; and we must find way around the treacherous binary logics that set the wild in opposition to the modern, the *civilized*, and the real."[6] Landscape is steeped in time and history, and often paralyzes thinking of the past against an uncertain future. The vernal pools represent a malleability to personify how we react to darkness and decay *and* being alive at the same time, free from a binary timeline.

[6] Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: the disorder of desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), p i.

How do we avoid instinctively setting boundaries to a landscape? We simultaneously accept the scientific with the poetic. Joyelle McSweeney's book, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* is an example of contemporary ecopoetics, where she "coins the term 'the Necropastoral' to describe an Anthropocene ecopoetics based on such contemporary modalities as decomposition, mutancy, extinction and decay."[7] Their book unlocked a new way of thinking to how I can write and photograph the experiential and abstract, unbound to time. Necropastoral is defined "by its activity, its networking, its paradoxical proliferation, its self-digestion its eructations, its necroticness, its hunger, and its hole making, which configures a burgeoning textual tissue defined by holes, a tissue thus absent as it is present, and therefore not absent, not present--protoplasmic, spectral."[8] I like to think of the unseen and unfamiliar as a network of tissues that is understood, but not visible; like mycorrhizal networks that transfer energy underneath the dirt. By creating a clear geographic boundary to the site in which the work is made, directions in the work become meaningless. I am instead tasked with showing the connection in the macro and the micro, beings that inhabit the space, and the emotions that embody it.

The directionless quality of many of the works in *Wet, flowering, dry* emanates from the precise and still reflections of the surrounding forest onto the vernal pools. This mirrored image captured through the camera shows layered realities, the detritus beneath, the inert water surface, and the reflected canopy above. This confusion in temporal space creates boundless room for understanding exactly which reality the photograph is portraying (figure 12). In this phenomenon, layers of surface meld together. Heightened by the pigment and matte surface, the

[7] Joyelle McSweeny. "Books." Joyelle McSweeney. May 3, 2022. https://www.joyellemcsweeney.com/books-test.
[8] Joyelle McSweeny, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2015) p. 3.

photograph changes as your spatial perspective does. Moving closer will reveal hidden details beneath the surface, mimicking the introspection required for studying the ponds.

Entanglement of place, history, and time

On a sand dune above the Nottoway River some 40 miles southeast from the vernal pools lies another site, Cactus Hill. Prior it's discovery in 1993, scholars believed the earliest human occupation in America began in Clovis-age culture, 13,500 years ago. Archeological data from Cactus Hill offered new evidence of pre-Clovis human habitation, from as early as 18,000 to 20,000 years ago.[9] Cactus Hill incited further inquisition to the age-old question, who got here first? When thinking of the unimaginably great timescale of human life as it relates to landscape, the concept of landscape and place boundary is entirely dependent on the perspective. For ages the perspective of those who lived at the site of the vernal pools belonged to the Weanoc people (also Waianoke, Weyanock, Weanock, Weyanoke, Waonoke, or even Weianoack), part of the Powhatan Confederacy. The violent succession of British colonial rule in Virginia and ongoing conflicts with the Iroquois led the Weanoc to shelter and move frequently, recreating their communities along the way. Their final movement from this site led them south, to the upper Nottoway River,[10] where they integrated into Nottoway and Tuscarora reservations[11]. I should note that the research I conducted on indigenous history at the site of the vernal pools does

[9] Encyclopedia Virginia. "Cactus Hill Archeological Site", May 10, 2022, *Encyclopedia Virginia* https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/cactus-hill-archaeological-site/.
[10] Frederick Hobb," Weakaote—Weapemeoc," in *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* (Scituate: Digital Scanning, Inc, 2003), pp. 926.
[11] Kianga Lucas. **"**The Weyanoke (and Nottoway/Tuscarora) origins of Granville's Kersey Family", May 10, 2022, *Native American Roots: Genealogy and history of Native Americans of Granville County and Northeastern North Carolina* https://nativeamericanroots.wordpress.com/2015/07/05/the-weyanoke-and-nottowaytuscarora-origins-of-granvilles-kersey-family/.

source any first-person indigenous voices to explain the history and importance of what the land offered and meant to those who lived there at that time, and its tradition today. This blank space is a starting point for where I plan to take the work and research in the future to expand the points of view and perspectives of landscape. While the idea and evidence of nature as capital is boundless in history, immateriality in spiritual practice, movement, and it's meaning is an area that deserves equal attention.

