

**THE
AIR
AROUND
US**



Stephen Armitstead & Lia McKnight

1 NOV - 16 NOV

Cover: Stephen Armitstead, *Dog whistling*. Detail of balloon speaker
Right: Stephen Armitstead, *Dog whistling*. Studio working document



THE AIR AROUND US

Written by Laetitia Wilson



Lia McKnight, *Sigh*, 2013. Tyvek, fan, timer

Site-specific art practices are at their best when an artist's eye is perceptively trained to the idiosyncrasies of a given space, its materiality, structures and environmental conditions. Site-specific installation is often about process, experimentation, ephemerality and a degree of abandonment to elements of chance. In *The air around us* Lia McKnight and Stephen Armistead present a series of works informed by the interior architecture of Paper Mountain. There is a close dialogue between the artworks and their site, its fixtures, limitations, textures and volume.

McKnight draws inspiration from the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi, a term with historical roots in ancient China and across Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto traditions and Zen Buddhism. Its definition is mired in ambiguity but it has a consistent synergy with the natural world and its accidents, suggesting the qualities of impermanence, humility, asymmetry and imperfection. Wabi-sabi's focus on the organic, degradability and ambiguity are a contrast to traditional Western art conventions such as symmetry, permanence and perspective¹. It is marked by "an intuitive appreciation of a transient beauty in the physical world that reflects the irreversible flow of life in the spiritual world."² This offers an interpretive framework through which to understand McKnight's practice.

Ink, copper, hemp, gouache, string, salt and dye are some of the materials employed by McKnight. They inform the development of the pieces and lend themselves to wabi-sabi sensibilities in the way they are handled and arranged. Through process-based experimentation the artist conveys a sense of ritual, of intuition, of the passage of time and the rhythms of nature. *Window Space* is a durational kinetic sculpture consisting of two white Tyvek inflatable bags that slowly billow out from two window frames in the gallery. It is as though the rhythms of the world outside are breathing into the space.

The bags extend to form rectangles and retract as formless masses. This work is a poetic disruption of the interior space, as a moment of movement that invites one to pause and contemplate impermanence. It is also likened to the wabi-sabi aesthetic applied to painting, where the picture plane is often dominated by large empty spaces, empty voids for the mind to dive into.

In *Lead, Line, String* long tendrils of string dangle from a string bag and pull away into different directions, some dipped in black ink, others drawn to roll around lead and others still releasing to the ground to become part of a salt-encrusted rope. The gaze is drawn to follow the string, its loose tangles, the contrast of inky black and organic white, its shadow play against the wall and the play with perception in the way it is replicated in ink on paper.

In a similar way to McKnight, Armistead activates the possibilities to perceive sundry materials in a different light, although his pieces employ more technical means of expression. In *Dog whistling* Armistead connects thin wooden spires from floor to ceiling. Their size is mismatched to the room dimensions; they are wedged in and warped accordingly, like thin branches bent by the impact of persistent wind. This is a sound-based installation and as the viewer walks through the spires, balloons dangling from them act as speakers playing nationalistic tunes whistled by the artist. Muddled from afar and coherent in proximity this is a direct reference to the coded language of 'dog whistle politics.'

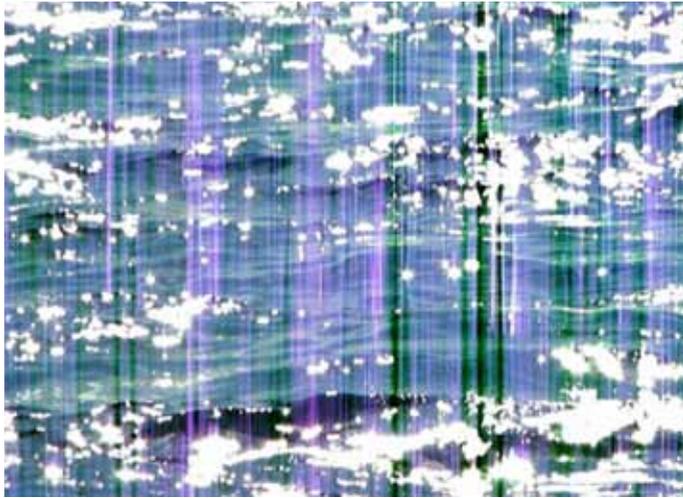
Mutability in the transmission of information is something that interests Armistead. This is apparent in the video installation *64 bits*. A projector is turned to 64 mirrors on the ground and the projection is experienced at a second remove, reflected on a corner of the ceiling as a

distortion of the play of the sun glimmering on ocean waves. The image is a closer approximation of the sensory impression of intense light on water, conveying the shimmer, depth, layers and ceaseless movement more accurately than a standard projection might. It is also an image interrupted by noise. Looking like glitch art it is streaked with purple and green as evidence of the limitations of the technology overloaded and overwhelmed by bright light and so unable to resolve the information.