The perspective of landscape in the artistic genre of Southern Gothic is a direct reflection of the falsehood of the pastoral vision of the South, instead revealing the reality of a culture embedded with slavery, racism, and patriarchy. As Matthew Sivils explains, "As the history and culture of the south indicates, racism mingles with a host of other horrors so that, ultimately, the landscapes of the south are haunted by the thread of a shallowly buried cultural contagion, one that threatens to expose humanity's monstrous legacy and to spread that legacy from the past to the present. That is the great fear of the southern landscape: that its pestilence will not merely frighten us with horrors exhumed from days gone by, but that eve buried those horrors continue to poison the land as well as those who reside within its influence."[12] This "pestilence" weaves its way through *Wet, flowering, dry*, immortalizing time that captures land embedded in a legacy of human and environmental abuse.

The darkness in Southern Gothic works embrace a preoccupation with the grotesque, often exposing a tension between realism and supernatural. In terms of the landscape of Virginia itself, it is difficult to extract the widespread death that occurred throughout the chronology of the colonization of Indigenous peoples, to slavery, into the Civil War, and the repercussions of these

[12] Matthew Sivils, "Gothic Landscapes of the South," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 16.

that exist today. Two-thirds of soldiers in the Civil War died solely because of disease[13] due to poor hygiene and a lack of sanitation. The site of the vernal pools in particular records a public health disaster from June to July of 1862. 100,000 Union troops and 30,000 animals encamped deteriorated and suffered in a corridor of mud that recently was logged. You can see an obvious earthwork cutting through the forest, a humped road that confirms travel of humans, animals, and supplies to the encampment that summer.

Today, the site of the vernal pools is part of the VCU Rice Rivers Center, an environmental research center located on the James River. The vision of what the site looked like 160 years ago, an empty mud pit recently stripped of all trees, to its current reestablished dynamic left me imagining the environment's constant fluctuation. As a wetland, it's metamorphosis in water levels and amplified humidity embroidered the Civil War story with an embodied, physical reaction when I would visit the site. I wanted to visually explain the putrefaction that took place through the layering of the pigments. In the densest of the prints (figure 13), I covered multiple layers of muddy pigment on its surface to reminisce of the filth in the story and the historic sepia toned photographic imagery that would've encapsulated it's reality in the nineteenth century.

Here, the past regularly returns, a constant process of rotting and decomposition, a burying and oxidizing of matter. There is an inherent lack of oxygen in swamps and wetlands that allows for high volumes of carbon storage, as soils are so saturated with water.[14] Not only through the lens of ecology does a swamp act as a vacuum, again in the genre of Southern Gothic the swamp is seen as a site that is equally threatening as they are freeing, a place that chews and spits out, or

[13] PBS. "Behind the Lens: A History in Pictures" PBS. May 3, 2022 http://www.pbs.org/mercy-street/uncover-history/behind-lens/disease/#:~:text=Before%20war%20in%20the%20twentieth,was%20probably%20closer%20to%20750%2C000.

[14] Samantha K. Chapman, Matthew A. Hayes, Brendan Kelly, and Adam J. Langley, "Exploring the oxygen sensitivity of wetland soil carbon mineralization," *Biology Letters* 15, no. 1 (2009), accessed May 4, 2022, https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsbl.2018.0407.

a place of "wilderness linked liberation"[15] for enslaved peoples. The swamp is a site of camouflage, it's natural tendencies for overgrowth and darkness offer a blanket for which to hide in. While it is a refuge in which to disappear, it is also a sanctuary of terror, a humid environment difficult to survive in, riddled with poisonous creatures.