The air around us is a musing on the fragility and existential transience of being alive. The artworks unfold as curious experiments liberated from concerns of the material world, their beauty is understated, modest and both located within and transcendent to the everyday. Together McKnight's and Armistead's works carry dual sensibilities of lightness and depth, raw materiality and craftiness, analogue and digital, the organic and the synthetic. They have a shared vision grounded in an understated aesthetic that is sophisticated in its simplicity. Their art also holds meanings beyond dualities as a transient intermission in the hectic pace of urban life. Like the experience of rain in sunshine it is sensorially compelling and acts as an invitation for us to pause and contemplate ambiguities within existence, within the air around us.

¹ Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, United States, Imperfect Publishing, 2008

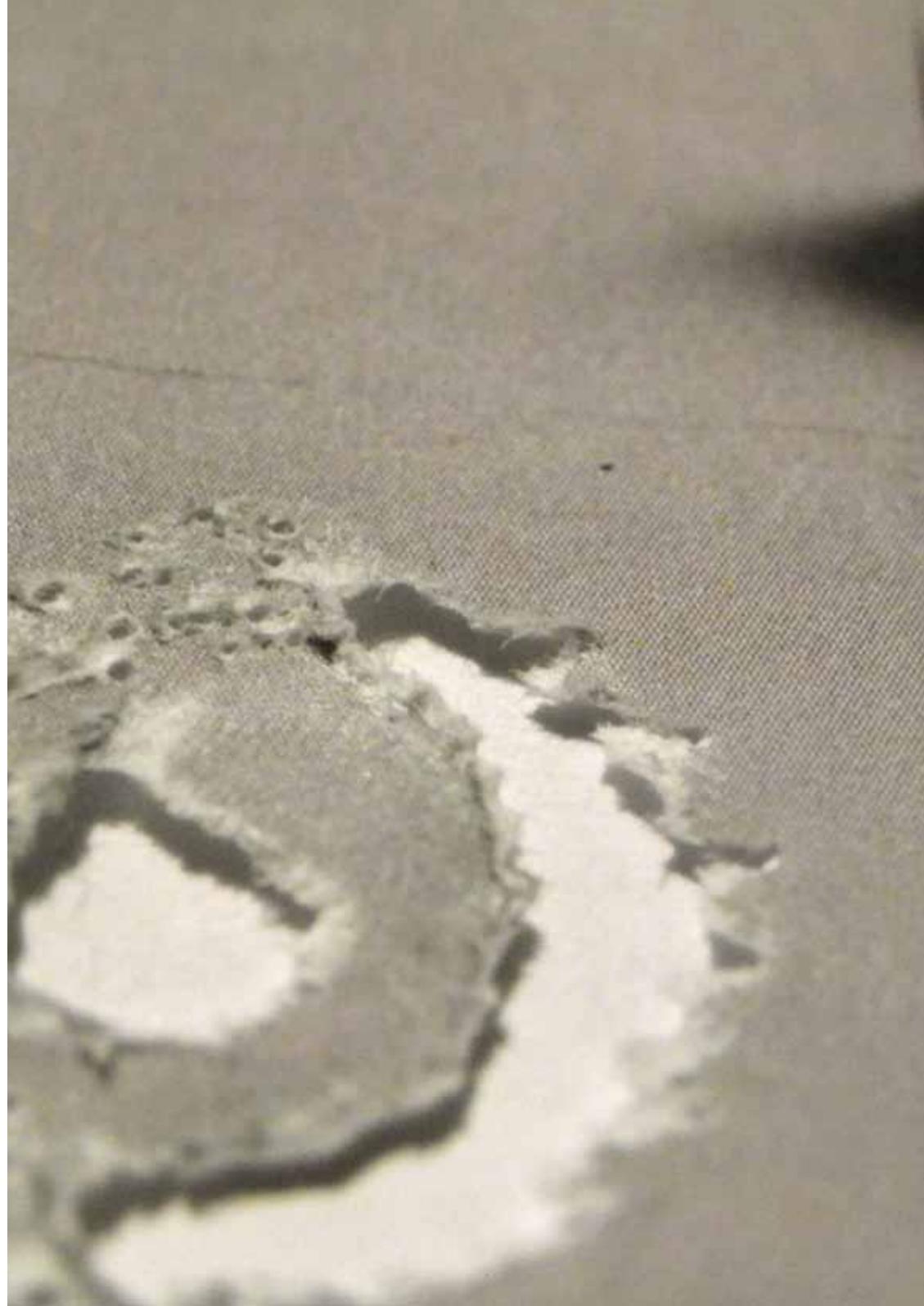
² Juniper, Andrew, *Wabi-sabi: the Japanese Art of Impermanence*, Boston, Tuttle, 2003, p.51



Armitstead, *64 bits*, video still



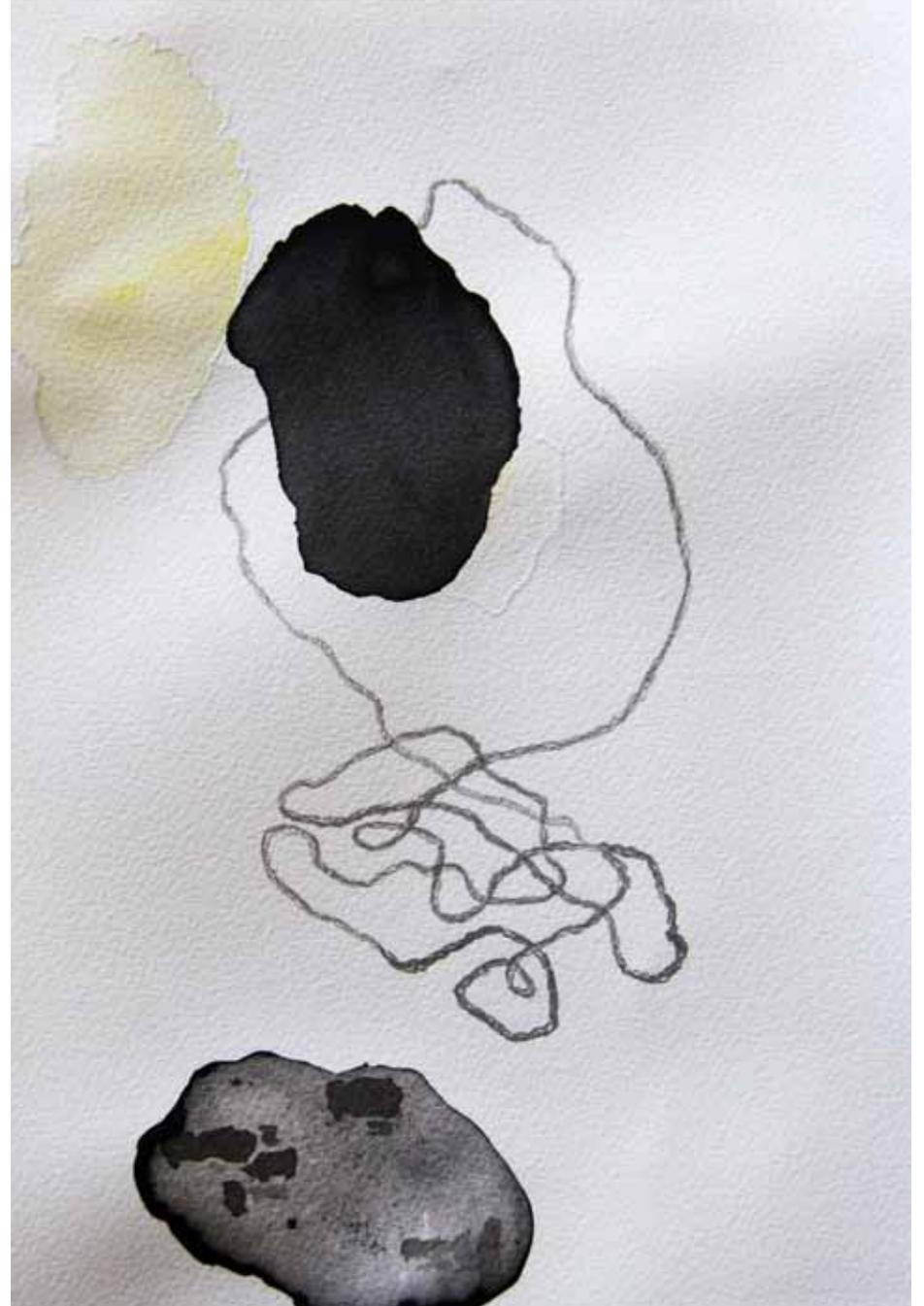
Armitstead, *64 bits*. Studio working document