Like a swamp, the works in *Wet, flowering, dry*, use reflection as a tool for disorientation. Many lack horizon lines, or exits, deepening the narrative of an endless pool (figure 14). They recall Ralph Eugene Meatyard's light on water series (figure 15), which pictures solely broken water reflections through an experimental process reminiscent of abstract expressionist paintings. Recalling the earlier conversation on the photographic medium's preoccupation with truth and realness, in Meatyard's works, "the image no longer insinuates a depth, a scene behind the lens, a snapshot of contingent, independent reality, inviting ontological doubt, but is located entirely on or near the picture's surface, its shapes are suggestive of texture and materiality – are haptic."[16] As the surface is so important in the photographic works in *Wet, flowering, dry*, I chose to frame without glass, in order to allow the prints to gleam without the barrier of a reflective surface. The matte surface is deliberately pronounced, and it remains in a state of vulnerability.

Conclusion

Wet, flowering, dry is the culmination of two years of quiet reflection and intention that resulted in a series of photographic works that speak to larger parables of life cycles. While the site in which the works were made its quite small, the representations of it transform the place to

[15] Sivilis, 6.
[16] Atėnė Mendelytė, "Faciality and Ontological Doubt in Ralph Eugene Meatyard's Photography," *SubStance* 50, no. 4 (2021): 178, accessed May 4, 2022, doi:10.1353/sub.2021.0008.

one that is otherworldly, ethereal, and ghostly. Time is bound to every essence of this work, from the photographic base to the bone black pigment's source, and finally, to the physical time I spent there, absorbing and pursuing. It was a pleasure to submit to the seasons and create this work over the course of two seasonal cycles. To the best of my ability, I worked to remain unfettered by the pressures of quick artistic production. The trust in patient consideration allowed the final form of the work to reveal itself.

Figures

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

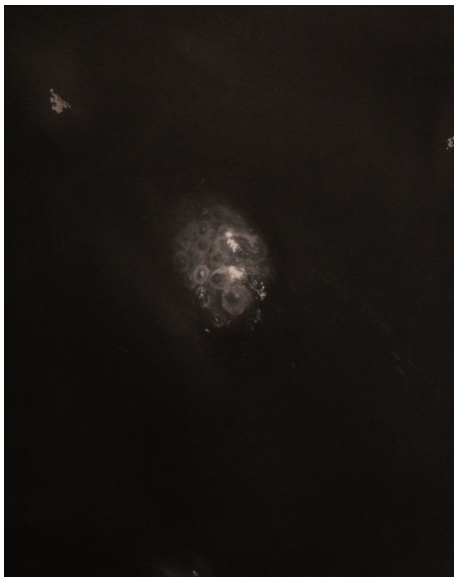

Figure 4

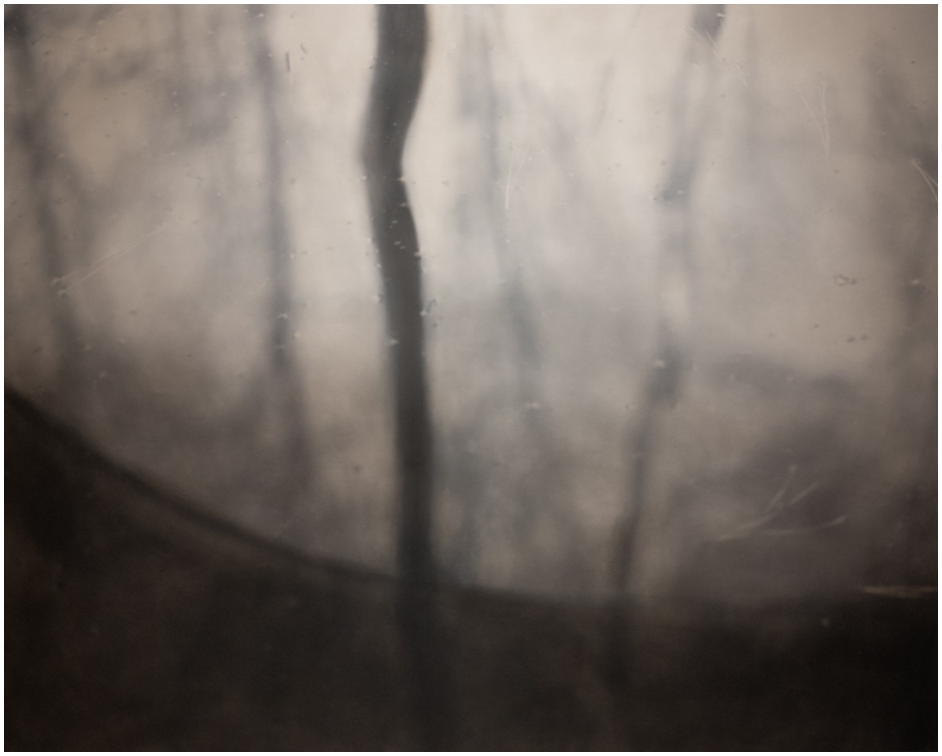

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

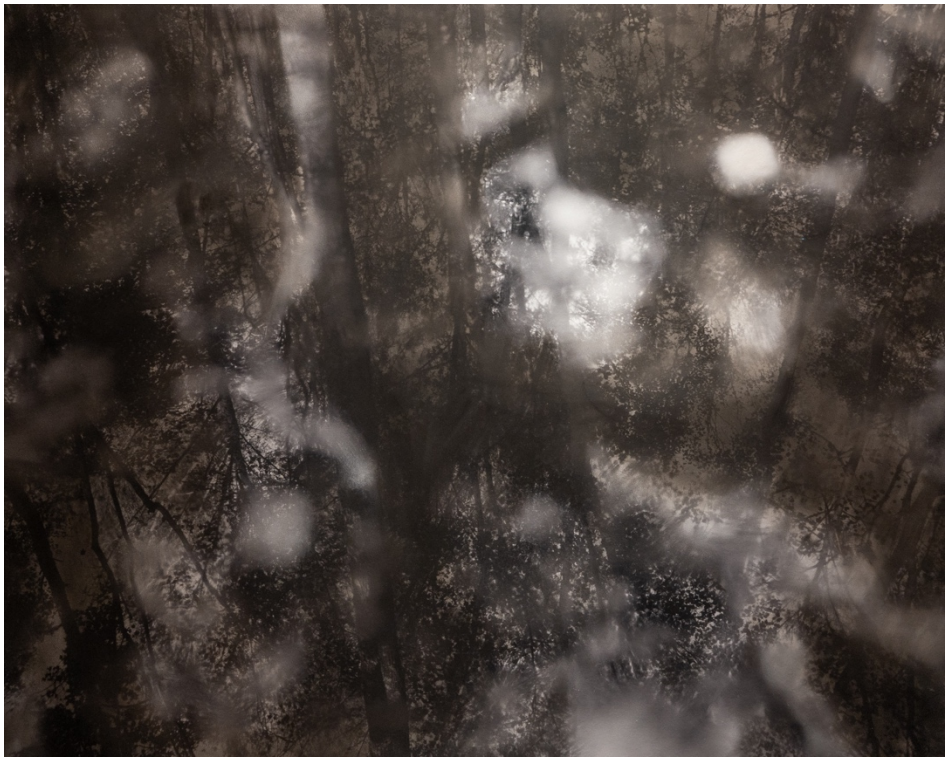

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

Vita

Caroline Minchew (b. 1992 Arlington, Virginia) is an artist currently based in Richmond. Using the landscape as a guide for connection and story, she explores natural spaces through photography and psychogeography. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Sewanee: The University of the South in 2014 and her Master of Fine Arts in Photography + Film at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2022.

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