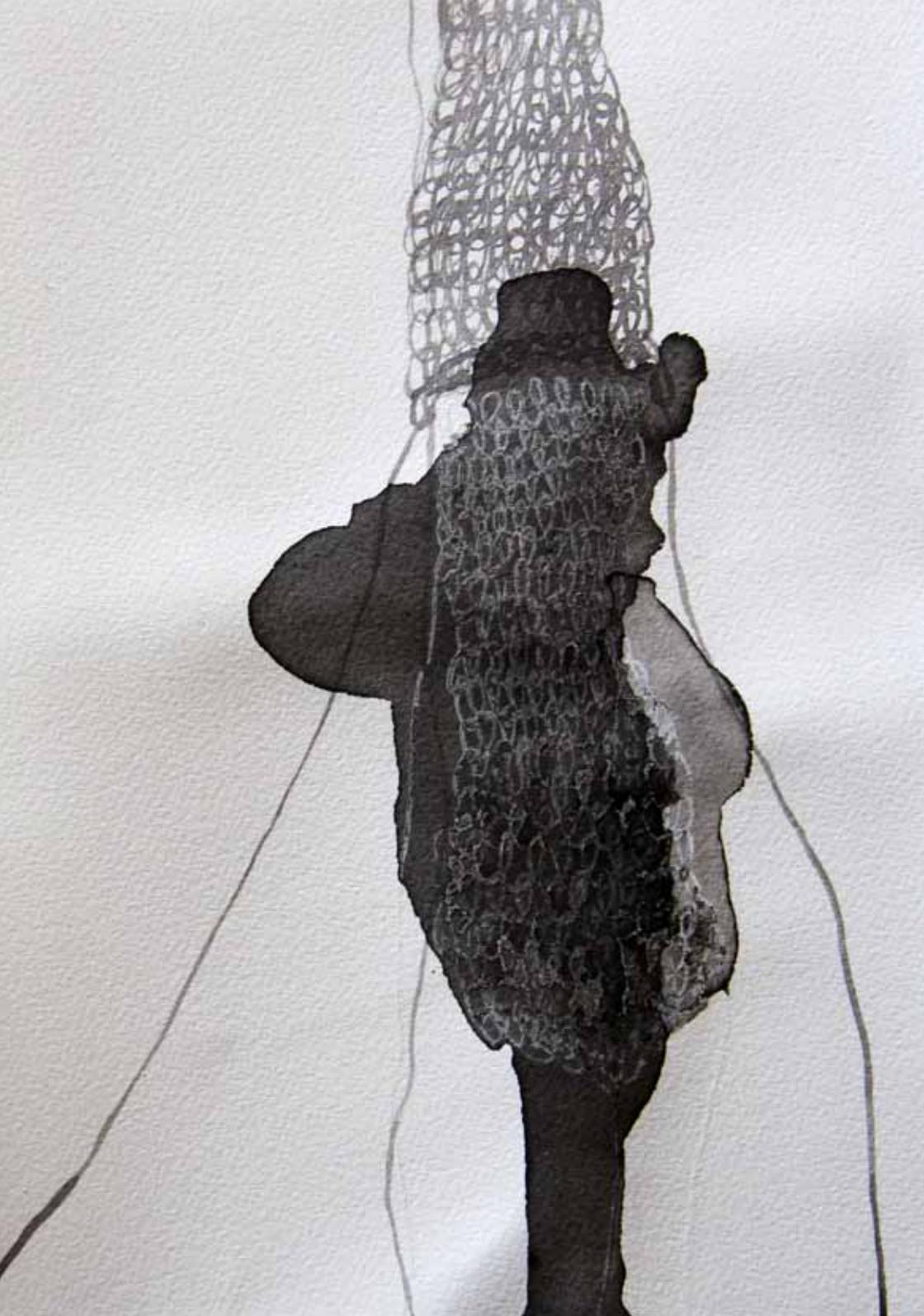
Right: Armitstead, *Bags of light*. Detail



McKnight, *Lead, Line, String*. Cotton bamboo thread, lead, ink



McKnight, *Untitled*. Ink and gouache on Arches paper



Left: McKnight, *Untitled*.
Ink and gouache on Arches
paper

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